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4 February 2019
House of Commons

Monday 4 February 2019

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Post-16 Education: Funding

1. Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on funding priorities for post-16 education in the forthcoming spending review. [908952]

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): The Department works closely with Her Majesty’s Treasury on the challenges that the further education sector faces. We are currently considering the efficiency and resilience of the sector and assessing how far current funding and regulatory structures enable high-quality provision.

Ruth Cadbury: We know that the Government want to bring in T-levels, but the funding for that is almost immediately offset by the ongoing £3.3 billion real-terms cuts for our colleges and further education. Will the Minister’s review include addressing the 38% cut in construction skills training and the 68% cut in engineering courses that have been experienced recently?

Anne Milton: The hon. Lady is right that T-levels will bring in an extra £500 million a year when fully rolled out. I know the Construction Industry Training Board is putting a substantial amount of money into improving skills in that industry.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): We certainly need more money for schools in my constituency, but does the Minister accept that funding for further education colleges has been the worst hit of all the parts of the education system? Will she give my constituents some assurances that there will be more money for Shipley College and Bradford College in the very near future?

Anne Milton: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I know the sector faces significant challenges—indeed, we had a Westminster Hall debate on the issue and I think 53 colleagues from across the House contributed to that. We are putting in £500 million of disadvantage funding and £127 million of discretionary bursary funding. Money has been going in, but I am aware of the fact that although the base rate for 16 to 19-year-olds has been protected, that still leaves the FE sector with challenges.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Staff at Lewisham College had not received a single pay increase for 10 years, despite rising living costs in London. While they were able to secure a pay deal in November, college teaching staff across the country have seen their pay fall 25% in real terms since 2009. When will austerity end for our FE teachers and students?

Anne Milton: I am aware of the issues that the hon. Lady raises. I have to say, I am always disappointed when staff take strike action—which is good for the cause—because it is young people who suffer. I understand that Capital City College Group has offered a 5% pay rise. Some colleges are able to do that. I am very aware of the challenges that colleges face, but as I say, I think resorting to strike action is disappointing.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I hope to approach the Backbench Business Committee tomorrow to get a debate on funding for education, because so many
colleagues across the House have the same narrative. It is vital that we look at that, especially for pupils with special educational needs. Post-16 and special educational needs are absolutely suffering and we have to look at this in the spending review.

Anne Milton: My hon. Friend was one of those who intervened in the Westminster Hall debate. I am very aware of this issue. I visited a college a couple of weeks ago where 400 students have special educational needs. Colleges do a fantastic job. There has been a focus over the last 15 to 20 years on higher education, and it is great to see Members across the House all campaigning for their local colleges.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): As 16 and 17-year-olds attract 23% less funding than pre-16 students and young people, is it not just time to raise the rate and tackle this problem?

Anne Milton: The Raise the Rate and Love Our Colleges campaigns have been very successful and, to a large extent, led to the number of hon. Members who attended that debate to raise the issue. I will continue to raise this with the Treasury. It has to be said—I have to continue to point this out to hon. Members—that there is over £2 billion available in apprenticeship funding from 2020. It is there now. Currently, colleges are not doing that much of that apprenticeship training. I look forward to seeing them getting more involved in those opportunities.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will the Minister outline to the House what support is available, and will be made available, for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to remove the barriers to their participation in further education?

Anne Milton: We have a pilot project running in five areas across the country specifically to target young people in disadvantaged areas who might be less willing to take up an apprenticeship, particularly in sectors they would not traditionally look at. We have £500 million of disadvantaged funding in the sector and £127 million of discretionary bursary funding, and there are other projects focusing particularly on apprenticeships to encourage young people who might not have thought of them as an option.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is clear that the Chancellor has dashed FE’s hopes massively in his Budget, but the Prime Minister, when told in Prime Minister’s questions last week that FE funding was in crisis, replied complacently that he “could not be more wrong”—[Official Report, 30 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 811.]

MPs debating FE here recently all said otherwise. One Member said “it is clear that funding for...16 to 19...has fallen”—[Official Report, 21 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 20.]

Another said:

“The bottom line is that the...sector needs more money”—[Official Report, 21 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 23.]

Those are the words of Conservative Members in that debate. Will the Minister get the Education Secretary to pledge to tell the Chancellor that increased FE funding in the spending review is his top priority, to keep at it and to not take no for an answer?

Anne Milton: I notice the hon. Member pointing his finger across the Dispatch Box. The Secretary of State is very aware—because I have not ceased to point it out to him—of the challenges that FE colleges face, and I did hear the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) raise this in Prime Minister’s questions last week. It is good to hear people across the House talking about further education, because sadly the House collectively, including under the last Labour Government, did not talk about it very much.

T-levels

2. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What recent progress his Department has made on the introduction of T-levels. [908953]

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): We are making very good progress. We are working closely with providers to deliver the first three T-levels from 2020 and have launched a £38 million capital fund to support that initial roll-out.

Mr Cunningham: I thank the Minister for that answer. I recently tabled a question and got an answer back saying there had been a 30% cut in adult education, particularly in relation to T-levels, as part of a wider effort to increase the numbers in adult education. What will the Secretary of State do about that, bearing in mind that Hereward College in Coventry, which teaches people with disabilities, and Coventry College badly need funding? Can he give us a positive answer on that?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Gentleman is a great advocate for further education in general, and for his colleges in Coventry in particular, and for the important role that adult education plays in social mobility and improving life chances. On T-levels, we are initially focused on getting the roll-out done, but we will look at adult provision in the future, and of course there was also a big boost in the Budget for the national retraining scheme.

18. [908969] Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Alongside T-levels, will my right hon. Friend take measures to enforce the Baker clause and to support the embedding of skills and careers in the curriculum for all ages?

Damian Hinds: I will and I have. I was grateful for the opportunity to discuss some of these matters the other day with my right hon. Friend’s Select Committee. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills has written to large multi-academy trusts and will be writing to local authorities to remind them of the importance of the so-called Baker clause in making sure that children and young people have information about all the options available to them. I also agree about the importance of embedding careers information deep in the curriculum.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): Only about 10% of 16 to 18-year-olds on a full-time level 3 course are currently studying a technical qualification. The proposed
investment in T-levels will not benefit the vast majority of sixth-form students in schools or colleges. FE and sixth-form funding has fallen by one fifth since 2010. Do not all young people deserve to have FE properly funded, irrespective of the qualifications they choose to study?

Damian Hinds: Yes, clearly further education—and indeed all 16-to-19 provision—has to be properly funded, but I do anticipate that more young people will do T-level qualifications in the future, because they will be very high-quality qualifications, with those extra hours, the maths, the English, the digital content, and that high-quality industry placement.

13. [908964] Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Over the years, I have heard a lot of employers complain that vocational courses do not adequately prepare young people for the workplace. Will the Secretary of State commit to including business in the development of T-levels so that they can provide that service?

Damian Hinds: I will. In fact, about 200 employers have already been involved, in one way or another, in their development. Business is at the heart of this major upgrade to our technical and vocational education, including T-levels.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Obviously T-levels are still a couple of years away, and colleges are expecting funding now. What can the Secretary of State do to assure me that when T-levels do arrive, colleges such as Stoke-on-Trent sixth-form college, which will be delivering them, will not have to use some of that additional money to cross-subsidise underfunded courses in other parts of the college? Is not the best way to stop that money being misused simply to raise the rate for everyone else?

Damian Hinds: The money that the Treasury has committed to T-levels is new money to finance more hours for young people studying these subjects. I think that that is incredibly important, but, as the hon. Gentleman says, there are other people studying for other qualifications, in Stoke and elsewhere, and they too must be properly resourced.

Several hon. Members rose——

Mr Speaker: Ah yes, a south-east London knight. Sir David Evennett.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I warmly welcome the introduction of T-levels, but what action has been taken to upskill the teachers and lecturers who will be delivering them? That process is vital to the success of the project.

Damian Hinds: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. We must engage in a number of preparations, such as setting up relationships with businesses for the industrial placements and also, as my right hon. Friend says, relationships with people working in our sector. We created the T-level professional development offer for precisely that purpose.

Further Education: Economic Sustainability

3. Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): What recent representations he has received on the economic sustainability of the further education sector. [908954]

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): My officials and I have regular and frequent discussions with representatives of colleges and college sector bodies, among others, about the sustainability of the sector. I get out and about as often as I can to find out precisely what funding problems some colleges are facing.

Toby Perkins: I thank the Minister for that answer. I am sure that the Minister does get out there, and I think we all have a strong sense of the sympathy with which she is attempting to make the case for colleges, but she has a Chancellor and a Prime Minister who seem to be entirely deaf to that case rather than responding to it. What more can Members on both sides of the House who recognise the scale of the financial crisis facing colleges do to ensure that the Prime Minister and the Chancellor start taking the action that is so desperately required?

Anne Milton: I do not think that the Prime Minister and the Chancellor are deaf to the case, and, in fact, in the first 15 minutes of this Question Time we have focused largely on the further education sector. I think that Members on both sides of the House are doing well in making the case to ensure that we have a sustainable and resilient FE sector in the future.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): How will the Department assist the businesses that will offer the placements which will be such an essential part of the T-level qualifications?

Anne Milton: We are doing a lot of work in that regard. For instance, we organised a pilot project, run by The Challenge, which highlighted some of the needs of employers. We are working closely with the sector, because it is crucial to the success of T-levels for us to get the industry placements right, and that means building relationships between colleges and those delivering T-levels and local employers.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): A while ago, like many Members, I was lobbied by staff and students in further education who told me that they and their institutions were at breaking point. At 16, the average further education student receives £1,500 less than the average student aged under 16. When will the Government understand that this investment in our communities needs to happen, and it needs to happen now?

Anne Milton: This member of the Government does precisely understand some of the challenges facing the sector. Some of the money that goes into further education does so through a variety of funding streams. For instance, I have not yet mentioned the £330 million that went into the restructuring of colleges, which has brought about substantial financial savings in some colleges undertaking mergers. However, I am very aware—and the Chancellor is very aware, and the Prime Minister is very aware—of the circumstances of FE colleges.
Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I welcome the doubling of funding for apprenticeships, but what conversations has the Minister had with colleges such as Heart of Worcestershire in Redditch about how they can gain a greater share of such funding?

Anne Milton: I could probably bore for England on the issue of apprenticeships. I talk to every college, and ask every college what it is doing. The National Apprenticeship Service will work with any college that wants to set up new apprenticeship training. It is not always easy for colleges to do that, but plenty of support is available if they want to do it, and plenty of money is available.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): At our last Question Time I raised the case of Greenhead College in Kirklees, which has warned that continued cuts in post-16 education are threatening standards. The Minister said that the Department was “looking at the resilience of the sector.”—[Official Report, 12 November 2018; Vol. 649, c. 14.]

Since then, however, it has been revealed that colleges will be landed with a pensions bill of £142 million by the Treasury. When will the Department stop looking at the resilience of the sector and actually provide further funds?

Anne Milton: We are proposing to fund the teacher pension contribution increase for those FE providers obliged to offer the scheme. I am very aware of that, and I have recently been to Kirklees and have seen the fantastic work that goes on up there. We will continue to raise the issue both with the Treasury and within the Department. The resilience review of FE funding will come forward fairly shortly.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I think, if memory serves me correctly, and after due consultation, that post 16 the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) was at cadet school. I feel sure that I speak for the House in saying that we are all convinced he was a very athletic fellow. I call Sir Nicholas Soames.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Different days, Mr Speaker, I am afraid. May I thank my right hon. Friend for the incredible work and leadership that she has offered, together with officials in her Department, in the reopening of the sixth-form college in Haywards Heath in my constituency? Will she pay tribute to the work of Mid Sussex District Council, whose leadership in this matter has been absolutely exemplary?

Anne Milton: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question, and I am very happy to join him in his tribute. Mid Sussex District Council has shown remarkable leadership, and it just goes to show how much can be achieved when the local authority, colleges and schools in the area—all those with a vested interest, including the county council—get together to find a solution for a problem. I wish them every success.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): The shambolic roll-out of special educational needs and disability reforms has meant that nearly 9,000 learners who previously would have been eligible for education and healthcare plans have been denied that support. As a result, college principals have warned the Government that support for learners over 19 is now being met from their college budgets. Surely the Minister knows that, after years of budget cuts, that could push many colleges to the brink of collapse. More than funding, learners with SEND need a Government who are genuinely on their side. When will that happen?

Anne Milton: I reject the suggestion that we are not on the side of young people with SEND. It is disappointing that the hon. Lady put it in those terms. I am very aware of the fantastic work that colleges do with young people with SEND. I have said that I visited a college recently where 400 students had SEND, and the results that they achieve are remarkable.

STEM Take-up

4. Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): What recent steps his Department has taken to increase the take-up of STEM subjects.

10. Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): What recent steps his Department has taken to increase the take-up of STEM subjects.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): The Government are committed to encouraging more young people into STEM education training. We fund a number of programmes to improve teaching standards and participation in those subjects, including the new advanced maths premium and an £84 million programme to improve the teaching of computing.

Luke Graham: Since the SNP would remove Scotland from international maths and science tables such as TIMSS—trends in international mathematics and science study—may I ask my hon. Friend how my constituents can assess STEM education in Scotland to make sure that we are performing in line with the UK and internationally?

Chris Skidmore: As education policy is devolved, issues relating to SAMs in Scotland are a matter for the Scottish Government. However, according to the latest OECD programme for international student assessment from 2015, while performance has remained stable in England and Northern Ireland since 2006, there has been a sustained decline in science in schools in Wales, and in maths in schools in Scotland. Since 2012, Scotland has also experienced a significant decline in its science score.

Mary Robinson: Two software engineering apprentices from Cheadle-based Thales, Nadia Johnson and Jessica Wong, created an outreach campaign designed to provide free engineering resources for young people, teachers and parents. It is hugely important to support young people in these areas. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a fantastic example of how degree apprenticeships can not only help apprentices to earn and learn but enable them to develop STEM qualifications for the benefit of the wider community?
Chris Skidmore: I congratulate Thales on the work that it does on outreach campaigns for local schools. I was at Thales in Northern Ireland on Friday, and saw for myself the work that it does to raise ambitions for STEM participation in schools. The engineering community does a fantastic job of passing on its passion for the profession, and I welcome the opportunity to hear a further example of that enthusiasm.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. In calling the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), I wish him a very happy birthday—a mere stripling of 35, I believe. I cannot say that I remember such a time in my life.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker. As you can tell, I had a tough paper round. I am very keen for youngsters in my community to take up STEM subjects, but Park Vale Academy is struggling because Carillion went bust a year ago and its school work stopped. A year later, it remains unfinished. This is having a significant impact on the quality of provision for those young people. Different Departments are discussing who should resolve this issue but not agreeing. Could a Minister please step in and get this resolved?

Chris Skidmore: I should also like to congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his birthday. I was there not too long ago. Life comes at us fast, but we have to start somewhere. I would be happy to meet him to discuss the problem he has raised. The Government are committed to supporting STEM teaching in schools, and we have seen £7.2 million-worth of funding annually going into our network of 35 maths hubs. We are also determined to improve science teaching with a national network of 46 science learning partnerships, but let us sit down, perhaps with a celebratory cup of tea, and discuss the issue that he has raised.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Having started surgery when there were hardly any women surgeons and having been told that it was not possible for me to be a surgeon, I have been delighted to speak at Ayrshire College at the #ThisAyrshireGirlCan and Girls with Grit events. Has the Minister read the report by the Royal Society of Edinburgh, “Tapping all our Talents”, which is about getting more women into STEM, and if so, has he considered any of its recommendations?

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise the importance of increasing female participation in STEM. Since 2010, we have seen about 26% more women entering STEM A-levels in England, and our efforts to increase skills participation include the Stimulating Physics Network, which delivers on a series of innovative gender-balanced interventions. I would be happy to read the report that she mentions and to discuss it with her. We are determined to ensure that we work together with the science community to raise participation in these crucial subjects.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Will my hon. Friend tell us how maths hubs have helped to increase the teaching of mathematics and to enable its better appreciation by students?

Chris Skidmore: The key thing to note about the maths hubs is that we want to spread good practice across the country and increase participation and attainment in post-16 mathematics. In addition to the £7.2 million funding for the 35 maths hubs, we have introduced a £16 million advanced maths support programme and an £83 million advanced maths premium for 16-to-19 providers of up to £600 per additional student. This Government are absolutely determined to increase maths uptake at GCSE and A-level as well as in higher education. It is important for our industrial strategy that we increase maths participation.

Universal Infant Free School Meals Policy

5. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the universal infant free school meals policy since 2014.

Chris Skidmore: The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): Take-up is a key measure of success for universal infant free school meals, and it has been strong since the introduction of the policy. According to the latest figures, 1.5 million infant pupils—including those eligible for benefit-based free school meals—took a lunch on census day. That represents a take-up rate of 86.2%.

Diana Johnson: Some 15 years ago, Hull led the way by pioneering the policy of free healthy school meals to fight poverty and childhood obesity and to improve attainment in the classroom. When the Liberal Democrats came to power in Hull, they scrapped that scheme in 2007, but this was followed by the Labour Government’s pilots and the announcement from the coalition on free school meals for the earliest years. However, given the continuing link between poor nutrition and childhood obesity, is it not disappointing that just-managing families in Hull are seeing a doubling of prices for school meals, all because the austerity funding squeeze on school budgets and councils has not ended in deprived areas?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for that question. Giving free school meals to infants encourages children to start on the right path to nutritious meals. Those who are eligible will go on to claim free school meals, and it is worth noting that the new eligibility criteria and the protections introduced last April mean that we expect more pupils to be entitled to free school meals by 2022, by contrast to the scaremongering that took place in this place and outside when the policy was introduced.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Does the Minister now accept that it was a mistake for his party’s last election manifesto to propose abolishing free school meals? Will he promise that there will be no such proposal ahead of the snap election that looks like it is about to happen and to which his Back Benchers are looking forward so much? Indeed, will he commit to matching Labour’s manifesto commitment to extend universal free school meals to all primary school pupils?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for that question. It is good to see the shadow Front-Bench team intact after the weekend speculation that they were about to split with the leadership. It is worth reminding the House...
that we have extended eligibility for free school meals three times while in government, and we continue to be committed to that policy.

Leaving the EU: Tertiary Education

6. Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): What assessment his Department has made of the effect on tertiary education of the UK leaving the EU without a deal.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): Leaving the EU with a deal remains the Government’s top priority and that has not changed, but as a responsible Government we are preparing for every eventuality. We are considering all aspects of how exiting the EU might affect tertiary education. That includes consideration of participation in EU-funded programmes, future arrangements for migration, and access to student finance support.

Douglas Chapman: The Minister will be aware that, per head of population, Scotland’s universities have won more Horizon 2020 funding than any other part of the UK as a whole. It has also outperformed Germany, which has won the biggest overall share of the programme investment. Will the Minister give those successful Scottish institutions a commitment and guarantee that funding for academic research will, at the very least, continue to be maintained at current levels?

Chris Skidmore: On the Government’s commitments on Horizon 2020 funding, I point to my recent appearance at the Select Committee on Science and Technology. We have not only issued a Government guarantee but a guarantee extension to ensure that we protect all current programmes throughout their duration and, in fact, beyond 2020. We are working very closely with other programmes, such as the European Research Council and Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions, which still need to be netted into the guarantee. I absolutely empathise with the hon. Gentleman’s point that we must ensure that the science community is protected under all eventualities.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, deal or no deal, we must ensure that we get the right balance of funding for tertiary education, universities and further education? Universities have done very well, but further education has experienced an 8% cut in per learner funding since 2010. That has had an adverse effect on East Kent College Group, which teaches 13,000 learners.

Chris Skidmore: In 2017, the Prime Minister instigated a review of post-18 education, which is being led by Philip Augar. That report will be published shortly, in due course. As my hon. Friend says, it is important that we look at the entirety of the post-18 education world, and above all at the opportunities that need to be available for the student. This is not about pitching HE versus FE, but about ensuring that we create learning pathways so that when students wish to achieve a degree or level 4 or 5, the funding and opportunities are in place for them to succeed.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): This year my son, like very many others, has had the privilege of studying in Europe as part of the Erasmus programme. Last Wednesday, the European Commission gave a guarantee that in the event of a no-deal Brexit, current Erasmus students would be able to complete their studies, “provided that the United Kingdom continues to honour its financial obligations under the EU budget.”

Will the Minister confirm that in the event of no deal, his Government will honour their obligation and that our young people currently abroad will be able to complete their studies?

Chris Skidmore: We are in close contact and working with the UK National Agency and the European Commission to ensure that in the event that the UK leaves the EU with no agreement in place, the Government’s guarantee on Erasmus will cover the payment of awards to UK applicants for all successful Erasmus+ bids submitted before the end of 2020. Successful bids are those approved directly by the European Commission or by the UK National Agency and ratified by the European Commission. On 29 January, we published on the gov.uk website an updated technical notice stating the current position.

Carol Monaghan: I thank the Minister for that answer. However, Universities UK has expressed serious concerns that, in the case of a no-deal Brexit, the Government will not commit to funding students who plan to study in Europe for the 2019-20 academic year. Unlike the Government, these young people are trying to plan what they are doing next year. Will the Minister confirm, first, whether Universities UK is right to be concerned? Secondly, how can he justify denying our young people such valuable opportunities?

Chris Skidmore: I work closely with Universities UK and with Universities UK International and its director, Vivienne Stern, to allay their concerns. When it comes to the Government’s guarantee, all successful bids that have been approved by the European Commission will be guaranteed funding.

When the House comes to vote again on a deal that will protect Erasmus students not only under the withdrawal agreement but under the political declaration, perhaps the hon. Lady could say to Universities UK that she will now vote for a deal that will protect all Erasmus students.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I, too, welcome the fact that half the questions and half the time today have been spent on further education, and I also welcome the new higher education Minister to his place. I believe he is a scholar of Tudor England, and I suspect will serve him well considering how long he is about the same as Henry VIII’s wives.

Will the Minister confirm that figures show there are 36,000 academics from other EU countries working in UK higher education, nearly one in five of the total academic workforce? Given the damage that a disastrous no-deal Brexit would clearly do to the sector, will he promise the House today that he will never be part of a Government who allow that to happen?
Chris Skidmore: I refer to myself as a scholar with a small s, but when it comes to Henry VIII’s wives, I hope to see myself as more like Catherine of Aragon, who managed to last, I think, 27 years, rather than one of the later wives.

When it comes to ensuring protection for EU students, we have announced guarantees on student finance for EU nationals irrespective of the EU outcome. We have also provided a reassurance that everyone on a course will continue to be eligible for home fees status and student finance support from Student Finance England for the duration of their course. I believe that, even with a no-deal outcome, the Government have done the responsible and right thing, and I hope the hon. Lady will now do the responsible and right thing and walk through the Lobby with me on 14 February in support of the Prime Minister’s deal.

Underperforming Children

7. Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to identify children who perform well at primary level but underperform at higher levels of education.

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): The Department, of course, measures the progress that pupils make between the end of primary education and their GCSEs, and those data can help schools to identify where and when to put additional support in place.

Mr Sheerman: This is nothing short of a national scandal and a national disgrace, because we all know where we lose these talented children. We lose them in this transition period, and who do we lose? Poorer children from deprived backgrounds. When will we have a big beast on the Government Benches who will see this as a national disgrace and do something about it?

Damian Hinds: I assume the hon. Gentleman means the transition between years 6 and 7, to which I acknowledge we have not paid enough attention—both before and after 2010. That is one of the reasons why we are looking at this in the Opportunity North East programme, and in other piloting opportunities, but it is not the only thing to look at. I am pleased to be able to say that the Office for Students, which makes public and readily available the performance of schools, enabling parents to make choices for their children’s futures? Does he agree that we want the OfS to have a similar role, so that we embed the idea of potential students making choices on the basis of clear data and so drive up standards at the higher education level?

Chris Skidmore: Absolutely. I look forward to working with the OfS in future, above all to help deliver the best possible outcomes for students, based on the publication of transparent data. The OfS requires providers to meet high-quality standards, which are assessed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. As I say, we have introduced the TEF to identify and reward institutions that deliver high-quality teaching and positive student outcomes.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): How many universities are currently considered at risk of insolvency? Does the Minister agree that allowing universities to fail would improve neither quality, nor choice? If he does agree with that, will he give us a categorical assurance that that will not happen on his watch?

Chris Skidmore: All universities are autonomous institutions that have the independence to be able to govern their own finances. The OfS is currently going through a process of re-registration of certain institutions, and I hope that all institutions have put in place sound financial measures to continue for the future. If that is not the case, the Government are working with the OfS towards establishing student protection plans, to ensure that all students’ education will not be harmed.

Higher Education: Quality and Choice

11. James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase quality and choice in higher education.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): The Office for Students holds providers to account for delivering well-designed courses that offer successful outcomes for all students. The teaching excellence and student outcomes framework—TEF—is supporting student choice, and we are developing new digital tools to help prospective students make choices based on graduate outcomes data.

James Cartlidge: Does my hon. Friend agree that parents probably now take for granted the fact that we have Ofsted, which makes public and readily available the performance of schools, enabling parents to make choices for their children’s futures? Does he agree that we want the OfS to have a similar role, so that we embed the idea of potential students making choices on the basis of clear data and so drive up standards at the higher education level?

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Commiserations for yesterday’s football, Mr Speaker; I am sorry.

The recent University of Bristol report shows that 40% of so-called underperforming secondary schools would actually be out of category if the progress 8 measure were more rounded. That is in addition to the Education Policy Institute study that found a very strong correlation between the number of deprived children and a school’s Ofsted rating. Given the high-stakes accountability regime in schools, is it not about time we had a much more profound and deeper understanding of what makes a good school, instead of just hammering, time and again, the most challenging schools that are doing a very good job in difficult circumstances?
more than £35 million of potential savings and revenue generation opportunities. We are continuing to work with these schools to help them realise these savings.

Mr Dunne: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer. Do any of these pilot areas include rural parts of the country, such as south Shropshire, where my constituency is? We are suffering from declining school rolls as a result of the birth rate, and the school efficiency advisers could be very helpful in aiding schools to cope with that problem.

Nick Gibb: Of course we recognise the importance of rural schools, the role they play in their communities and the challenges they face. That is why the national funding formula includes £25 million specifically to provide support to small schools in sparse areas. Early evidence from the pilot projects shows that school resource management advisers can help schools to review their longer-term budget and curriculum planning approach to help them adjust their costs over the long term if income falls due to declining pupil numbers.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Schools in my constituency say there are simply no more efficiencies to be made—there are no more savings to be made, and there are no more teachers they can sack or make redundant without affecting children’s education and care. So what does the Minister have to say to schools in my constituency about the efficiencies they are supposed to make to keep functioning?

Nick Gibb: Since 2017, we have given every local authority more money for every pupil in every school. We are spending record amounts of money on our school system—the figure will be £43.5 billion next year, which is a record for those schools—but we do understand the cost pressures that schools are under, which is why we have this cadre of school resource management advisers, who can help those schools. We also have a series of national buying schemes, whereby we can buy things such as insurance, energy and computers far more efficiently to make savings in the non-staff expenditure that schools have to incur.

Education in Essex: Funding

14. Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase funding for education in Essex.

15. Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the Government’s policy on funded childcare on the financial viability of childcare settings.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): By 2019-20, schools in Essex will receive 3.3% more funding per pupil compared with the level in 2017-18—this is an additional £141 per pupil or £48.7 million in total. In 2019-20, therefore, Essex will receive £855.8 million in school funding—a record amount.

Priti Patel: Notwithstanding the Minister’s response on the funding that Essex will receive, the county council is seeking to transfer funds from the schools block to the high-needs block, as there is not enough money for children with special educational needs. My right hon. Friend the Minister knows that any transfer of funds will have a knock-on impact on educational funding throughout Essex, so will he work with me and the county council to address this issue?

Nick Gibb: I am very happy to do so. I know that my right hon. Friend takes a particular interest in special-needs education in her constituency. High-needs funds for Essex were increased to £139.1 million this year, and will rise to £141 million next year, but she is right to point to the increase in pressures on the high-needs budget, which is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced in December an extra £250 million over two years. We will work closely with the Treasury as we prepare for the next spending review to ensure that we secure the best funding settlement possible to address this and other school funding issues.

Mr Speaker: I am very glad to hear it. I should add, in parenthesis, that the county is of course also home to the life-transforming University of Essex, of which I am very fortunate to be chancellor.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): And it is also home to the Anglia Ruskin University in Chelmsford.

Schools in my constituency in Essex were delighted to see in the NHS long-term plan that the NHS intends to help schools with funding for mental health support. How do my local schools access these funds?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We take young people’s mental health very seriously, which is why we recently published the Green Paper on mental health for children and young people. We will fund and place in every school a designated mental health lead, supported by mental health support units, which we are rolling out to trailblazer areas as we speak. That is how my hon. Friend’s local schools will be able to access those funds.

Childcare Settings: Financial Viability

Dr Rupa Huq: I am very happy to do so. I know that my right hon. Friend takes a particular interest in special-needs education in her constituency. High-needs funds for Essex were increased to £139.1 million this year, and will rise to £141 million next year, but she is right to point to the increase in pressures on the high-needs budget, which is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced in December an extra £250 million over two years. We will work closely with the Treasury as we prepare for the next spending review to ensure that we secure the best funding settlement possible to address this and other school funding issues.

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Childcare Settings: Financial Viability

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the Government’s policy on funded childcare on the financial viability of childcare settings.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): We plan to spend £3.5 billion this year to deliver our funded early-years entitlements. We recognise the need to keep our evidence base on costs up to date, and continue to monitor the provider market closely through a range of regular and one-off research projects.

Dr Huq: According to the Sutton Trust, 1,000 children’s centres have closed over the past decade. Now, West Twyford children’s centre, which is a small centre in an isolated area, cannot continue under the current funding arrangements. That will leave the 295 families it helped last year, 123 of which are among the 30% most deprived families in the country, in the lurch. Will the Minister come with me, along with headteacher Rachel Martin, to see the great work that the centre does—it is not very far from here—and can we thrash out a way forward from this unsatisfactory situation? The area has had local government cuts of 64%. We need to spare these vital centres the axe.

Nadhim Zahawi: I will happily meet the hon. Lady, and even join her, if my diary permits, to have a look at that work. I have seen many local authorities throughout
the country deliver outreach programmes to the most disadvantaged families, who actually do not necessarily tend to come into bricks-and-mortar buildings. There are models that deliver a better outcome for those families than just investing in bricks and mortar.

Huw Merriman: To my knowledge, two local authorities have done the same thing in England, and I urge other local authorities to look into what they can do to help childcare providers to cope with business rates.†

Tracy Brabin: Since 2010, the number of state nurseries in deficit has soared. One in five is now in the red and dozens have had to close. Transitional funding will soon run out and they face serious uncertainty about their future. Last week, I visited Harewood nursery, a much-loved maintained nursery in Pontefract. I was deeply troubled when the headteacher told me that without a cash injection the nursery faces imminent closure. Parents are running a GoFundMe page to keep the doors open. Will the Minister give us an assurance today that maintained nurseries will get funding, at least to tide them over until the spending review, before the end of the current financial year?

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Lady will know that we had a very good debate on that matter last Thursday, when 13 hon. and right hon. Members spoke from the Back Benches about the provision of maintained nurseries. We are considering how best to handle the transitional arrangements for a number of areas, including for maintained nurseries. My message again is that it would be premature of local authorities to make decisions on maintained nurseries before the spending review, but we are considering transitional arrangements.

Mr Speaker: I was hoping that the hon. Gentleman would shoehorn his inquiry into question 15, because he cannot leapfrog question 16, which would displace it. I thought that if he applied his little grey cells he would realise that the subject matter of his own inquiry was pertinent to that of question 15. I should have thought that a scholar of his repute was capable of making that mental calculation, but if he wants to wait, he will have to take his chances. [Interuption.] Oh, very well.

Mr Barry Sheerman: And it’s his birthday.

Mr Speaker: I do not know whether it is his birthday, but he has made a bit of a mess of the matter. Never mind, we will seek to accommodate him at a later stage in our proceedings.

†[Official Report, 21 March 2019, Vol. 656, c. 9MC.]
Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend has touched on a really important and wide-ranging issue. First, I am grateful to him for mentioning Chapel Green School and the excellent work that it does, and also our investment in its new facilities, but he is also right that, in thinking about high needs and special needs, we also need to think about how teachers and others in mainstream schools are equipped. That is one reason we are looking at what happens in initial teacher training and with the specialist qualification, and also the key role of educational psychologists in that regard.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): Figures released last week show that only 15% of school leavers in the Furness area go on to higher education. That is the lowest in the country. Will the Secretary of State or the Universities Minister meet me to see how we can address that gap? We are really proud of our apprenticeship scheme, but a generation of talent is being lost to the country because of this.

Damian Hinds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question and he is absolutely right that we all need a blend in our local areas—apprenticeships, further education and higher education. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) or I would be delighted to meet him. I will just mention, though, that universities these days have very large sums of money available for access and participation plans, and they should be reaching out into all communities, including in Furness, to make sure that all children have the opportunity to make the most of those if they can.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to the school for its work and I would be happy to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss the matter further. There was some extra funding for high needs in the package of measures that we put forward in December; I also committed to looking at some of the wider issues, including the way funding works structurally, to ensure that the resourcing for those needs is fairly spread among schools. I will also address some of the training and development issues that I mentioned in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman).

Angela Rayner ( Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree with today’s call from the Children’s Commissioner for new powers to deal with the alarming number of pupils falling off schools rolls? I have already written to him to ask for more information about what the departmental advisers are doing to support schools, and I pay tribute to the school, given its outstanding work in this vital field?

Damian Hinds: I pay tribute to the school for its work and I would be happy to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss the matter further. There was some extra funding for high needs in the package of measures that we put forward in December; I also committed to looking at some of the wider issues, including the way funding works structurally, to ensure that the resourcing for those needs is fairly spread among schools. I will also address some of the training and development issues that I mentioned in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman).

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): Last week, we launched the Department for Education’s integrated recruitment and retention strategy for teachers to attract and keep even more inspirational people in this most vital of careers. We continue to make progress on the major upgrade of technical and vocational education, including through higher-quality apprenticeships and T-levels. This week is Children’s Mental Health Week, and I am pleased to be able to announce the start of a major trial to look at ways to improve support for young people’s mental wellbeing. The trial—part of our integrated and wide-ranging approach on mental health—will take place in up to 370 schools across England and will be one of the largest such trials in the world.

Sir Nicholas Soames: I thank my right hon. Friend for that comprehensive answer. I have already spoken to the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), about the excellent St Wilfrid’s Catholic Primary School in Burgess Hill in my constituency, which I visited recently. The school has an outstanding reputation for supporting pupils with special educational needs.

It takes in more children with SEN than it is properly funded for and thus finds itself with a budget shortfall through no fault of its own, other than the desire to do good. What further help can my right hon. Friend give to that school, given its outstanding work in this vital field?

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Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): Last week, we launched the Department for Education’s integrated recruitment and retention strategy for teachers to attract and keep even more inspirational people in this most vital of careers. We continue to make progress on the major upgrade of technical and vocational education, including through higher-quality apprenticeships and T-levels. This week is Children’s Mental Health Week, and I am pleased to be able to announce the start of a major trial to look at ways to improve support for young people’s mental wellbeing. The trial—part of our integrated and wide-ranging approach on mental health—will take place in up to 370 schools across England and will be one of the largest such trials in the world.

Sir Nicholas Soames: I thank my right hon. Friend for that comprehensive answer. I have already spoken to the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), about the excellent St Wilfrid’s Catholic Primary School in Burgess Hill in my constituency, which I visited recently. The school has an outstanding reputation for supporting pupils with special educational needs.

It takes in more children with SEN than it is properly funded for and thus finds itself with a budget shortfall through no fault of its own, other than the desire to do good. What further help can my right hon. Friend give to that school, given its outstanding work in this vital field?

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of the Government’s early-years pilots. He even visited the local pilot in Wigan. However, Leigh—part of the Wigan borough—has recently been ranked 533rd out of 53 for early-years provision in the country. Will the Minister and this Government wake up? Their sticking-plaster schemes are not working. If we want to improve social mobility, we first have to address child poverty.

**Damian Hinds:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right about the central importance of the early years when it comes to social mobility. We know that the gaps between the rich and the poor develop very early on, which is one reason this Government are spending more than any previous Government on early-years education and childcare. There are 154,000 two-year-olds benefiting from early-years education in a programme that was never available to any child before 2010. But we can do more. I want to ensure that we integrate our approach with helping to support parents in what happens at home because, particularly in the very early years, what happens at home is crucial to what happens later at school.

T7. [908983] Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): The Secretary of State has said many times that school funding is increasing, but what reassurance can he give to the teachers and parents of Squirrels Heath Infant School in Romford, who have told me only today that, among many other schools in the London Borough of Havering, they are having to take drastic measures just to stay afloat? Will he meet me to try to resolve this?

**Damian Hinds:** First, I thank the staff at Squirrels Heath for what they do. I totally acknowledge the pressures there are on school budgets and I know that it is difficult managing these budgets. It is also true that, compared with other countries in the world, we spend relatively high amounts on state education at both primary and secondary levels. However, I will of course be very happy to meet my hon. Friend.

T3. [908797] Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Because of their religious character, Catholic sixth-form colleges such as the nationally renowned St Dominic’s in my constituency cannot, even if they wanted to, take advantage of the financial inducements available that converting to an academy might offer. What steps, then, will the Secretary of State take to end the double discrimination against Catholic sixth-form colleges and allow them access to the extra financial resources that academies get?

**The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton):** I visited St Dominic’s only last week, as the hon. Gentleman will be aware, and was astounded at the brilliant work it is doing. I am very aware of the problem facing Catholic sixth-form colleges, as is the Secretary of State, and we are considering it.

T9. [908985] Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating Eythorne Elvington Community Primary School in my constituency, where 100% of pupils met the expected standard of reading, writing and maths—up 23% on last year? Does that not show how school standards are rising?

**Nick Gibb:** I would of course be delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating the teachers and pupils at Eythorne Elvington Community Primary School on their exceptional performance in last summer’s standard assessment tests. Ensuring that 100% of its pupils are reaching expected standards in reading, writing and maths will help those pupils to be ready for the demands of secondary school. In addition, 56% of pupils at Eythorne Elvington qualified for free school meals at some point in the past six years, showing that high expectations and great teaching can deliver high standards for all pupils, regardless of background.

T4. [908980] John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): The Construction Industry Training Board has revealed its intention to sell off sections of Scotland’s national construction colleges. Will the Secretary of State outline what impact this decision will have on apprenticeships?

**Anne Milton:** It is absolutely critical that we get the construction workforce we need. We are very aware of that. The Construction Industry Training Board, now with a new chief executive and chairman, is doing great work in this sector. It is absolutely critical that we use apprenticeships to encourage young people to go into construction—not just at levels 2 and 3, but also progressing upwards.

**Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): Schools in Cheshire are still underfunded compared with more urban counterparts, especially in London. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me and a number of Conservative councillors from Cheshire East Council, and Cheshire West and Chester Council, to discuss how we can fix this historical inequality?

**Damian Hinds:** There are differences between Cheshire and London, including in the composition of the population. For example, the proportion of children on free school meals is materially higher in London than in Cheshire, and there are some cost considerations, but I will of course, as ever, be more than happy to meet my hon. Friend.

T6. [908982] Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): This morning, Chief Superintendent Ade Adelekan of the Metropolitan police’s violent crime taskforce described the factors common to many young people involved in knife crime and gangs, the foremost of which is exclusion from school. What action is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that academy schools, which are accountable not to local authorities but directly to him, stop illegitimately off-rolling pupils to boost those schools’ exam results, to the ultimate cost of vulnerable young people and our communities?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi):** Off-rolling of pupils is illegal. Edward Timpson’s review is in progress and will report very soon. Exclusion from school must not mean exclusion from education. Our priority in the Department is to make sure that AP—alternative provision—works for those children who cannot go to mainstream school.

**James Morris** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Halesowen College in my constituency recently held an apprenticeship awards evening to celebrate apprenticeships in the Black Country. With projects such as High Speed 2 and the extension of the metro coming down the line in
the west midlands, does the Minister agree that we need to redouble our efforts to get young people into apprenticeships, to take advantage of those opportunities?

Anne Milton: May I take this opportunity to wish my hon. Friend a very happy birthday? New industry-designed standards, increasing off-the-job training, rigorous end-point assessments and strengthening the register of apprenticeship training providers all mean that doing an apprenticeship these days gives young people the opportunity to get high-quality qualifications, with a great life and a fabulous career ahead of them.

Mr Speaker: On the matter of birthdays, it is also the birthday of the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), and I see that he is seated next to another birthday boy, the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), which is very encouraging—birthday boys sitting together.

T10. [908986] Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): In response to my recent Adjournment debate on the relationship between exclusions and youth violence, the Minister for School Standards failed to address how the Government's strategy links to the vital role that education plays in the public health approach. My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) just asked a similar question, which was also not answered. I have since sent the Minister a copy of the Youth Violence Commission's report. Has he read it, and if so, can he update us on what he will do?

Nadhim Zahawi: My right hon. Friend has read the report, and there is cross-Government work through the serious violence taskforce. As I said, exclusion from school must not mean exclusion from education. It is vital that pupils who enter alternative provision following an exclusion have a high-quality education, which is why we are reforming AP.

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating Yate Academy on its outstanding progress on its Progress 8 scores, which are now at 0.69—its best ever result? Will he meet me and a delegation of headteachers from south Gloucestershire to talk about how we can continue to drive up educational standards across our area?

Nick Gibb: I certainly want to congratulate Yate Academy on the improvements it has made in the progress of pupils at both primary and secondary phases, and particularly its significant improvement in the proportion of pupils taking the EBacc combination of core academic subjects. We are committed to ensuring that support is available for schools that require it, and teaching schools are strong schools that work with others to provide high-quality training and development for teachers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Taking into account the immense pressure that staff are under, torn between a desire to enhance their children's education through after-school clubs and their obligation to the unions, will the Minister outline what steps the Department is taking to strengthen the teaching profession?

Nick Gibb: On 28 January, we launched the teacher recruitment and retention strategy, which was designed collaboratively with the education sector. Its centrepiece is the early career framework, which will underpin a fully funded two-year package of structured support for all teachers in the first two years of their career. We are also building a career structure for teachers who have more experience. It is a very good package, designed to increase retention and help with recruitment.

Ms Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Will the Secretary of State look again at school funding in rural areas, particularly Cheshire, and push for further funding at the spending review? Will he commit to come to Tatton, to meet some of my headteachers?

Damian Hinds: I am conscious of the issues around rural and smaller schools. We have made adjustments for that in the national funding formula, but I am happy to visit Tatton and meet some headteachers.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Over 50% of York children from disadvantaged backgrounds are not school-ready by the age of five, and only 46% of those qualifying for free school meals are ready by the end of year 1. York has the highest attainment gap in the country. We also receive the worst funding for our schools. What correlation does the Secretary of State draw between the two, and will he meet me to discuss how we can improve the chances of children in York?

Damian Hinds: I am taking a lot of meetings today, but I will take one more, because if the hon. Lady has some good ideas, I am happy to hear them. She is right to identify the issues around school readiness, and this is at a time when there is more early-years nursery provision than ever before. We need to work harder on this, and I would be delighted to hear from her.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I know the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills is aware of concerns in Mansfield about the future of West Nottinghamshire College. Despite its strong record historically, it now finds it has overreached financially and made capital investments that were not sustainable. Will she assure my constituents that we have seen good changes in the management and new governance there, that the core purpose of the college in delivering local provision is secure and that we will see accountability for the problems that have happened?

Anne Milton: I know that my hon. Friend has campaigned very hard for West Notts College, and the Skills Funding Agency and the Further Education Commissioner’s office are working very closely with it. What matters now is that West Notts College has the opportunity to do well what it should do, which is offer excellent further education to local people.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): The excellent school food plan recommended in 2013 that Ofsted inspectors should consider the way a school promotes healthy lifestyles. We have had two childhood obesity reports that talk about Ofsted evaluating how schools support children to keep themselves healthy, yet there is no mention of that in the Ofsted inspection framework. Will the Minister commit today to implementing an Ofsted-led healthy rating scheme as soon as possible?
Nadhim Zahawi: We are working with Public Health England to update school food standards. This will focus on reducing sugar consumption and include guidance to caterers and schools. We are testing delivery models as we continue to explore the most effective way to deliver the healthy schools rating scheme, building on the successful resources that are already available.
Crime and violence. This public health approach includes set out in the serious violence strategy to tackle knife sector. We have a comprehensive programme of action across civil society, including local government and do all they can to tackle it, along with our partners in our communities. The Government are determined to Home Department (Victoria Atkins): Mr Speaker, if I really is time that he upped his game.

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The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): Mr Speaker, if I may, I will address that point before we move on to the very important issue at hand. I know that the Home Secretary means absolutely no discourtesy—he is a regular and assiduous Minister. I hope that I will be able to answer questions today in a way that meets with the House's approval. Please do not think that this in any way undermines our commitment to this important topic. I am sure that my right hon. Friend will hear what you have said, Mr Speaker.

Knife crime is devastating for victims, families and our communities. The Government are determined to do all they can to tackle it, along with our partners across civil society, including local government and those in education, health, policing and the charitable sector. We have a comprehensive programme of action set out in the serious violence strategy to tackle knife crime and prevent young people from being drawn into crime and violence. This public health approach includes support for prevention projects through the early intervention youth fund and the anti-knife crime community fund, support for police weeks of action under Operation Sceptre, and our ongoing media campaign #knifefree to encourage young people to understand that there are alternatives to carrying knives.

We will also be building on longer-term intervention work, with the new £200 million youth endowment fund, and consulting on a new legal duty to underpin multi-agency work to tackle serious violence. However, it is also vital that the police have the powers they need. That is why we listened when the police—those on the frontline in confronting knife-carrying young people—told us that they required additional powers of intervention to deal more effectively with people being drawn into knife crime, and we have acted.

The police asked us to introduce knife crime prevention orders to reach young people before they are convicted of an offence. These orders are aimed at young people who are at risk of engaging in knife crime, at people the police call “habitual knife carriers” of any age, and at those who have been convicted of a violent offence involving knives. The orders will enable the courts to place restrictions on people, such as curfews and geographical restrictions, as well as requirements such as engaging in positive interventions. The intention is that the new orders will be preventive and will support those subject to them in staying away from crime.

We have therefore tabled amendments to the Offensive Weapons Bill, which is currently before the other place. The amendments were tabled last Tuesday, and in line with parliamentary convention, a letter was sent to all noble peers who spoke at Second Reading, as well as to the Chairs of the Home Affairs Committee, the Joint Committee on Human Rights and the Delegated Powers Committee, and to shadow Ministers from Her Majesty’s Opposition and the Scottish National party. A copy of the letter was placed in the Lords Library, and a copy is being placed in the Commons Library.

The amendments to the Offensive Weapons Bill, which introduce these orders, are due to be considered in the other place in detail this Wednesday. The Bill will, of course, return to this House after it has completed its passage through the Lords, and I hope all Members on both sides of the House will lend their full support to this important new preventive measure when the Bill returns to this place.

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According to the police, 10,000 children are involved in county lines. Knife crime offences across the country are at record levels. Homicides are at record levels. Children as young as 10 years old are being slaughtered on the streets and these orders are what the Government come forward with. It is simply not good enough.

Why is it necessary to have knife crime prevention orders when it is already a criminal offence to have a knife in public without good reason? The Minister talked about “habitually” carrying a knife. For goodness’ sake, it is not habitual. Something needs to be done! Instead of introducing new laws, why does not the Minister, with others, support the police to enforce existing laws? Why have we seen a reduction in police numbers, when her own evidence tells her that they make a difference in tackling this issue? Is it not the case that knife crime prevention orders merely paper over the cracks? Of course we want to prevent young people from becoming involved, but where are the youth services? Where are the street workers? Where are the people out there working with young people who have been excluded from school to prevent them from getting into trouble in the first place?

How will knife crime prevention orders tackle the huge crisis facing our country? Instead of introducing the orders, the Home Secretary should be chairing Cobra. This is a national emergency. This is a national crisis. Up and down the country people will wonder why the Government are not using the full force of the state to tackle it. They need to help the young people who are having problems with knife crime and tackle the criminal gangs who ruthlessly exploit them.

MI5, GCHQ, MI6 and the National Crime Agency, led by the Home Secretary, should be reporting regularly to Parliament. Anybody would of course welcome serious crime prevention orders if they helped, but the British public and Members will all want to know, from the Minister and from the Government, why the state will not respond with ruthlessness and determination to take on the criminal activity that is putting so many of our young people in danger and ruining the lives of countless people in communities across the country. If there was a terrorist act, the state, quite rightly, would respond. I tell the Minister this: this is a national emergency. The lives of countless families and young people are being ruined. We need to step up to the mark. The British public demand no less of all of us.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his impassioned question. He will know, from the discussions we have constantly on this topic, that the Home Office is a team. Colleagues will have noticed the Policing Minister sitting next to me. This is a team effort, not just in the Home Office but across Government and across civil society.

We are introducing the orders because at the very end of August last year the police asked us for a preventive order to get to a very small cohort of children, who have not yet been convicted of criminal offences but on whom the police have received intelligence, in an effort to intervene before they get a first conviction, with all the terrible repercussions that can have both for the victims of any crimes they commit but also for their own life chances. These orders are about prevention. We want to give the police the power, through the Bill, to seek an order from a court, on a civil standard of proof, so that the state can wrap its arms around children if schools and local police officers think they are at risk of carrying knives frequently. The orders mirror similar prevention orders we have, such as sexual harm prevention orders, by placing negative and positive requirements on children who do not necessarily have a criminal conviction, to try to drag them away from the gangs that the hon. Gentleman rightly identifies as being central to this criminality.

Last week, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) invited me to his constituency. I heard from a group of people who are on the frontline tackling these crimes how young vulnerable children are being targeted by criminal gangs. This is why we have the serious violence strategy. This is why we have the cross-party serious violence taskforce. We want to tackle not just the exploitation of children, but the criminals behind it. We can agree on one thing, which is that we all want this to stop. We will achieve that by working together and by intervening early.

Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend and the Home Secretary on what they are doing to tackle this very difficult problem. There are no easy answers, but I remind her that 11 years ago, the Met instituted Operation Blunt 2, which, in the course of about 18 months, took 11,000 knives off the streets of London and was one of the factors that led to serious and sustained falls in knife crime and indeed, in the murder rate. Does my hon. Friend agree that the biggest supporters of stop and search are the families who might otherwise face a lifetime of pain, and does she not agree that the present Mayor of London is therefore grotesquely pessimistic in saying that this will take 10 years to resolve?

Mr Speaker: I think the right hon. Gentleman is telling us that he was doing jolly well.

Victoria Atkins: I am bound to say that I agree with my right hon. Friend, if he is congratulating himself. I thank him for his contribution and of course recognise the work that he did as Mayor of London. I sit here alongside the Policing Minister, who is also the Minister for London, and the joined-up work between the Government and the Mayor of London’s office is critical in tackling this. Stop and search is a vital tool in the police’s armoury, but it is not the only answer. That is why our approach on early intervention—including the Home Secretary securing £200 million from the Chancellor recently to set up the long-term youth endowment fund—will, I hope, absolutely give the results that the House expects. However, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is absolutely right: there is no room for complacency, which is why, in addition to these very long-term projects, we also have much shorter-term, immediate projects such as knife crime prevention orders, which will have a very real effect very quickly on the streets of our cities and rural areas.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that with knife crime at record levels, the public at home will be very disappointed that the Home Secretary could not find the time to be in the Chamber today for this urgent question? Opposition
Members appreciate that knife crime prevention orders are an attempt to intervene without criminalising, but does the Minister accept that the problems of knife crime and other types of violent crime are as much about capacity as the law? When we say “capacity”, it is a question of not only the number of police officers, which has dropped under this Government, but the capacity in the youth service. I was in Wolverhampton last week, where the youth service has been decimated. People said to me over and over again that they report those they believe to be drug dealers and what they believe to be young people carrying knives, and they get no response because of a lack of police capacity.

Does the Minister accept that although the announcement of knife crime prevention orders was preceded by the Home Secretary’s declaration in October last year that the Government are adopting a public health approach to violent crime, it is simply not clear how knife crime prevention orders fit into that? How is this a public health approach that is supposed to address the underlying causes as well as tackling criminals? We are told that suspects as young as 12 will be on curfew and deprived of their liberty and access to social media. These are only suspects. Are any of these measures based on evidence? If so, what is that evidence? Will the new orders be subject to appeal or review? In addition, what measures are in place to ensure that those deprived of internet access do not simply open up another account using different personal details?

The head of the violent crime taskforce said “we cannot enforce our way out of this—prevention and intervention is the key”.

We do not reject out of hand these knife crime orders. The House will study them when they come to Committee, but we want to see more from Government than token changes in the law. We want to see real intent and real resources behind prevention and intervention, because the lives of young people in our cities depend on that.

Victoria Atkins: I am pleased the right hon. Lady appears to support these orders. The Mayor of London also supports them. This is what I mean when I talk about a cross-party consensus. People out there, including the bereaved families I meet, such as the Goupall family, whom I met last week, are not interested in the back and forth over the Dispatch Box; they want us to work together to stop this happening, and so I welcome her support for the orders.

As I am sure the right hon. Lady knows, having read our serious violence strategy, we have set out the factors that we believe underpin the rise in serious violence. We note, for example, that other countries across the world have seen similar rises. Last year, we held an international conference to discuss with other law enforcement agencies and healthcare providers across the world what they were doing to tackle serious violence, because of course we want to learn from other people’s experiences.

On intervention, we are as one; we want to intervene earlier. Families worried about their children and young people walking around, whether in London or further afield, want us to deliver results. That is the absolute reason for the strategy and the serious violence taskforce, which, as I said, is a cross-party initiative. I am extremely grateful to Members across the House for helping us with it.

I should have said to the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) that I very much take on board his point about the House being updated more regularly on what we are doing. I am conscious that we are busy working quietly in the background with our partners, and I agree that we should inform the House more, so I undertake to do so.

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend’s answer to the urgent question. We need to be unflinchingly robust on enforcement, but we also need to draw youngsters away from the risks of knife crime in the first place. Having served as a volunteer and later a trustee at Fight For Peace, a groundbreaking charity in Newham with a stellar record of getting at-risk NEETs into training and work, can I ask the Minister what work is being done across Whitehall to invest in the preventive expertise and experience of groups such as Fight For Peace in order to cut the risk of knife crime in the first place?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question, partly because, in highlighting the work of his charity, he gives me an opportunity to correct a misreport in The Sunday Times this weekend about the early intervention youth fund. It erroneously stated that we had cut the amount available to that fund. We have not. We have spent the first tranche—£17.7 million—on 29 projects across the country, and the rest of the money is to be invested in due course later this year.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for highlighting the work of his local charity. Many charities large and small do invaluable work, and we very much hope that their knowledge and intelligence will feed into applications for knife crime prevention orders, where those are in the best interests of the child and the local community, so that we can draw them away from criminality before it is too late.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North)
(SNP): We all agree that the surge in knife crime in England and Wales is harrowing, and our hearts go out to everyone affected by this epidemic, but these disproportionate measures cannot be the right approach to tackling this issue. Why is the Home Secretary introducing these orders to the Offensive Weapons Bill at such a late stage, when the opportunity to debate them will be limited?

In Scotland, we have taken a different approach. Under a public health approach, which views violence as a disease, the goal is to diagnose the problem and treat the causes. Officers in Scotland’s groundbreaking violence reduction unit work with teachers and social and health workers to prevent young people from being drawn into a criminal lifestyle in the first place. Only by tackling the causes of violence, and not just its symptoms, and by taking a whole-systems approach, can we break the cycle of violence. As a result of this approach, recorded violent crime in Scotland has fallen by 49% since 2006-07 to one of its lowest levels since 1974.

Does the Minister agree there is much to learn from Scotland’s approach to violent crime, and can she confirm whether the Home Secretary is actively considering the public health approach, which has been so effective in Scotland, but with which these measures do not fit?
Victoria Atkins: I am afraid that I must disagree with the hon. Gentleman’s use of the word “disproportionate”. I recognise that he may not have had time to read the detail of the orders, but they are civil orders imposed by a court on a case-by-case basis following a careful presentation of facts by the police. It will be for the court to determine whether an order is appropriate in all the circumstances of individual children. Those under 18 will be reviewed periodically, which will involve the placing of orders, positive and negative. An order may impose a geographical curfew or prevent children from having access to social media, and it may require them to seek help from youth workers.

As for the timing, the police approached us with this idea on 28 August, and we have worked hard to reach a stage at which we can insert an amendment in the Bill during its passage. I appreciate that we were not able to do so while it was being considered in this place, but if the hon. Gentleman does not have knowledge of the workings of the other place, I can promise him that its Members are very good at scrutinising measures.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I draw the Minister’s attention to a disturbing report in yesterday’s edition of The Mail on Sunday about the ability of a 16-year-old “test” youngster used by the newspaper to buy an oversized Rambo-style knife online in about two minutes flat? How will the legislation stop knives being delivered at home?

Victoria Atkins: That is exactly the point of the Bill. We are very conscious that, while most retailers do what they should by obeying the law that has been in place for more than 30 years to stop the sale of sharp knives to under-18s, online retailers are not doing so well in that regard, so the Bill is intended to ensure that online as well as shop retailers meet their obligations. That is just one of the ways in which we are trying to prevent young people from getting their hands on these very dangerous weapons in the first place.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Does the Minister not realise that the Home Office appears just to be tinkering while children and young people are dying on our streets, families are being devastated, and parents are worrying about whether their teenagers are safe on their way home? She has talked about an endowment fund, but it is spread over 10 years. She has also talked about an early intervention fund, but it amounts to only £22 million, and there are reports that it is being cut.

This proposal stands against cuts of hundreds of millions of pounds in our youth services. Does the Minister not recognise that any chance of preventing young people from being caught up in dangerous gangs, drug networks, exploitation or county lines requires investment in people who can work with those young people? Will she now commit herself to meeting the scale of the huge and serious problem that we are facing, and to presenting a much bigger, much more ambitious plan that can actually save lives?

Victoria Atkins: Let me, if I may, correct the right hon. Lady on a couple of points. The endowment fund is spread over 10 years deliberately to ensure long-term investment in prevention and intervention, and it will be leveraged as well. It is in the process of being launched. As I said earlier, reports of cuts in the early intervention youth fund are mistaken: it remains at £22 million. As for scaling up our response, the serious violence strategy encompasses all of Whitehall, it encompasses local government, and it encompasses the various agencies and arms of the state that it would be expected to encompass.

Our plan to consult on a legal duty to take a “public health” approach to this issue goes further, dare I say, than what is being done in Scotland. If the consultation reveals that there is an appetite for it, all the arms of the state will have a legal duty to prevent this violence. So I do believe that we are scaling up our approach. I do not for a moment underestimate the scale of the task that we face, but we must ensure that all the various levers are pulled in a way that is consistent and will deliver results.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Young people need to fear the probability and severity of being caught in possession. How close is the Minister to delivering that?

Victoria Atkins: My right hon. Friend brings a frankness to the debate which, if I may say so, does not recognise shades of grey. For example, a young man who may my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service recently met described his fear of walking outside his front door without a knife, and how that fear was greater than the fear of meeting a police officer. We need to be sensitive to children who behave like that, because they are very, very afraid. That is why early intervention work, knife crime prevention orders and other tools available through the strategy and the Bill will, I hope, give confidence to those young people that knives are not the answer—that there are alternatives. We cannot just give a harsh response; we also need to take a public health approach.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): One of the Home Secretary’s closest colleagues said of antisocial behaviour orders that “they were too time consuming and expensive, and they too often criminalised young people unnecessarily, acting as a conveyor belt to serious crime and prison”

Given that it is the Prime Minister who said that, what is different about the proposed new ASBO, and will it genuinely help to tackle this appalling rise in knife crime?

Victoria Atkins: These orders are preventive orders. They can be applied for before a child is convicted of carrying a knife. They can also be used after conviction. For example, the young man whose sentence was raised last week at the invitation of the Solicitor General in Croydon would have been eligible for a knife crime prevention order on serving his prison sentence. The orders are targeted at an admittedly small cohort of people but, none the less, we are worried about them, as they could cause great harm if they continue to carry knives and use them. It is about targeting prevention directly on them in a way that is not available at the moment in the eyes of the police. We are trying to prevent crime at a stage before harm is done.
Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): When knives have been used to wound or kill, what is the association with the supply of illegal narcotic drugs?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend knows that the illegal drugs market is considered to be the major driver of serious violence. These gangs deal in drugs for nothing more than money—money is their sole motivation—and they exploit children to carry those drugs around the country. The way in which they exploit those children is terrible, which is why we are tackling the organised crime gangs behind the drugs market, and sending out a message to anyone who may have a wrap of cocaine at the weekend or dally in drugs almost as a hobby that they are part of the picture of violence and exploitation. They need to be aware of where their drugs may very well have come from.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I have a few questions for the Minister that I hope she can answer, especially given that the Home Secretary is not here. How much does she expect the roll-out of knife crime prevention orders to cost? Will there be extra community police officers? How does this fit with the Government’s public health approach? Will there be extra resources available for programmes such as Divert, which I visited at Millwall in my constituency last week and which has proved so successful in reducing reoffending by over 20%? Reoffending costs the UK up to £1 billion a year, so should our focus not be on early intervention programmes such as that, rather than gimmicks that risk criminalising our young kids?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for all the work she does on this issue. She knows how important intervention is in the Government’s approach to tackling this serious violence. In terms of reoffending and preventing offending from happening in the first place, that is precisely what these orders are about: they are called prevention orders. We want to prevent children and young people from carrying knives in the first place, and that is consistent with our approach on, for example, the #knifefree campaign on social media. In terms of the costs, I do not have that figure to hand but I am sure that it will make its way across to me at some point.

The orders have been put in place at the request of the Metropolitan police. We have listened carefully to its analysis that there is a small cohort of young people that these orders may help, and we have drawn inspiration from similar prevention orders that are used in other regards. It will be for the police to decide how they use this tool as part of their operational toolkit. I would argue that this is consistent with the public health approach, because the postive and negative requirements within the order will enable the young person to receive help from other state organisations that will be able to draw them out of the criminal gangs that they might well be frequenting.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Following the excellent comments by the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), I should like to point out that the one group of people he did not blame were the parents. Parents have to take more responsibility because, ultimately, anyone who has a child has a responsibility to take care of that child. I say to those on my Front Bench that I have campaigned for a long time for more police officers on the beat. As more officers are taken to fight online crime, which we all understand, we are losing officers on the beat. As an ex-soldier, I know that that is where intelligence and prevention are used to great effect. Can my hon. Friend reassure me that more police officers will be put on the beat?

Victoria Atkins: Whether there will be more police officers on the beat in my hon. Friend’s constabulary is a matter for his police and crime commissioner. We have quite rightly devolved decisions about local policing to commissioners who are elected locally, because they best understand the needs of their local community. Tomorrow, we are debating the new police settlement grant, in which the Government are proposing to deliver a further £970 million to the police, with the help of police and crime commissioners, and I am sure that my hon. Friend and colleagues across the House will support that extra money.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): In 2015, amendments were introduced to the Criminal Justice and Courts Bill by my constituency predecessor with, I think, the best of intentions. They stated that anyone caught carrying a knife twice would face a mandatory sentence. Since that time, knife crime in London has reached an all-time high, with a total of 14,987 such offences. In the past year alone, Enfield has seen a 20% increase in knife crime and we now top a league table that we never wanted to top because of our level of serious youth violence. I am not opposed to these powers, but I do not think that they are the solution. As many have said, the massive reduction in our neighbourhood policing teams and the huge cuts to local authority budgets, which have decimated our community safety units and youth services, are where the biggest part of the problem lies. The police need those partners to be properly funded. If they are not, we are not going to solve this problem.

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady, who has questioned me assiduously through parliamentary questions on the prevalence of county lines. In relation to the mandatory minimum sentence, 65% of offenders sentenced under the new second strike legislation received an immediate custodial sentence. Before the legislation, the figure was 48%. It is important that, even with the mandatory minimum sentence, the courts should have the ultimate discretion, and they are obviously using it in particular cases. She is right that Opposition Members will know that I do not like to labour this point, but we had to make some very difficult decisions in 2010 because of the economic situation that we inherited from the last Labour Government—[Interruption.] I say that as a fact, because those spending decisions are made over a long term and we had to make some very tough decisions. However, I hope that she will gain confidence and that she will help to inject a further £970 million into the police accounts when we vote on our police settlement tomorrow. We hope that, with the help of police and crime commissioners, that funding will make a real difference to policing locally.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on bringing forward the order. What else could she have done if the police were asking for it? It is clearly not the solution to the whole problem, but it is part of the solution. Is she concerned,
as I am, that some children feel that they should carry knives for their own protection rather than using them against people? What can she and the Home Office do to promote campaigns such as #knifefree, to demonstrate that children should not carry knives for defensive reasons?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend, who absolutely sums up the situation. This is but one part of the Offensive Weapons Bill, which is but one part of our overall strategy. We have never pretended that this deeply complex and worrying crime can be solved with one tool or one approach, which is why this is just one small part of the overall picture. He is particularly right to identify those children who carry knives not because they are members of gangs but because they feel they need them for their own protection. That is why the orders are important—because gang injunctions, which are available at the moment, apply only to children whom the police can prove to be members of gangs. The orders will also help those children who are not members of gangs but who, as he says, carry knives out of a misplaced sense of security. The fact remains, however, as a visit to the Ben Kinsella Trust or any of the charities we work with will show, that if someone carries a knife, the risks of being hurt with their own knife are considerably higher.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Knife offences in Leicestershire have risen by 63% since 2010, yet Leicestershire received no funding from the early intervention youth fund, and neither did the two other largest forces in the east midlands—namely, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. Some £5 million from that fund has still not been allocated, so if the Minister really believes that early intervention is the key to tackling knife crime, may I urge her to put her money where her mouth is and give the east midlands the resources we need to tackle this appalling problem?

Victoria Atkins: I note in passing that the reserves of Leicestershire police have risen by £3.8 million since 2011, so just a fraction of the £27.6 million currently in reserves may go a very long way. I hope the hon. Lady will vote with the Government tomorrow to give Leicestershire police and other police forces up to a further £970 million on top of last year’s increases, with the help of police and crime commissioners.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I welcome this initiative, which I think will make a difference, but we must go further. The Minister knows that since entering this House I have campaigned for both first aid education and weapons awareness education to be on the national curriculum. We are halfway there, with first aid entering the curriculum. What steps can she take to ensure that weapons awareness appears on our national curriculum?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has indeed campaigned so much, not just on serious violence in general, but on county lines in particular, representing as he does an important town in Essex. The Government’s work through the serious violence taskforce has included sending out lesson plans before last year’s summer holidays, because we listened to youth workers who said to us, “Before children go off on their summer holidays, please can we help teachers teach them about the risks of carrying a knife?” We also support the work of charities such as the St Giles Trust, which goes a very long way to helping children. The Department for Education plan to introduce relationship education in schools will, of course, help, because it is about ensuring that children are not exploited and know what behaviour they should expect from their friends and older mentors. That is all part of a joined-up package.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) is almost uncontrollably excited. I think we must hear from her.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I have to run to a Delegated Legislation Committee, but I am keen to take part in this debate.

The Minister is right when she says that people living with this in communities like Walthamstow do not want a back and forth across the Dispatch Box. They are not interested in who got sent letters or in the parliamentary process. They do not really care about hashtags.

A few short weeks ago, Jaden Moodie was murdered by knife crime in my constituency. On Saturday, another young man almost lost his life after being stabbed while in my constituency. What people in my constituency see is an absent Home Secretary. What they see is Labour Members dragging Ministers to the Dispatch Box and holding Westminster Hall debates about the issues of knife crime and youth violence. What they see is an absence of police on our streets, having lost 200 in the last couple of years alone in our borough. They see an absence of youth workers in a struggling community, and they are asking me who cares about this. They are asking whether this place cares about the lives of those young people. When they see corporation tax being cut and no funding for youth services, I fear they see the answer.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for introducing me to Jaden’s mother after last week’s Westminster Hall debate. Jaden’s mother showed extraordinary strength in staying in what must have been a very difficult debate for her to listen to.

In terms of resources, we would argue that it is not just about police funding, although that is important. We have rehearsed the impact of the illegal drugs market, and from the work we have discussed, the hon. Lady knows the vulnerabilities of young people, such as how the prevalence of domestic abuse can make young people vulnerable to exploitation outside the home. There is a great deal of work going on in government on the effect of adverse childhood experiences. If she feels so strongly about police funding, I hope that she will support the Government tomorrow on the police grant settlement, under which the Met receive a further £1.72 million on top of the £100 million-odd it received last year.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I strongly welcome the statement and my hon. Friend’s work on this issue. To use a well-known phrase, “Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime.” We know that 40 children are excluded from our schools every day, and we know that excluded children are twice as likely to carry knives and
that 60% of prisoners had been excluded from school. Will she work very closely with the Department for Education on measures to stop these exclusions, which are almost becoming an epidemic in our country’s schools?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend who, with his expertise from the Select Committee on Education, hits the nail on the head when it comes to the role that exclusions and alternative provision seem to play in the lives of so many young people who are either the victims or perpetrators of serious violence. I am already working very closely with the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), particularly through the serious violence taskforce. I look forward to Edward Timpson’s review of good examples of alternative provision, because we need to ensure that children who struggle in mainstream education do not become targets for these criminal gangs that seek to exploit them as they attend alternative provision. We are very much working on that, and I would be delighted to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss our work further.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the birthday present of calling me to speak this afternoon. I very much appreciate it.

A famous boxer once said, “You can run, but you can’t hide.” The fact of the matter is that there is a shortage of policemen, and the level in the west midlands is only 75% of what it should be. I have met different groups in Coventry, some from affluent areas and some from not very well-off areas, and the common denominator is the lack of police and the increases in burglaries, knife crime and drugs. Over the weekend, the police used a dispersal order in the centre of Coventry after a young man was badly stabbed. There have been a number of stabbings in Coventry. Let us have the police; let us do something about it; and let us stop shadow boxing.

Victoria Atkins: I understand and hear the hon. Gentleman’s concerns about police funding. I hope that he will encourage his police and crime commissioner to spend some of the £85 million he has accrued in reserves as of March 2018 and that he will support the Government’s funding settlement tomorrow. West Midlands police stand to receive an extra £34 million through the settlement with the help of the police and crime commissioner, and presumably the commissioner will be able to use that money to good effect.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) for tabling this urgent question and you, Mr Speaker, for granting it. As with antisocial behaviour orders, what is to stop these new knife crime prevention orders from becoming a badge of honour in the gangland culture, which makes those upon whom they are served even harder in the eyes of fellow gang members?

Victoria Atkins: Across the course of human behaviour, no one can guarantee that gang members will not come to view orders in that way. However, I must point out that one of the strongest parts of the prevention orders is that the court will be able to prohibit a young person from using social media and from meeting families who have lost loved ones, including the family of Jermaine Goupall, who have done so much work to highlight the impact that social media had in the murder of their beloved son and brother. The social media measure will help to stop the ways in which these gangs can communicate and spread their evil.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Knife crime has risen by 19% in the west midlands in the past year alone. Young men are dying on the streets, some weeping as their life ebbs away. Let me ask the Minister a specific question: are the Government seriously suggesting that there is no link between the cutting of 2,000 police officers in the west midlands—21,000 nationwide—and rising knife crime?

Victoria Atkins: I assume the hon. Gentleman has read the serious violence strategy. He will see in that the ways in which Home Office officials have analysed the data and set out the chief drivers of serious violence. There are correlations with other countries that have seen rises in serious violence, which is why we have looked to see what they are doing differently and whether there are any commonalities between their experiences and ours, but we have to look at this in the round. The public health approach, which has support across the House, is very much focused on prevention and early intervention, and that is what the strategy and the taskforce seek to achieve.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I warmly welcome these knife crime prevention orders, but does the Minister agree that we need to tackle head on the cultural sickness that glamorises knife violence in the first place? That must include taking a robust approach to those social media platforms that host material that is distasteful and downright irresponsible.

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I note that he represents Cheltenham, which plays such an important part in our national security. We have invested £1.4 million in a social media hub with the Metropolitan police precisely to help the police identify those images and bring them down as quickly as possible. Frankly, the tech companies were not doing what they should be doing. They are getting better, although I do not think that they are there yet by any means. It is through the campaigning of not just the Government, but people such as the Jermaine Goupall family, who have suffered so terribly at the hands of gangs, who spread their evilness via social media, and through tech companies waking up to the harms that their sites can do to ordinary families across the country that I hope we will get some real action on this and get these sickening materials taken down.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Police numbers slashed and youth services and other services that support troubled families and vulnerable individuals cut to the bone will be a familiar tale to many in this House. The Government were warned that cuts have consequences. Did the Minister think the consequences of these cuts would be an increase or a decrease in knife crime and other serious violence?
Victoria Atkins: I am sure the hon. Lady knows that I was not in this place in 2010, when those very difficult decisions had to be made in the light of Labour’s leaving us with “no money”—I think that was what it said on the note. I remind the hon. Lady that I am sure that families watching this do not understand this buck and forth across the Dispatch Box; they want to see measures that help to protect their children and deal with the causes of serious violence. That is why these knife crime prevention orders are just one tool to help the police to intervene on children whom we think are at risk of carrying knives.

If the hon. Lady is so concerned about funding, I am sure she will support the police funding settlement tomorrow. It will see up to £970 million more fed into policing this year, on top of the nearly £500 million last year and on top of the protected spending since 2015.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): A significant number of weapons seized in London are supplied by a wholesale manufacturer named Anglo Arms. It supplies blades described as “First Blood”, “Fantasy Hunting Knife” and “Predator”. I recently purchased a maritime instrument that contained a blade. When it came to me, the person who delivered it did not ask for my identification or how old I was. The Minister says that she wants the responsibility to be put on the suppliers, but once someone ticks a box to say that they, as the purchaser, are 18, the responsibility leaves the supplier and the onus falls on the deliverer. I am sure she would not expect anyone who delivers these goods to take responsibility for enforcing the law.

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend makes the point that it is the responsibility of retailers to check the age of the people to whom they sell these knives. That is precisely why we structured the Offensive Weapons Bill as we did, making it absolutely clear to retailers that the onus is on them to conduct these checks—it cannot just be a tick-box exercise—so that they are sure that the person to whom they deliver the item is over 18. That is also why we are requiring people to go to the local post office or to the delivery depot and show ID before they can pick up the item. Again, that means there is an extra check in the system. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that ticking a box simply is not good enough.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): As we speak, Live Your Life Drop The Knife is doing some excellent work in schools in the Runcorn part of my constituency. The community could do an even better job if the Government reversed the £56 million of cuts imposed on Cheshire police. When are they going to do that?

Victoria Atkins: We have the vote tomorrow, and I assume the hon. Gentleman will vote in support of the police settlement grant, which will give £970 million to policing. I hope he will put his money where his mouth is and support the Government.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): May I commend the Minister a charity in my constituency called Stand Against Violence? It does some excellent work through anti-violence workshops in schools. I would really welcome a meeting with the Minister to talk about that work, because I think we could roll it out nationally. Prevention is the key, which is why I support the new orders. Parents want to know how children are getting hold of all these knives in the first place. Will the Minister assure the House that we will clamp down on retailers that sell them to children, who are under-age?

Victoria Atkins: I am always happy to meet my hon. Friend, and that sounds like a great charity. Through our various funds we are supporting large and small charities. The knife-crime community fund is aimed specifically at the smallest charities working on the frontline with young people in their local area. I hope that the charity my hon. Friend mentioned has applied to that fund. We also have the early intervention youth fund for larger charities and police and crime commissioners, and of course the youth endowment fund, which is £200 million that will be leveraged up over 10 years to support innovative projects.

In respect of where children are getting their knives, buying them over the counter is but one way in which they get them. We of course acknowledge that some children have simply taken knives from their kitchens. That is why we all—mums, dads, schools—have to work together to send the message out to children that it is not normal to carry a knife and that they face much greater risk and harm simply by carrying one.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): We need to think about the worth of a person’s life when it comes to funding. We need to think about putting in the resources and the money to save people’s lives, because those lives are what really matter. I attended a school council meeting this morning and was told by the children how some of them were being chased after they left school. They said that they were being manipulated, targeted and bullied by older children. This must stop. To deal with it, the schools need resources, the parents need support and the community needs resources, as well as local police on the ground doing their job. We need to consider whether a life matters enough to put in those necessary resources.

Victoria Atkins: It was a pleasure to address the hon. Lady at the all-party group on knife crime last week, when we were providing a little more detail on what we are doing to tackle serious violence. No price can be put on the loss of a son or daughter, so I am always hesitant to agree that one can put a price on life; it is almost impossible to put a value on the emotional cost of the loss of such lives.

Of course, we must look at the effectiveness of the programmes that we are investing in to help prevent such crimes. The youth endowment fund is important, because, over a 10-year period, it will gather evidence on what has the best effect in preventing young people from being ensnared in serious violence. I end by saying that I am very grateful to the all-party group for all the work that it does in this regard, and I hope that it agrees with the orders, because they are about preventing young people from being ensnared in carrying knives, and all the consequences that that can have, before they receive a criminal conviction.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): What percentage of people who carry out a crime and carry a knife go to prison?
Victoria Atkins: A total of 65% of those who are caught under the minimum mandatory sentence legislation receive terms of immediate imprisonment, but that is always at the discretion of the court. We are mindful, especially when it comes to the first offence of a young person, of not fettering the hands of the judge who is considering that case if he or she believes that forms of intensive community work may help that child out of the cycle of violence and into a much happier, safer adulthood.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Before joining the Home Department, the Home Secretary was responsible for local government, where he authored significant cuts that have translated into a decimation of youth services in this country. We are losing the battle for the hearts and minds of our young people because we have no one out there trying to engage with them. These cuts will continue tomorrow in this place. If the Home Secretary and the Home Office are really serious about tackling youth crime and violent crime, why are they not banging down the door of the Treasury and Local Government that there would be a specific concentration in the troubled families programme on tackling knife crime. That is precisely because those two Secretaries of State wanted to have a united approach to tackling knife crime. I gently point out that although youth services are really important—of course they are—we have a wealth of amazing charities across the country, which provide services. For example, the charity Redthread sits in accident and emergency departments to try to reach children and young people at the teachable moment. A mixture of youth services and charitable work is one of many ways in which we can help to tackle this matter together.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I strongly support the package of measures announced by the Minister. How receptive have the social media companies been to the Government’s plans, given that their co-operation will clearly be vital if we are to block social media accounts? What particular benefit will this measure bring?

Victoria Atkins: Some gangs use drill music and certain forms of social media to incite violence. Just this week, I have heard examples whereby orders to assassinate were put out on social media. I know that everyone across the House abhors that sort of behaviour. The tech companies are under a lot of scrutiny at the moment—not just regarding serious violence, but in relation to tackling the awful scourge of child sexual exploitation and terrorism material on their channels. They have not been great in the past, but they are getting better. The Home Secretary is absolutely clear that there is much more to be done, which is why he is focusing so much attention on the tech companies when it comes to addressing serious violence and stopping child sexual exploitation.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her answer to the urgent question. She will be aware that zombie knives, Rambo blades, lethal knives, and even samurai swords and knuckledusters can be bought online and delivered to home addresses. Who will have the responsibility to enforce knife sales provisions online? Who will check the retailers—the police, local councils or the Department?

Victoria Atkins: In relation to online sales, it will be a combination of the police and trading standards. Retailers are not supposed to be selling knives to under-18s; that is the law at the moment. We therefore see the measures in this announcement as merely solidifying that commitment in a way that will bring about results.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): There will be £20 million a year for the very welcome youth endowment fund, but the Minister knows that far more than that has been cut from local authority budgets, while four billion quid is being made available in three months to slosh up the wall for a no-deal Brexit that the Government have the power unilaterally to stop. I welcome the Minister’s focus on prevention, but do she and the Government not accept that we are a world away from the kind of investment that would be needed to take away the market for drugs and that, unless we can take away that market for drugs in Barrow and other areas, our young people are going to continue to carry knives, be stabbed and be enslaved by these evil drug gangs?

Victoria Atkins: Let me say what a pleasure it was to visit Cumbria on Thursday. I made only a fleeting visit through the hon. Gentleman’s constituency on my way to Copeland, where I discovered the great work that the Copeland hub is doing to bring together all the agencies involved in helping young people, and tackling antisocial behaviour and other types of crime.

I hear what the hon. Gentleman says about money for Brexit; that is a debate for other times. I very much hope that we can count on his support tomorrow for the police settlement, which will see up to £970 million more being invested in policing nationally—something that his local crime commissioner welcomes.
Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty

4.48 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to make a statement on the intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty.

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): As if to prove that lightning does sometimes strike twice, even in this unnatural world of politics, I am here to address this issue again, as I was on 25 October, deputising for my right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe and the Americas, who is once more gallivanting globally. This time he is in Ottawa, where, I am delighted to inform the House, he is in the grip of an even colder spell than we are here—it is minus 7º centigrade for the record, or so he assured me earlier today.

When I last had the opportunity to respond on this issue in the House last October, President Trump had just announced that it was the intention of the United States to end the intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty unless Russia returned to full compliance. Let me once again set out the context. The INF treaty was a 1987 agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union that eliminated nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with a range of between 500 km and 5,500 km. For over three decades now, the INF treaty has played an important role in supporting Euro-Atlantic security, initially removing an entire class of US and Russian weapons, thus making a significant contribution to strategic stability.

While the UK is not a party to this bilateral treaty, we have always made it clear over the years that we ideally wish to see the treaty continue. However, for that to happen, the parties need to comply with its obligations. Sadly, this has not been the case. Despite numerous objections raised by a range of NATO allies going back over five years, Russia has developed new missiles, in direct contravention of the treaty. This includes the covert missile testing, producing and fielding of the 9M729 ground-launch cruise missile system. As NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has said:

“These...missiles are hard to detect. They are mobile. They are nuclear capable. They can reach European cities”.

The US, under both the Obama and Trump Administrations, has made extensive efforts to encourage Russia to return to full and verifiable compliance. It was indeed the Obama Administration who, in 2014, first strongly called out Russia’s non-compliance with this treaty. It is important to acknowledge that, while doing so, the US has continued to meet its obligations under the treaty. However, the US, with the full support of its NATO allies, has been very clear that a situation where the US fully abided by the treaty and Russia did not was not sustainable. On 4 December last year, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that the US would suspend its participation in the INF treaty within 60 days— that is, by 2 February 2019— unless Russia returned to compliance.

This constituted an opportunity for Russia to address our shared concerns and to take steps to preserve the treaty. Allies took the opportunity to protest this point last month to the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergei Ryabkov, during the NATO-Russia Council meeting. I have to inform the House that Russia has not taken that opportunity. It has offered no credible response, only obfuscation and contradictions designed to mislead. This course fits a wider pattern of behaviour from Russia aimed at undermining our collective security. We and all NATO allies therefore support the US decision to suspend its participation in the treaty and to trigger the formal withdrawal process. NATO is unified on this process.

It is Russia’s fault alone that we have arrived at this point. President Putin’s statements in the last few days announcing that Russia, too, will suspend its obligations was unsurprising given the fact that it has violated the treaty over the years. Nevertheless, even at this late stage, we urge Russia to change course. The treaty’s six-month withdrawal process offers Russia a final opportunity to return to compliance through the full and verifiable destruction of all its 9M729 systems. That is the best—indeed, the only—way to preserve the treaty.

We remain committed, as do the US and other NATO allies, to preserving effective arms control agreements, but we are also clear that for arms control to be effective, all signatories must respect their obligations. In the meantime, we are working closely with all our NATO allies on the implications for European security. We remain committed to ensuring that NATO has a robust defence posture to deter all threats. As NATO allies said on 2 February:

“NATO continues to closely review the security implications of Russian intermediate-range missiles and will continue to take steps necessary to ensure the credibility and effectiveness of the Alliance’s overall deterrence and defence posture. We will continue to consult each other regularly with a view to ensuring our collective security.”

If this treaty falls, we and other NATO allies will hold Russia alone responsible. We urge Russia now to take a different course and to return to full and verifiable compliance.

Fabian Hamilton: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker, and I thank the Minister for his statement.

During the weekend, one of the main pillars of nuclear weapons treaties was suspended when first the United States and then Russia withdrew from the intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty. As the Minister said, it was only in October last year that I stood here asking an urgent question on this matter. Back then, the United States was only expressing its initial intentions to withdraw from the INF treaty, citing Russian non-compliance. Regrettably, it has now fulfilled that action. Since then, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has decided to maintain its so-called doomsday clock at two minutes to midnight. In a statement after the US Administration’s decision, the Bulletin noted that we are living in “a state as worrisome as the most dangerous times of the Cold War”—a sentiment with which I sadly agree.

What we see in these actions by the United States and Russia is the erosion of the system of multilateralism and the rules-based international order which underpins global peace and security. Leaving the INF treaty is a dangerous unravelling of part of the architecture of trust and understanding that has prevented nuclear conflict—an architecture that was begun 50 years ago with the signing of the non-proliferation treaty, which I
strongly support. Indeed, this comes only weeks before the 2019 NPT preparatory committee meeting in New York at the end of April.

Along with climate change, nuclear conflict and the devastating environmental impact that it could unleash are two of the most pressing threats to our lives and the future of every living creature on this planet. The suspension of the INF treaty is a sure sign of a dangerous breakdown of trust between the two nations with the vast majority of the world’s nuclear warheads. This has serious implications for future negotiations, including those on extending the new strategic arms reduction treaty, or New START, which is due to expire in 2021. What we see may be the beginning of a new arms race, even more dangerous and unpredictable than the one we saw during the cold war. We now live in a multipolar world in which the US and Russia no longer have a monopoly on the weapons proscribed in the INF treaty, even if they have the majority of warheads.

What assurances has the Minister received from our American allies that suspension of the INF treaty will not begin a new arms race between the United States and Russia involving weapons once again being based on European soil? What contact has he made with other countries that have developed INF-proscribed weapons, including China, so that a future multilateral framework may be developed that could supersede and replace the INF treaty?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I will touch on two aspects of what he said. The first is what losing the INF treaty means for extending New START, which is a bilateral treaty between the US and Russia that expires in 2021. We were pleased to see both sides meet the New START limits by the deadlines, by the end of last year. We believe that that treaty contributes to international stability. All allies support continued implementation and early and active dialogue on ways to improve strategic stability. It is, of course, for the US and Russia to take forward discussions about extending that treaty.

The hon. Gentleman also raised perfectly legitimate concerns, which I think we all share, about the broader range of challenges for the multilateral system. We will continue to work closely with the US across a wide range of multilateral organisations and issues. He touched on climate change, for which I have Foreign Office responsibility and on which we work closely—if not necessarily as closely as we would like with the federal Administration—with a number of important state governors and others.

May I just say that we, like the US, believe that a number of multinational institutions are in need of reform? On the matter at hand, a situation in which the US is respecting the INF treaty and Russia persistently and consistently is not is simply not sustainable. The US is respecting the INF treaty and Russia persistently refusing to do so is a threat to international security.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Nuclear weapons are a dangerous and expensive folly. As well as taking away valuable resources from public services, they are not fit for purpose in meeting the security challenges of the 21st century. That is something SNP Members believe, and I know that there are even some Labour party Members who still believe that.

There is a need for full compliance, but there could also be dangerous repercussions for a security treaty that has guaranteed European security, so does the Minister agree that any US withdrawal could do more harm than good? How can we work towards getting rid of these weapons for good and—the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), made a very good point here—will the Minister inform the House what work he is doing with international agencies? We want to see the back of nuclear weapons forever.

Mark Field: I thank my right hon. Friend, who has great knowledge of and great interest in these matters. He is absolutely right that there needs to be an evidence-based approach. I have to say that we are confident, and I think all NATO allies have been confident in the discussions that have taken place with our American allies, on this matter. I should also point out, as I did in my initial comments, that the announcement on Saturday 2 February actually triggers a six-month withdrawal process, so there is a chance for Russia to come back to the table and, indeed, as he points out, for all of us to work internationally to try to salvage aspects of this treaty.

Ultimately, to return to the point I made earlier, I would say to my right hon. Friend—as I say, he has a great passion for demilitarisation and for such treaties—that these treaties can only work if they are complied with on all sides. There has been a persistent and consistent sense from Russia, going back many years, that it has not been willing to do so, and that makes such a treaty unsustainable.
developing new missiles that could target Europe simply is not acceptable. I think that is part of Russia’s broader pattern of behaviour, which is intended to weaken the overall Euro-Atlantic security architecture. It does undermine Russia’s claim that it is a responsible international partner upholding the rules-based system.

We will obviously have to take whatever action is necessary, but one thing about which I would reassure the House and the hon. Gentleman is that there is absolute unanimity among NATO members on the steps that have been taken. As I said earlier, it is not simply an issue of the Trump Administration; this was brought to the fore back in 2014 under former President Obama.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): On the subject of disarmament, I am reminded of Belloc, who wrote:

“Pale Ebenezer thought it wrong to fight,
But Roaring Bill, who killed him, thought it right.”

I just wonder whether, when we look at the treaty, which was signed in 1987, we remember that President Reagan managed to convince Gorbachev to sign it by matching him with a worthy strategic deterrent and capability. What would the Minister offer today in terms of persuasion to stop Mr Putin from similarly breaching the agreement and using these nuclear weapons at least to threaten, as he is doing today?

Mark Field: I think I speak for everyone in the House when I say that no one wants to see a return to an arms race. It is also worth pointing out that broader Russian interests extend well beyond the nuclear; they go into cyber-attacks, disinformation and influence peddling more generally. I think that is the bigger concern that many have in mind—I am slightly quoting the formidable Edward Lucas, who had an interesting article this morning in The Times on that issue and who knows Russian affairs to a great extent.

In terms of the bigger concern, yes, it is not in anyone’s interest to see an escalation of an arms race on European or other soil. Equally, it is very undesirable to see the moves that have been made by Russia consistently, as I say, over half a decade or more. The allies had very little choice other than to trigger this withdrawal, as we have done today. As I say, there is still time for Russia to come back to the table, and I very much hope it will do so.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Russia is in violation of the INF treaty, it seems, but when someone breaks the law, the answer is not to repeal the law and, in the case of the UK Government, to support another country in walking away from that process, but to look at the well-established methods for bringing an offending nation back into compliance—in this case, through the Special Verification Commission mechanisms. Will the UK Government be doing that, and will they make it clear to the US that if it is now suspending its obligations under the INF treaty, it should not assume that it is going to start putting cruise missiles back in the UK?

Mark Field: It does not “seem” that Russia has breached its commitments; there is absolutely no doubt, and there is absolute evidence, of that—evidence that is understood and supported by each and every NATO member. We will continue to work with partners across the international community to try to prevent the proliferation that, understandably, the hon. Lady is very concerned about and to continue to make significant progress, as we have, in the UN and elsewhere on multilateral nuclear disarmament. However, that can happen only when we are in a position to build confidence and trust between nuclear and non-nuclear weapons states and to take tangible steps towards a safer and more stable world. That trust, I am afraid, is at a very low ebb with the Russians, not just for this reason, but, as she will be aware, in other areas. However, we are determined to try to discuss these matters, and we will continue to do so in whatever forum we can.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I served in the British Army during the cold war, and I was present in this House at the time of the deployment of the INF weapons and the subsequent treaties, so I know the value of them. I entirely support our American allies on this issue, as well as the statement of the Secretary-General of NATO. If we are to move into an era of a lack of arms control agreements, thus leading to a continuing and most dangerous erosion of trust, would the Minister consider encouraging NATO to really press on with its fundamental review of nuclear deterrence—as I suggested, incidentally, to the Secretary of State for Defence only a week ago—to diminish the risk of misunderstanding and misinterpretation and to avoid returning to the worst days of the cold war?

Mark Field: I thank my right hon. Friend for his wise words. I do not think there is much that I can add to what he said, other than to say that I wholeheartedly agree with it and that it is something we should take up, as he rightly says, with the Secretary of State for Defence, the Foreign Office and others.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): As the Minister said, the Russians are in clear breach of the INF treaty. The development of the 9M729 missile is a clear breach, and there is evidence for it. In addition, the Russians are developing things such as the Kalibr sea-based cruise missile and other technologies. Russia is clearly taking an aggressive stance. Taking up the point that the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) made, would sharing this information and intelligence in an international setting—I accept that some of it is highly classified—help to persuade those who somehow want to give the Russians the benefit of the doubt?

Mark Field: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his thoughts on this matter. He will be aware that we have to deal with security and intelligence-rated issues carefully, but I am confident that discussions have been taking place within NATO for many months, if not years. We will do all we can. I do not think anyone wishes to see the treaty ripped up. We would like Russia to come back to the negotiating table. We clearly need the sort of international-level discussions he refers to and to which my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East referred earlier. That is certainly the message we will put to our representative at the UK mission in New York.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I represent Greenham Common. I saw in the 1980s how Russia responds to strength and how it will not respond to weakness. Even in the darkest hour of the cold war, the finest minds
across the alliance and particularly among our American allies, were devoted to strategic arms limitation efforts. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that that is still the case now? We really need to understand that we can be strong with Russia, but we also need to reassure and negotiate with it to try to get a safer world and a safer future.

Mark Field: My right hon. Friend puts it very well. I should perhaps say that decisions on US nuclear weapons policy are obviously fundamentally a matter for the US Government. However, the US “Nuclear Posture Review” published last year represents a continuation of previous years’ nuclear policy and indicates a measured and proportionate approach to nuclear deterrence, which I think the whole House would welcome.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): It is alarming to see how, piece by piece, the security architecture that was assembled to keep us all safe after the cold war is being dismantled. Looking ahead to the NPT—the treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons—review conference next year, how can the UK help to foster a shared understanding among all major powers in the new world order that rules and restrictions on nuclear weapons are of mutual benefit?

Mark Field: I think we all recognise that these are dangerous times. The questioning of the rules-based international system from all sorts of quarters should give rise to very grave concerns. Specifically on nuclear proliferation, I have spoken at the UN Security Council on a couple of occasions. Not least with what is happening in North Korea, this issue is of great importance. I think we all recognise that any further proliferation in nuclear weapons is incredibly undesirable, particularly in this relatively uncertain world. We will continue to make strong representations, working within the international community. I would try to reassure the hon. Lady that many members of the UN Security Council, both permanent and non-permanent, feel very similarly. I suspect that this issue will be quite high profile in the months to come.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): My father was a leading expert in nuclear non-proliferation in the 1960s. It is depressing to see a lot of his work, which led to Gorbachev’s decision to work with Thatcher and Reagan, being reversed by Putin. We are one of the closest partners of the US and the leading military European country in NATO. Can the Minister reassure the House that the Government will do everything they can to ensure that the USA is not dragged into a dangerous arms race again?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady’s father was clearly an extremely clever bloke.

Mark Field: I think it is hereditary, Mr Speaker. Others can perhaps judge that. I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. I hope she does not feel that her father’s work was in vain. My late father was also in the armed services. In many ways these problems and issues do not entirely go away, but the patient use of diplomacy, even within the military, can make a real difference over a period of time.

My hon. Friend asked about the issue of an arms race and the concern about whether the United States would be held back by allies and, in particular, the UK. It is worth stating again that any situation where the US is respecting its treaty obligations and Russia is not is simply not sustainable. NATO has been, and will continue to be, consistent in calling out Russia and making clear the importance of this issue for broader European security. In many ways, other nations closer to the Russian border feel that more acutely than we do, but the US has made clear its continued commitment to effective and enforceable arms control.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The essence of successful arms control is trust and verification. Will the Minister confirm that there has been no trust of the Russians because, as the Obama Administration were saying for several years, there was no effective way of verifying that, and Putin has lied and cheated on the obligations that the Soviet Union and then Russia signed up to under the intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question—I know he takes these matters very seriously. Yes, trust has clearly broken down. It is difficult to try to restore trust. It is worth remembering, as he mentions, that the Obama Administration had a clear goal from the moment they came into office at the beginning of 2009 to re-cast their relationship with Russia. Even within that context, they concluded, during the course of their time, that Russia could not be trusted on these matters because simply, as the hon. Gentleman rightly said, there was no evidence of verification. I am afraid that that situation has not improved over the past two and a half years.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Tension over nuclear forces is clearly highly dangerous. NATO experts argue that the Russian Federation seeks overmatch in four areas: political warfare, conventional forces over its neighbours, European theatre conventional missiles and European theatre intermediate nuclear missiles. What is being done to reassess the balance of power in eastern Europe and the level of forces based in Eastern Europe? And the threat of Russia? Will the Minister endeavour to keep the House informed? I get the sensation that not enough is being done or talked about on this extremely dangerous issue.

Mark Field: I reassure my hon. Friend that Ministers will keep the House up to date, not just on this issue—and obviously, it affects other Departments, including particularly the Ministry of Defence. My last overseas visit, only 10 days ago, was to Warsaw. I spent two days in Poland and we discussed some of these issues, which are clearly far closer to the hearts of our Polish counterparts, as well as those within Baltic and Nordic states, who are very concerned about the proliferation and potential threat of Russia in this regard. My hon. Friend also rightly made the point that in many ways, as I mentioned earlier, Russia’s nefarious work extends well beyond the nuclear sphere. The campaigns of disinformation and the use of cyber-attacks in a very aggressive way are all very modern ways—well beyond the nuclear—in which there are major threats. Obviously, those are issues that the whole of Government have responsibility for, and we shall do our best to keep the House informed about them.
Mr Speaker: That probably put the hon. Gentleman off for life.

John Woodcock: We have both changed our views since then.

Is there not a responsibility on everyone in the House not to hand Putin another PR coup by suggesting that the breakdown of this treaty is in some way the fault of America and the west, or even that there is some sort of false sense of equivalence between the two parties? Must we not put the blame firmly on Russia and do whatever is necessary to re-strengthen NATO to ensure that we can get to non-proliferation, and ultimately disarmament, through the strength of our allies, not their weakness, which Putin will exploit?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his brave words, and I agree entirely, but that makes it all the more important that we continue to work with the international community. The UN is the obvious vehicle for doing that, but we recognise that the Russians would veto a Security Council resolution, so we are working to build a coalition of interests among many UN members, both those directly impacted and others who, if we do not deal with this now, could be impacted in the decades to come.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Everyone agrees that we should get Russia back within the provisions of the INF treaty. Intermediate range means up to 5,500 metres. Will the Minister confirm that the INF treaty does not include sea or air-launched missiles, which would be sad if it did?

Mark Field: I believe that is correct. If I am incorrect, I will correct it in writing to my hon. Friend, but I believe he is correct.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What assessment have the Government made of the impact of this breakdown on other nuclear powers, such as Pakistan, India, China and North Korea, and what can the Government do to get international diplomacy back on track in relation to the importance of the framework of inspections, which, without a treaty, could get lost?

Mark Field: The hon. Lady will be aware that this is a specific treaty within Europe between the United Kingdom and Russia signed some 32 years ago, but she makes a valid point that these issues are not entirely isolated, and obviously therefore rogue states—for want of a better phrase—such as North Korea and states such as Pakistan that have nuclear capability will be watching from afar and making their own decisions. That is one reason I support the idea, before we rush headlong into lifting sanctions on North Korea, that we see verifiable evidence of denuclearisation, which, I am afraid, we have not had to date. That said, we are working closely with our partners in the region, and clearly the US is doing its best to make progress in that regard.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Appeasing non-compliance would increase the probability of our being vapourised in a nanosecond, would it not?

Mark Field: By my right hon. Friend’s standards, that was rather a long question, but let me keep the answer short. He is correct.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Minister is right that the world would be better without nuclear weapons—they kill innocent people indiscriminately; they are weapons of mass destruction. If he is sincere about not wanting to return to an arms race, is it not time that the UK stopped building new ones, cancelled the Trident programme, saved a couple of hundred billion pounds the UK cannot afford and set the lead internationally?

Mark Field: The issue is about deterrence. As I said, if these weapons had never been invented, or if they could be mysteriously or mystically dis-invented, we would all be grateful, but that is not the case. In the practical reality of the world in which we live, we need that deterrence, so I absolutely support the Government’s policy, which has been the policy of all British Governments since 1945.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): The Russian economy is doing very poorly, partly as a result of falling oil prices and partly as a result of crushing economic sanctions, and one wonders why they want to engage in another arms race in such a state. Could it not be a sign of weakness on the part of Russia—the dying gasp of a bankrupt regime?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for his arguably slightly optimistic view on these matters. I will not speculate about the state of the Russian regime, but I am not convinced that this will necessarily lead to an arms race. For the reasons I have pointed out, my concern is with what one might call the 21st-century aspects—the disinformation war, cyber-attacks and the like—on which the Russians’ main efforts will be focused in the future. As he rightly points out, however, the state of Russia’s economy is grisly—to put it mildly, and it might well be, as he says, that it is behaving in this way out of weakness rather than strength.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I must say that I was somewhat surprised by the Minister’s statement that the United Kingdom seems to be unequivocally supporting the United States rather than trying to pursue more legal and trade measures first. Russia’s actions are of course very worrying, and they must be to blame in large part—[HON. MEMBERS: “But.”]—Wait a second. But Russia has pledged that it will not place INF material in Europe unless the United States does so first. Will the Minister reassure me that we will not permit the US to place such armaments in the UK and will discourage it from placing them in Asia, which could spark, inadvertently, an arms race with China?

Mark Field: I am not going to become involved in speculation about arms races in other parts of the world, and, as the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, issues concerning the location of weapons are a matter for the Ministry of Defence. However, an escalation of
these matters would be in none of our interests. I think that, in one sense, the treaty has worked well for 30 years—at least it has led to some peace on European soil—but trust and verification are required, and I am afraid that those have been lacking for some years. In many ways it is the Trump Administration who have grasped the nettle, with the support of all NATO allies.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I clearly remember the treaty being signed when I was 11 years old. That pretty much inspired me to take this career course, and it is with great honour and pride that I am now a member of the NATO parliamentary assembly and international vice-chairman of the Conservative party.

International relationships are very important, and today it is with a real sense of tragedy that we see where the treaty has ended up. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this shows the absolute importance of counterbalances? May I remind people who say that Russia promised that it would not put anything into Europe that it is a country which, less than 12 months ago, launched a chemical weapon attack on this country, and showed what its means were and what it was willing to do? Tragic as today is, does my right hon. Friend agree that we must continue our full support for NATO, our full support for our allies, and our engagement on the international stage with all countries to ensure our safer future?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for his youthfulengagement in these matters. I am not sure that even at 23—which was my age in 1987—I realised quite what was going on when the INF treaty was signed. Levity aside, however, my hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we need to work on this continuously. We should remind ourselves, as he has reminded the House, of events in Salisbury during the past year following the use of chemical weapons by a Russian state source on UK citizens, with fatal results.

I think that all Members who have expressed concern will agree that we need to keep lines of engagement open as far as possible. While trust has broken down and while we want to see verification, we need to talk. One of the criticisms made of international diplomacy is that it is notionally a talking shop. [ Interruption. ] As several of my right hon. Friends are saying from a sedentary position, we need to talk from strength, but, equally, we need to keep those lines of engagement as open as possible when it comes to these very important matters.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): If, ultimately, there is a request from the United States Administration to relocate US nuclear weapons on UK soil, what will be the response of the British Government?

Mark Field: As the hon. Gentleman will recognise, I am not going to speculate on too many hypotheticals for the future. This issue will obviously be discussed at very senior levels, and I think that it would be wrong for me to say any more at this stage.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The Minister’s response to the urgent question today has been clearer and more assertive than his response to the same urgent question in October, and I welcome that. There is no point in being a signatory to an international arms treaty if the other side is not going to stick to the rules. The problem seems to be what I think the Minister described as the 9M729 missiles that the Russians have been developing. Can he tell the House how long they have been developing that capability, how many weapons we think they have, and what their capability is?

Mark Field: I fear that I will disappoint my hon. Friend by not going into great detail on these matters, as they are issues of secure intelligence. I confess that when I was at the Dispatch Box 102 days ago I was pretty robust. Perhaps he is getting harder in his old age, or perhaps it is the other way round. These are important issues, and we are full square behind our US allies on this matter. I am glad to say that, overwhelmingly, as far as I can see, although the House thinks it is regrettable that the treaty has been suspended, it recognises where blame rightly lies.

Mr Speaker: Perhaps parliamentary pressure has produced a force field. I call Dr David Drew.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): John Bolton has referred to the INF treaty as a cold war relic, and in its place he says that he intends to negotiate directly on behalf of the US with the Russians and Chinese. If that is the case, what is the role of the UK?

Mark Field: We are, and remain, a very active member of the United Nations in the Security Council. We are a committed member of NATO, and will continue to be such a member. Our role is important, but this is a bilateral agreement between Russia and the US that was signed three decades and more ago. Obviously, we have interests as a fully engaged NATO member, and will continue to do so.

The idea that we have no say on this matter could not be further from the truth. This issue has been festering, as I pointed out, for five or six years, right from the early stages of the Obama Administration, and it has finally come to a head. As I say, there is one message that will trickle out loud and clear to the Russian authorities. They have a chance to come back to the negotiating table. The US Administration have triggered a withdrawal, but that takes effect over a six-month period. I hope that before 2 August Russia will come back and recognise the importance of the treaty, but it can do so only if it shows the international community that it can be trusted and is willing on the verification of the outcomes.
Nissan in Sunderland

5.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about Nissan. The House should know the background to the decision that the company announced yesterday. In July 2016, the allocation decision for the next model of the Nissan Qashqai was about to be made, and it was set to be awarded to a European plant other than Sunderland.

Nissan had located in Sunderland in 1986, having been persuaded by Mrs Thatcher that the combination of British engineering excellence and tariff-free access to the European Union made Britain an ideal location. So it proved, and the Sunderland plant grew to be the largest car plant in the history of Britain. The firm invested nearly £3.7 billion in it, and it currently employs about 7,000 people, with approximately another 35,000 in the supply chain.

The prospect of losing easy access to the EU market was the principal concern of the company at the time. It was clear that if Sunderland lost the Qashqai, which accounted for over half its production, mostly for export, the medium and long-term prospects for a plant losing scale would be bleak. Determined not to see the 30-year success of the plant come to an end, we set out over the coming months a strong case for backing Sunderland that centred on four areas, all of which were about highlighting the success of, and our strategy for, the British motor industry.

First, we would continue our successful and long-standing support for the competitiveness of the automotive sector, which has been available to all firms for skills and training the local workforce and for innovation. The regional growth fund has supported over 30,000 companies—large, medium and small—since 2010, with £2.6 billion of public support. Some £335 million of that has been invested in the automotive sector via the regional growth fund since 2010. All proposals are assessed independently by the Industrial Development Advisory Board and are subject to UK and EU rules. In 2016, Nissan initially considered applying for a total of up to £80 million in support over nine years for skills training, research and development, and environmental improvements, and it was eventually awarded £61 million—around £7 million a year over nine years.

The second commitment was that we would work with the automotive sector to ensure that more of the supply chain could locate in the UK, in close proximity to manufacturing sites. Since 2016, as many hon. Members know, our automotive sector deal has established with the industry an ambitious programme to do just that.

The third was that we would make a strong commitment to research and development, particularly to the development of new battery technology and its deployment in connected and autonomous vehicles. Our joint industry-Government £1 billion advanced propulsion centre R&D programme, along with our £250 million Faraday challenge, is putting Britain at the leading edge of battery technology and manufacturing. We have introduced testbeds for autonomous vehicles across the country. Indeed, the longest autonomous car journey in the UK will take place in November this year from the Nissan site at Cranfield to its site in Sunderland, covering more than 200 miles on public roads.

Our fourth commitment was that, in our negotiations to leave the EU, we would always emphasise the strong common ground that exists between the UK and other EU member states and pursue a deal that could ensure free trade unencumbered by tariffs or other impediments.

These commitments proved persuasive, as they have subsequently for investments by Toyota at Burnaston, BMW Mini at Oxford and PSA at Luton. Indeed, every competitive allocation decision taken since 2016 in this industry has gone to Britain. Although the discussions had been around the Qashqai, Nissan proposed towards the end of the discussions to add a further model, currently produced only in Japan—the X-Trail—to Sunderland. On 27 October 2016, Nissan announced that both the Qashqai and the X-Trail would be built in Sunderland, securing the plant’s future and adding 741 new jobs.

Last Friday, I was informed by Nissan that following a global review of its capital investment, future capital was needed to accelerate the shift in Europe from conventional to lower-emission vehicles. The Qashqai and the Juke will in future have petrol and plug-in hybrid variants made in Sunderland, and as a result, more capital will be invested in Sunderland than was originally planned in 2016. However, this was accompanied by a decision to maintain Japan as the sole production location for the X-Trail model, rather than to establish a new production line in Europe. The consequence of this is that the existing jobs in Sunderland will be maintained by the increased investment, but that the 741 additional jobs that would have been created in Sunderland will not now be available. Nissan confirmed that production of the new Qashqai, Juke and Leaf will continue at Sunderland, and that the decision has no implications for the existing jobs at the plant.

Nissan also pointed out, as it as done consistently since 2016, that the risk of a no-deal Brexit was a source of damaging uncertainty. While I am pleased that the decision taken in 2016 to build the Qashqai and secure the Sunderland plant is unchanged, it is deeply disappointing to me and to the workforce that the extra jobs that would have come from the X-Trail will no longer be created. I told the House that I would publish the correspondence with Nissan at the time of its original decision, as soon as the company advised that it was no longer commercially sensitive. I have previously shared it with the then Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, but I have now agreed with Nissan that it is reasonable to publish it in full today. Colleagues will see that it sets out exactly what I told the House in October 2016.

Grant support for training and development and for environmental improvements were applied for and approved by the Industrial Development Advisory Board on the basis that both the Qashqai and the X-Trail models would be built in Sunderland. Given yesterday’s announcement, if the company seeks to participate in those industry funding schemes—as I hope and expect it will—it will submit new applications in the standard way and undergo a process of independent assessment.

I am disappointed that the new jobs associated with the X-Trail will not now come to Sunderland, but I am pleased that the plant will benefit from substantial new investment in the existing models and that the decision to continue with the vital investment in the Qashqai,
Leaf and Juke, and the jobs associated with them, is unaffected. These decisions were made on broader business grounds, but Nissan has commented on the need for us to come together to resolve the question of our future trading relationship with the EU. I believe that its advice should be listened to and acted upon, so that our automotive industry—which will undergo more change through innovation in the decade ahead than it has for most of the past century, in areas such as battery technology and artificial intelligence—can seize the opportunities for Britain to be a world leader in state-of-the-art car making, providing great jobs and careers for hundreds of thousands of people across our country during the years ahead. I commend this statement to the House.

5.34 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): Yesterday’s announcement by Nissan that it has reversed its decision to build the X-Trail at its Sunderland plant and move it to Japan instead is a bitter blow to the north-east, the automotive sector and Britain’s industrial strategy. Of course, Brexit was not the only reason for that, but it was pretty prominent in Nissan’s decision. To quote its initial statement, “the continued uncertainty around the UK’s future relationship with the EU is not helping companies like ours to plan for the future.”

The Secretary of State’s opposition to a no-deal Brexit is, of course, well known, but still the Government juggernaut chaos hurts on. Even he must be suitably frightened today by the uncertainty being created by his Government’s negotiating strategy.

This week, Nissan has reversed commitments to invest in the UK. Last week, we saw that car production is down 9% to its lowest level in five years, and fresh investment in the sector halved in 2018, according to the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders.

When Nissan made the commitment to produce the X-Trail and Qashqai models in Sunderland, the Government provided certain assurances, as the Secretary of State has outlined. After the Government’s refusal to publish the letter, even in response to freedom of information requests, today we have finally seen a copy. The letter acknowledged the uncertainties as the UK prepares to leave the EU”, and in particular the “fear that potential future trade arrangements could affect the business case for…investments”, and it promised that Nissan would not be “adversely affected”. Although the letter made no firm commitment to a customs union or single market deal, there was a pretty strong assurance that manufacturers would still be able to trade without barriers. However, Nissan clearly does not have any confidence in those assurances today. Can the Secretary of State confirm why those assurances no longer stand and what has changed in the Government’s approach since those commitments were made? Is it now Government policy to accept that there will be significant trade barriers as we leave the EU and potentially a no-deal situation? If not, can the Secretary of State rule out the possibility of no deal?

The letter went on to offer support of about £80 million towards Nissan’s investments at its Sunderland site, in return for the expansion of SUV production. The Secretary of State noted that £61 million was eventually applied for. Can he confirm whether any of the conditions surrounding that £61 million were written into any formal agreement? Can he also confirm whether Nissan will still receive the £61 million, despite the move? He intimated that it may have to reapply for certain forms of grant funding. What assessment has he made of the impact of yesterday’s decision on the wider supply chain, particularly those companies that might already have decided to start investment?

The Government’s letter to Nissan also said: “It will be a critical priority of our negotiations to support UK car manufacturers, and ensure their ability to export to and from the EU is not adversely affected by the UK’s future relationship with the EU.”

Yet it is important to note that Nissan’s announcement came days after a free trade agreement was signed between the EU and Japan whereby tariffs on Japanese car exports to the EU will begin to taper towards zero over the next 10 years. What assurances can the Secretary of State give today to British automotive sector companies that there will be no tariffs on British-made vehicles entering the EU?

Similarly, in relation to cars exported to non-EU countries where the EU currently enjoys preferential trading terms, the International Trade Secretary has suggested that we can simply replicate those terms and Tipp-Ex out “EU” and replace it with “UK” on the front page of nearly 40 free trade agreements. How is he getting on with that? What assurances can the Business Secretary provide that Britain will continue to enjoy those trading terms?

Furthermore, what assessment has the Secretary of State made of the real risks of a temporary, Brexit-induced slowdown in British manufacturing? Has he examined any temporary support measures he could offer, such as examples in the German industrial sectors following the financial crash?

Finally, it is clear that we have reached a tipping point. I know that the Secretary of State agrees with me that a real industrial strategy is designed to give businesses the confidence to invest for the long term, but his Government’s handling of Brexit is undermining our industrial strategy. Businesses are no longer speaking out simply to highlight the future dangers of a badly handled Brexit; they are now losing confidence in the Government and taking real action to protect their businesses. Without real assurances from the Secretary of State and a firm commitment to take no deal off the table, it is hard not to think that managed decline is indeed the Government’s plan.

Greg Clark: If the hon. Lady had spent time talking to employers in the automotive sector, she would have come to a different set of conclusions. First, she should welcome the fact that Nissan has committed to Sunderland. After the referendum, before any negotiations had taken place and even before article 50 was triggered, the plant was in jeopardy, and the workforce, the unions and the Government worked closely and hard together to secure its future. At the time, her former colleague, the then hon. Member for Hartlepool and Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, hailed it as
"a welcome example of targeted Government commitment to a successful company in a strategically vital sector"—[Official Report, 31 October 2016; Vol. 616, c. 684.]

That commitment continues.

The hon. Lady asks whether the financial support that Nissan applied for continues, and I hope that I was clear in my statement that the support is available to the sector and has been for many years. Nissan will be invited to resubmit an application in the light of its changed investment.

The hon. Lady’s second point is that we need to conclude our Brexit negotiations, but what she spectacularly ignores is that Nissan and the UK automotive industry back the deal that the Prime Minister has negotiated. The deal achieves what they need: no disorderly Brexit on 29 March, a transition period and a commitment to no tariffs, no quotas and no rules of origin checks at the border.

The Japan Automobile Manufacturers Association has welcomed both the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration, and it has called for this House and the European Parliament to ratify the agreement swiftly. If the hon. Lady wants to rule out no deal—if that is her concern and her motivation—she should back the calls from the industry to ratify the agreement.

The continued uncertainty I referred to in my statement, as the hon. Lady will acknowledge, is a reflection, in part at least, on the Opposition’s failure to come to a decision and back the deal. During all Nissan’s 30 years in the UK, it has been able to count on constructive support from all parties, yet Labour Front Benchers have evaded having a policy on this vital issue for our support from all parties, yet Labour Front Benchers in the UK, it has been able to count on constructive decision and back the deal. During all Nissan’s 30 years

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Whatever the complex rationale behind this decision and, despite my right hon. Friend’s considerable efforts to work on it, is it not a stark reminder that our exporters still have no idea whether, at the end of the implementation period, they will require new certification, whether they will carry tariffs or whether, indeed, they will be able to trade frictionlessly? Given the fall off in business investment in each of the last three quarters, is it not now time for us all to come together to end the uncertainty and agree on the terms of our future trading relationship with the European continent?

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I echo the sentiment that our thoughts should be with the workers at Nissan and elsewhere who are unsettled by this news.

The Secretary of State has put a brave face on this bad news. We all know that the issue of diesel and the change to petrol is part of it, as is the global review, but the cancellation of X-Trail has his Government’s handling of Brexit at its heart. Brexit, in itself, is bad enough, but it is being bungled beyond belief by a Government who have failed to listen to business. He talks about business wanting to back a deal, but he omits to say that they all say that any deal is worse than what we already have with the EU. Professor David Bailey, from Aston University, is an expert in the car industry, and he has pointed out: “The Japanese carmakers came to the UK to access the single market”.

He went on to say that Brexit is “a big shock for the Japanese producers.”

Nissan’s European chairman has been clear: “The continued uncertainty around the UK’s future relationship with the EU is not helping companies like ours to plan for the future”.

Nissan’s decision shows that international investors have no faith in this Government’s assurances about the economic impact of the Prime Minister’s rotten Brexit deal. If Brexit uncertainty is too great for one of the world’s best- resourced manufacturers, what hope is there for small and medium-sized businesses, which are the backbone of the economy? This Government’s continued failure can be demonstrated by the failure to top up the Tay Cities deal to support Michelin workers, so will the Secretary of State urge the Chancellor to make the spring statement a fiscal event that increases funds to support businesses impacted by Brexit? Will the Secretary of State, once and for all, rule out participation in the foolish game of failing to rule out no deal?

Greg Clark: First, let me remind the hon. Gentleman that a greater amount of financial investment is going into Sunderland than was anticipated in 2016; this is a long-term commitment that has been made by the firm. He should welcome that and reflect that the future jobs of those employed in Sunderland have been secured by that investment in the Qashqai. That is a welcome factor.

The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that the company has expressed an urgent concern that we should resolve the question of Brexit, but he is wrong to say that the deal the Prime Minister has negotiated does not command the positive confidence of the industry. I have talked about Nissan, but let me mention the head of Ford in Europe, who said: “It’s important that we get the agreement ratified that’s on the table at the moment”.

The chief executive of Aston Martin has said that it is “obvious” that the deal that we see “meets the needs of all the requests we put forward as an industry and as Aston Martin.”

Toyota has said that it welcomes the announced deal, which “would provide business with the certainty of a transition period and help avoid the significant production disruption a ‘No Deal’ outcome would have for ‘Just in Time’ supply chains in the automotive industry.”

Greg Clark: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. He has experience of dealing with businesses that are making investments in this country. It is the view of investors in this country and around the world that they want to see us live up to the traditions of this House in providing a stable environment for investment to take place. That includes having certainty on our future trading relationship. It is incumbent on us all in this House to deliver that for the investors who are placing faith in our economy.
I share the hon. Gentleman’s view that we should bring the uncertainty to an end, but the only way to do that is by backing a deal, and I commend to him the deal that has the support of every one of the employers in the automotive sector that I have quoted to him today.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): The big increase in vehicle excise duties, the squeeze on new car loans, and the general tax and regulatory attack on new low-emission diesels has had a predictable effect, in greatly reducing the demand for and sales of new diesel cars in the UK. Will the Government reconsider these damaging policies, given the strong bias in our industry to produce those Euro 6 diesels?

Greg Clark: I say to my right hon. Friend, that, in fact, the extra investment is going into new Powertrains—cleaner Powertrains. Far from being critics of this, Nissan, as people who know the industry well know, is among the principal advocates for more ambitious environmental standards and has been a pioneer in establishing electric vehicles in this country. It is recognising that that is the way consumer demand is going, but it recognises that this is a positive step.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Nissan in my constituency, together with the supply chain, employs almost 40,000 people, many of whom will be extremely concerned at this decision. This Government’s chaotic approach to the Brexit negotiations, concerns about diesel and a new free trade agreement between Japan and the EU have created a perfect storm. With just 53 days until we are due to leave the EU, no Brexit parliamentary business scheduled for two weeks, the Prime Minister currently engaged in fantasy politics over the backstop and the sweetheart deal on the rocks, what immediate steps is the Secretary of State taking to reassure the whole UK automotive industry?

Greg Clark: One of the pleasures of dealing with the automotive industry in the UK is that it is one of the most advanced and most capable in the world in innovation. We are working with the sector, through our industry strategy, to be the leading place in the world, and our work not just for the discovery of new battery technologies, but for manufacturing, and the testbeds that we have put in place for connected and autonomous vehicles make Britain the place in the world that people come to for innovation. This Government back that, and I know it enjoys support across the House; it is a source of confidence around the world. However, it is true that an international business such as an automotive one wants to know, perfectly reasonably, what its trading relationships will be with the rest of the European Union in the years ahead. That is why these companies have been so clear that this House should come together and back the deal. I hope that the hon. Lady, with the care for her constituents that I know she always has in mind, will see fit to do so too in the days and weeks ahead.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): In 2016, my predecessor as Chair of the Treasury Committee, who now sits in the other place, wrote to the Chancellor asking what money had been promised to Nissan in order for it to make its commitments. Today we find out that a letter was sent to the former Chair of the Select Committee on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, but it has only been released today, after the press had got hold of it. First, does the Secretary of State think it right that the company should decide that something is still commercially sensitive two years after the event? Secondly, how much of the £61 million is not going to be paid over?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her question. What I said in my statement and what I said at the time was that the programme of support for the automotive sector is very long standing and has been very successful. As it happens, the application that Nissan made was concluded relatively recently; it was putting forward a case, through the independent scrutiny processes, for funding. I shared the letter with the previous Chair of the BEIS Committee, and the Comptroller and Auditor General had also seen it at that time. I said in my statement that because the terms of the application, which is independently assessed and reviewed, have now varied, the company will of course need to resubmit on the grounds of the new information that it has. However, this remains a programme that has been very effective in supporting the skills in the wider workforce, environmental improvements and the research and development for which our automotive industry is now so renowned.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): After the announcement at the weekend by Nissan—for the first time publicly saying that the insecurity around Brexit was impacting business decisions, which in real terms means jobs—what assurances can the Secretary of State give the workers not only at Nissan, but in the supply chain and wider manufacturing, that the Government will come up with an agreement that will secure jobs as we leave the EU? As he knows, the Prime Minister’s deal is not going through this House, and we need real decisions and real movement on the customs union and the things that will protect jobs.

Greg Clark: I say to the hon. Lady, whose constituents depend on successful future investments, as well as the ones that have been secured, which she rightly welcomed when they were first made, that this whole House has a responsibility to come together, put its differences aside and find a deal that can be agreed and ratified, and can be ratified by the European Parliament, so that we can have precisely that certainty that Nissan and other investors have called for.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Will my right hon.
Nissan in particular has been among the prime advocates of the drive towards cleaner vehicles. That has often been to this country’s benefit, because the Leaf, which is made in Sunderland, is the best-selling electric vehicle in Europe.

**Sir Vince Cable** (Twickenham) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for his comprehensive statement. May I follow up on the question from the Chair of the Treasury Committee, the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), about the £61 million? In view of the statement apparently made by the Department an hour ago, which contradicts what the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), said this morning, apparently in good faith, will the Secretary of State clarify how much of the £61 million was actually paid to the company and how much is now due to be repaid?

**Greg Clark:** I made it clear that the £61 million was approved by the independent process, with which the right hon. Gentleman is very familiar. To date, there has been a payment of £2.6 million, about half of which was for training of the workforce and the community, and half of which was for environmental improvements to the plant. So £2.6 million has been paid to date.

**Dame Caroline Spelman** (Meriden) (Con): A matter of minutes before I came to hear this statement, I had the wife of a car worker on the telephone and she was very distressed by the threat to her husband’s job. Does the Secretary of State agree that, for the long-term security of the car industry, the political declaration needs to secure a stable customs arrangement with the EU and the House needs to get behind the deal?

**Greg Clark:** I do agree with my right hon. Friend that the House needs to come together and enter into a deal that can provide that confidence. When it comes to the customs arrangements, as she well knows, the motor industry has been absolutely clear, as I set out in my statement, that it wants to make sure that the agreement involves no tariffs, no rules-of-origin checks and no frictions added to what has been a spectacularly successful trading relationship.

**Bridget Phillipson** (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): Nissan has been clear that uncertainty around our future trading relationship with the European Union has been a factor in this decision. Is it not the case that even if the Government’s deal is passed, we will still face years of uncertainty and negotiation, which will put jobs and investment at risk at Nissan and throughout the country?

**Greg Clark:** No. The industry has been clear that the deal that has been negotiated meets its requirements to continue what has been a very successful investment programme. One of the opportunities that we have and one reason I really do think it is in the country’s interest to come together on a deal is that I am familiar with investment plans into what is a very successful environment of innovation and excellence on the part of the workforce, and people are poised to make investments if we can set in place one of the terms of our exit and our future relationship. That is why I hope that in the weeks ahead the House will come together to provide that certainty.

**Mr Simon Clarke** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I agree completely with what the Secretary of State has said about the need to provide certainty as soon as possible, but I take issue with those who want to turn this all into an issue of Brexit. The House should be clear that there has been a 14% reduction in the sale of Nissan products into Europe over the past year, which explains a lot of the context of this decision. Will my right hon. Friend clarify that no jobs are being lost as a result of this decision and, crucially, that production of the Juke, the Leaf and the Qashqai is entirely unaffected?

**Greg Clark:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, but it is also right to reflect that for more than two and a half years now the industry, and Nissan in particular, has been worried about the consequences of Brexit. That is why many Members, both Government and Opposition, as well as the trade unions, made such a determined effort to ensure that we got the investment that was so vital. That investment is there, it continues, it has been made, and it has saved the plant in Sunderland and ensured that the more than 40,000 jobs—people’s livelihoods—that depend on it are there and secure. I want to see more investment in future, which is why I want the House to agree a way forward with the rest of the European Union.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): The Nissan Washington plant is less than 5 miles from the edge of my Gateshead constituency, where we have 3,325 people unemployed—1,000 more than at the same time last year. Nissan has laid off many hundreds of agency workers in the past 12 months, so will the Secretary of State commit to do something tangible for the north-east of England? The north-east of England is in danger of being left behind, but parts of it, like my constituency, are being left behind already. In the light of this very harmful decision, will he do something tangible and work with Members from the region to establish a taskforce to rescue the north-east economy?

**Greg Clark:** I am a north-easterner myself by birth and upbringing. We should celebrate the resurgence of industry across the north-east in recent years, including the expansion of Nissan. The hon. Gentleman should know—Members from all parties certainly know—that I worked closely with Members on both sides of the House to pursue investment opportunities. Had we not done so, we would not have had the investment that Nissan made two and a half years ago that secured those jobs for the future. I will continue to do that, all the time.

**Anne-Marie Trevelyan** (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I have many constituents who work at Nissan in Sunderland. They are highly trained and committed workers who do a long commute every day to work in such an extraordinary and fabulous place. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) said, the changes to the EU rules—and therefore the UK rules, too—on diesel emissions have put real pressure on Nissan to move away from diesel engines in the longer term. Will the Secretary of State set out clearly what the Government will do to support not only Nissan but the car manufacturing industry as a whole to move fully to electric vehicles over the next 20 years?
Greg Clark: In my statement I mentioned the Faraday challenge, which we established as part of the industrial strategy. Not only is there a quarter of a billion pounds to fund the latest research on the future of batteries, but we have established in the west midlands the national battery manufacturing centre to make sure that we not only invent the technology but deploy it. We have a reputation as one of the places in the world with the greatest prospects for the new types of propulsion that the industry is moving to rapidly. Nissan is of course one of the prime exponents of that and one of the prime beneficiaries.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Many of my North Durham constituents work at Nissan or in the supply chain and were very disappointed by the announcement at the weekend. Will the Secretary of State refute the allegation in yesterday's Sunday papers that because of this decision the Government will somehow penalise Nissan in respect of future Government grants? Also, will he be an advocate for the clean diesel engine? That would help not only Nissan, but the entire UK motor industry.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for what he said, and I can certainly refute that. He knows that I have given particular attention to the expansion of prospects for the automotive industry, including by establishing the programme for battery technology and connected and autonomous vehicles. I travel the world to make the case for Britain as the home of the vehicles of the future. Of course, Nissan is a hugely valued investor, employer and innovator in this country, and we will work closely with it in future.

On clean diesel, I have said to Members from all parties that the country will undergo a transition to fully electric and zero-emission vehicles, and a new-generation clean diesel is a perfectly reasonable choice for people to make, especially those who, for example, use it regularly for long journeys. People should be clear about that.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): My right hon. Friend has very clearly shown his enthusiasm for the future with the Advanced Propulsion Centre and the Faraday challenge. On the issue of diesel, however, changes in diesel legislation have resulted in a significant slowdown in the second-hand car market and its implications for the whole of the financial market in the UK. Has he done an analysis of what is going on in the second-hand diesel car market and its implications for the whole of the financial market in the UK?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; as the House knows, there has been a slowdown in the market for new diesels. People are hanging on to their existing ones and values have fallen in the second-hand market. It is something that is reflected across the whole of Europe, and indeed in many other parts of the world. We need to make sure that we are clear that the next generation of diesel is a perfectly reasonable choice for people, and that we accelerate the deployment and the uptake of electric and zero-emission vehicles. That has been our determination in the past two and a half years, and that is recognised by the industry right across the world.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I was at Nissan just recently meeting the fantastic workforce, some of whom are my constituents who had lost their jobs in the steelworks and subsequently been recruited by Nissan. It was made very clear to me when I was there just how important the EU market and the integrated cross-border just-in-time supply chains were. In their letter to Nissan, the Government say that they fully recognise “the significance of the EU market to your presence in Sunderland.” Why then are the Government keeping no deal on the table and playing fast and loose with my constituents’ jobs again?

Greg Clark: Everyone in this House has a responsibility: we need to protect the jobs of our constituents and to give them opportunities for the future. One way or another that involves this House agreeing on a plan for our relationship with the rest of the European Union. It might involve Members from all parts of the House leaving their comfort zone and being willing to compromise. Internationally, we have had a reputation for being willing and able to do that—to be a pragmatic and dependable place in which to do business. Now is the time to demonstrate that to the rest of the world.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I say to the Secretary of State that many people would compromise. If a customs union were put to the vote, some of us would vote for it, but the Prime Minister has made it very clear that that is not available. I suggest to the Government that they might start the compromising in Cabinet and with the Prime Minister. I had the great honour—and it was an honour—to go to Sunderland and visit the Nissan plant shortly after the EU referendum result. Having spoken to the management and workforce, this decision comes as no surprise, as there were very serious concerns then about Brexit. I gently say to him that, in my opinion, this Government, far from allaying those fears, have exacerbated them, because they refuse to take no deal off the table. Given the catastrophe of a no-deal Brexit, I would have expected the Cabinet to have discussed it, based on a careful assessment of the risks of a no-deal Brexit by officials. If it has not, why not? If those discussions have taken place, when will this House see the documents that have been made available to the Cabinet so that we can all understand the dangers of a no-deal Brexit, and so that the next time it comes to a vote, Conservative Members, who are supposed to represent the party of business, will vote overwhelmingly against no deal instead of, like last time, voting overwhelmingly in favour of a no-deal Brexit?

Greg Clark: I say to my right hon. Friend that no deal is fully acknowledged—certainly by me and the industry—as being ruinous for our prospects, but in order to avoid no deal, we need to come to an agreement in this House in the weeks ahead. She is right that this is something that affects all parts of the House. To put off the decision, or not to come to a conclusion, would be to continue the uncertainty. We need to bring it to an end, because that is what the investors are looking for.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that big multinational companies want to enter the transitional period detailed in the withdrawal agreement to work out whether they are going to stay
or leave? They can make that choice—the transitional period is their breathing space—but the small and medium-sized companies and our constituents do not have that choice. They have to stay and suffer the consequences of whatever Brexit brings. Is it not about time that the issue was put back to the people so that they can decide whether what is on offer today measures up to the promises that were made back in 2016?

**Greg Clark:** The views of businesses up and down the country—not of all of them, but of the majority of them—are clear that having a transitional period is something that they regard as important. The small businesses as well as the large businesses have called for that. It is one of the features of the withdrawal agreement that has been negotiated and it is why businesses specifically and through their representative organisations have called on this House to back it.

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): My first experience of Westminster politics was as the parliamentary candidate for Birmingham Northfield when Rover closed the Longbridge works and 6,000 people lost their jobs. It takes years to build a car factory, and one phone call to close it. Our car manufacturers benefit from frictionless trade with Europe and being part of the cumulative rules of origin regime. The withdrawal agreement keeps those. Does the Secretary of State agree with me that those who seek to vote against the withdrawal agreement or to try to rewrite large swathes of it are playing a deeply dangerous game?

**Greg Clark:** I do agree with my hon. Friend. She knows the industry well and she knows that, time and again, the leaders—the chief executives—of the players, big and small, in the industry have called on us to buck the deal for precisely the reasons that she gives.

**Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): Many of my constituents work at Nissan, and many more at the Port of Tyne in my constituency, which is a large part of Nissan’s supply chain. The Secretary of State has failed to answer what assessment he has made of the impact of this decision on the wider supply chain, but he keeps saying to us, “Back the deal”. He and the Government are offering zero clarity on the true impact of that very deal, so will he share that with us now?

**Greg Clark:** I think that I have been clear that the investment that is being made into the Qashqai is an expanded investment, which will have opportunities for investment that is being made into the Qashqai is an expanded investment, which will have opportunities for the supply chain, but that the supply chain will lose the prospects of supplying the new model that we had hoped would be there—that is clearly understood. Again, I say to the hon. Lady that I want, as much as she does, to resolve the question of our future relationship. The leaders of the automotive sector have said that the deal that has been negotiated would do that and they have urged us in this House to get on and approve it.

**Mr David Jones** (Clwyd West) (Con): Nissan itself has noted a significant decline in demand for diesel-powered vehicles due in no small part to changing EU regulations over emissions in the wake of the VW scandal. Is it not the case that it is that decline in demand that was the primary reason why Nissan decided that it was simply uneconomical to expand the production of the X-Trail outside Japan?

**Greg Clark:** The company gave its reason, and it said that it was owing to business conditions. One was the accelerating take-up of low-emission vehicles for which it has been one of the strongest proponents, and indeed it has an advanced position in that. It has been clear about that, but it did comment, as my right hon. Friend knows, that the context of uncertainty around Brexit was a negative factor. When an employer communicates that information as clearly as it has done, I think that we should act on it.

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The jobs of many of my constituents will be affected by this decision. We all know that the Secretary of State is a man who does not want to see a no-deal Brexit, so can he explain to the House and the country why it is that in this morning’s Financial Times he said that the crunch point was the end of February when the big votes will be on 14 February?

**Greg Clark:** I do not quite understand the hon. Lady’s point, but I think that she might be referring to the fact that we should not regard the period until 28 March as the time available to us to negotiate. Manufacturers place orders for components with suppliers and they are doing so now. They have to buy components now and these decisions are being taken at the moment. Manufacturers that are exporting to the far east, for example, have to make decisions about what they are going to ship during the weeks ahead. We therefore do not have the luxury of waiting until 28 March; we need to conclude this matter very quickly.

**Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): The Secretary of State has some historical connections with my region, so he will be aware that we have lost the coalmining industry, the steelworks and the shipyards. I hope that he is also acutely aware of how vital the car industry and the supply chain are not just to Sunderland, but to the whole region. Given that many thousands of my constituents work in the supply chain and directly at Easington, has the Minister considered introducing some incentives to drive the take-up of all-electric vehicles also manufactured by Nissan on Wearside, such as a car scrappage scheme? That would help to reduce emissions and promote employment in my constituency and in the region.

**Greg Clark:** The hon. Gentleman will know that there is no one in this House more familiar with the importance of the car industry across the country and in the north-east. Within 10 days of having been appointed Business Secretary, I flew to Japan to meet the chief executives not just of Nissan, but of the other investors. I have always had a clear understanding of their requirements regarding future prosperity, and I have always applied that. If he looks at the automotive sector deal that I negotiated with the whole industry and at the investment that we have made in the Faraday challenge, he will see that we are working well and closely with the industry to do what it says is necessary to drive the take-up and innovation in the sector that will secure the future of the motor industry in the north-east and right across the country.

**Dr Paul Williams** (Stockton South) (Lab): North East England chamber of commerce tells me that, as the Prime Minister’s deal does not nail down our future
trading relationship, Brexit uncertainty could continue for years. What certainty can the Secretary of State give now to the 600 workers in the Nissan supply chain at Nifco in my constituency, for whom this decision is a massive missed opportunity to improve their job security?

**Greg Clark:** The hon. Gentleman should, in fairness, reflect—as I have done—on the renewed commitment that Nissan has made to Sunderland by putting more cash into the plant than was originally intended in 2016. It has made a decision not to expand out of Japan the production of a model that does not have any other production lines around the world, and I regret that, but it has made a big commitment to Sunderland. That is something that we should respect and recognise the importance of.

**Mike Hill** (Hartlepool) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for referencing my predecessor, the former Member for Hartlepool, who was quite right in his of State for referencing my predecessor, the former... heavy in new technologies as part of the supply chain. What will the Secretary of State do to protect local manufacturing suppliers to Nissan and the wider automotive industry post Brexit?

**Greg Clark:** The hon. Gentleman will know that the automotive sector deal, in which Nissan was an important partner, has a significant programme of investment in the skills and capabilities of the supply chain. In fact, the increase in opportunities for the supply chain domestically is one of the principal components of the sector deal that was so widely welcomed by the automotive industry.

**Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): Unemployment in my constituency is double the national average, and there are hundreds of people in the constituency who are employed at Nissan and at supply chain companies. These supply chain companies also provide goods to other car makers and across the EU. What is the Minister going to do about a customs union that will protect those jobs in the longer term?

**Greg Clark:** To protect those jobs in the longer term, we need to secure our ability to trade without tariffs and without impediment across the whole of the rest of Europe. As I have stated very clearly to the House, it is my view that the House needs to come to a decision within the next few weeks. We need to make compromises with each other to be able to provide that certainty and security to important employers.

**Richard Burden** (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): When it could soon cost less, in terms of tariffs, to import a car to the EU from Japan than it will to export a new car from the UK to the EU in the event of a hard Brexit, is it not easy to see just what impact Brexit uncertainties have on decisions like this? Could not the Government minimise those uncertainties—first, by jettisoning the customs union as a red line for the Government and, secondly, by ruling out no deal?

On diesel, is it not the case that the problem is not with the latest emissions standards, but that Government vehicle excise duty rates hit the newest, cleanest diesels hard and leave the oldest, dirtiest diesels untouched? Will the Secretary of State have a word with the Treasury to do something about that in the spring statement?

**Greg Clark:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the importance of tariff-free trade. The European Union has agreed, and put into operation last week, a free trade agreement with Japan that provides advantages for companies in being able to import and export directly with Japan. In my view, it also increases the urgency that we face to conclude our agreement with the European Union that should allow us to continue to trade with it and with other countries, without interruption.

We have had many conversations about diesel. It is the case that companies, including Nissan, are accelerating their investment; they are investing more than they previously intended to in ultra-low emission vehicles. This is giving the supply chain opportunity. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we should not send a message that the current generation of diesel engines is a choice that needs to be avoided by consumers thinking about their next car.

**Liz Kendall** (Leicester West) (Lab): While the Conservative party tears itself apart over the Irish backstop and border, the fundamental problem that we face is that we still have absolutely no clarity about our long-term relationship with the EU. Is it not the truth that it is this uncertainty that is causing huge problems for companies such as Nissan, that the Prime Minister’s withdrawal agreement does not solve that uncertainty—it just prevents us from immediately falling off a cliff—and that, if we go ahead with the Government’s blindfold Brexit, we will back here with more damaging statements and announcements that hurt people’s jobs and livelihoods for years and years to come?

**Greg Clark:** The policy that the Prime Minister has proposed has commanded the support and endorsement of the employers that the hon. Lady is concerned about. I am not aware of any policy proposal from the Labour party that commands any degree of consensus across the Opposition Benches. I have said very clearly today and previously that all Members of this House who were elected in 2017 following the referendum the previous year always knew that this was going to be the most important decision that we would take. It is time to find common ground and to settle on an agreement that commands a majority of support in this House that will provide the confidence and stability that the rest of the world looks to.

**Albert Owen** (Ynys Môn) (Lab): The Nissan decision is sadly following a developing trend of disinvestment by foreign companies not just in the north-east of England, but north Wales. I appreciate the Secretary of State meeting me later to discuss that. I am a proud member of the all-party parliamentary group on Japan, of which the Minister for Asia and the Pacific, the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field), is also a regular member, and Japanese representatives say clearly to me that there are two strengths to investing in the United Kingdom: the loyal and unionised workforce, and a strong single European market. I ask the Secretary of State to urge his Cabinet colleagues, for a start, to ensure that we have that strong unionised workforce and a strong European single market?
Greg Clark: I gently correct the hon. Gentleman when he talks about disinvestment in Sunderland. It is very important that the House understands that far from being a disinvestment, the commitment that has been given actually involves an increase in the capital investment into the plant. Given that that comes from a company that has other uses for its capital, we should recognise that it is putting more money into Sunderland and into securing its future. With regard to the future, he is right to draw attention to the fact that the reason companies have located very successfully here in this country is partly because of the excellent workforce that we have, partly because of our track record of innovation, and partly because they have had access to a large market that has come from the European Union. It seems to me that we need to continue with all of those.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): Have any of the other large car manufacturers in this country sought and gained similar-sized packages of support—I am thinking about Vauxhall—and if they have been refused, why?

Greg Clark: As I said in my statement, there has been a regular and long-standing programme of support for companies right across the automotive sector. It is conducted independently. Companies make applications either through the Advanced Propulsion Centre or through the scrutiny of the Industrial Development Advisory Board. This has been a success. Nissan has applied for it, and many other companies have done so as well. For example, I commend the investment that Toyota made in its Burnaston facility. I had the pleasure of opening the production line for the new Corolla there a few weeks ago.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State and his like-minded colleagues for what we read they are trying to do to avert a ruinous no-deal Brexit, as he just described it, but I gently suggest to him that when the moment of truth arrives again in 10 days' time when the votes come back, they will be judged on their deeds and not just their words. I say to my own Front Benchers that if we have a Whip that ignores the unanimously agreed policy of our own party in opposing a no-deal Brexit, they will be judged just as harshly.

Greg Clark: I cannot speak for the right hon. Gentleman's Front Benchers, but he has heard me say that it is incumbent on the whole House to keep the national interest in mind and to reflect our traditions of doing that. I recently looked at the speech that Margaret Thatcher gave when she opened the Nissan plant in Sunderland. She commented that Nissan had chosen the UK because “within the whole of Europe, the United Kingdom was the most attractive country—politically and economically—for large scale investment and offered the greatest potential.”

That political stability, confidence and pragmatism, which was so important then, is important now, and we should return to it.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): In his speech in the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill debate, the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), who has just left his place, said that the political declaration was “vacuous”, so I gently point out to the Secretary of State that opposition to his Government’s withdrawal arrangements is not confined to the Opposition Benches. When a country like Japan is looking to invest, and when companies such as Nissan export up to 80% of their products into the single market, will he just acknowledge that being within the single market provides an advantage over the countries that are outside it?

Greg Clark: Of course, it depends on the terms of trade that are negotiated. Clearly, being a member of the European Union unquestionably allowed Nissan and others to trade without thinking about tariffs or impediments. We need to secure a deal that allows us to continue to offer Britain as a place of innovation and skills, and a place that can be confident in exporting to the rest of Europe.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): This weekend’s news clearly demonstrates the damage of continued uncertainty about our future relationship with the EU. The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders has been warning for many months about the very grave dangers of a no-deal Brexit, but in recent weeks numerous Nottingham employers, including Paul Smith, East Midlands airport and Siemens, have all contacted me to raise exactly the same concerns. The Secretary of State has just admitted that a no-deal Brexit would be ruinous, so when does he think the Prime Minister is going to recognise the damage that she has done by insisting that no deal remains a real option, and instead act to protect jobs and investment by ruling it out?

Greg Clark: I hope that when the hon. Lady has been having her discussions with those employers, she has listened to what they have said. The SMMT, for example, has been very clear that in order to avoid the consequences that she talks about, it is necessary to accept the deal that has been agreed. The SMMT said that it is “a positive step” that should be backed. The chief executive of Siemens in the UK has also commended the deal. So if she wants to avoid the disruption that I agree would be caused, she needs to listen to the other part of what people say to her and follow their advice in that respect too.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Given the uncertainty that the announcement by Nissan has caused, the job losses announced at Jaguar Land Rover, the worries expressed by Honda, and the Hitachi decision when the Prime Minister of Japan had barely taken off following his visit to our Prime Minister, what worries does the Secretary of State think have arisen in his Department? Does he agree with his junior Minister, the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), that we are going from “a crisis into a catastrophe”?

Greg Clark: I visit Japan a lot and speak both to the leaders in the Government and the leaders of important investors there. They regard Britain as a place with which they have enjoyed good relationships and in which they have invested with prosperity. They admire the ingenuity of our scientists and our engineers. They are keen to work even more closely together in future. But is true to say that they look at the uncertainty around Brexit and think that after two and a half years
it is time that it is resolved and comes to a conclusion. When they say that, we should listen to them and act on their advice.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Secretary of State is a nice man, but I honestly feel as if we are going to hell in a handcart. The only people who can genuinely stop this conveyor belt towards a no-deal Brexit in a few weeks’ time are people like him sitting in the Cabinet. They have got to go back to the Cabinet and say to the Prime Minister, “We will not put up with this. This will do lasting damage to our country, to our people, to our jobs and to our standing around the world, and we must put a stop to it; otherwise we will resign.” I suggest that he does that before next week’s votes.

Greg Clark: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s advice. I think it is matter of public record that I have constantly and consistently advocated the need for us to be able to secure the trading relationship that we need to make sure that the jobs in his constituency and all around the country continue. It is important that I should do that.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The automotive industry, employing 850,000 workers, is the jewel in the crown of manufacturing excellence. We have had 4,500 jobs going at Jaguar Land Rover and we now have the news about Nissan. The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders is warning that the industry is now “on red alert” as a consequence of Brexit uncertainty. Does the Secretary of State agree, on the one hand, that we should rule out any question of a no-deal Brexit, and crucially, on the other hand, that this House needs to come together at the next stages to negotiate a deal that will provide much greater and longer-term security, at the heart of which must be the customs union?

Greg Clark: The success last week of the amendment that the hon. Gentleman tabled with my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) demonstrated that the majority of Members of this House are determined not to see a no-deal Brexit. Indeed, to avoid that, we need to come together in just the way that he says to reach a deal, making compromises with each other that can provide the certainty that investors need to continue the period of great success that we have enjoyed in this magnificent industry.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): In response to the 2008 world economic crisis, the Labour Government tasked the Automotive Council, which they had established, with putting together emergency measures to sustain our important automotive sector. We are in a similar situation, and we need action. The Labour Government introduced the scrappage scheme, which led to me, as the last Labour automotive Minister in 2010, announcing the Nissan Leaf going to Sunderland—that is the type of action we need. Will the Minister task the Automotive Council with putting together emergency measures that it will support to sustain not only Sunderland but all the other plants, including at Bridgend, Dagenham and Ellesmere Port, to ensure that the strong automotive sector we have all built—Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative—over the past 15 years is maintained at this dangerous time?

Greg Clark: It is important for the hon. Gentleman to recognise that the investment being made in Sunderland is greater than was planned two and a half years ago. The company is investing more of its capital in Sunderland than it originally intended. That is significant because the pace of change in the sector means that there are great opportunities for investment right across it. We have a reputation because of a long-term commitment to the sector that started before this Government for being at the leading edge of innovation. If we can resolve the question of our future relationship with the European Union, I believe that substantial investments will be made very quickly, to the great benefit of this country and the people who work across it.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): When I started my career in manufacturing, I had the great benefit of being taught by experts in lean manufacturing from Nissan, Toyota Burnaston and Airbus. One thing that was drilled into me from a young age was the concept of the seven wastes: transportation, inventory, motion, waiting, over-production, over-processing and defects. The worst of those wastes was inventory. As a result of the uncertainty facing British industry, inventory levels are increasing, putting British industry at a permanent competitive disadvantage. Does the Minister recognise that the absence of a customs union will put British industry at a permanent strategic competitive disadvantage?

Greg Clark: I am impressed at the hon. Gentleman’s recall of the principles that he was taught. He is right that one of the benefits and sources of efficiency in our production system is that companies do not need warehouses or inventory. It is clearly a matter of huge regret that companies are having to invest in inventory and warehouses and divert capital from more productive uses. I agree that we need a deal and an agreement that allows just-in-time production to continue. I strongly share his analysis of that.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): This is clearly a terrible decision for not only Nissan Sunderland and the whole north-east, but the entire automotive industry, given how much of it depends on scale and component suppliers working to scale. The Secretary of State understands this sector particularly well. Does he accept that the industry wants a customs union and a single market? Does he accept that the Government have a responsibility to remove the diesel levy that they introduced two years ago?

Greg Clark: Obviously the hon. Gentleman has great familiarity with the industry, from his constituency perspective. The industry has consistently expressed itself satisfied with the deal that has been proposed. It has said so in terms at the overall level, through the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, and individual companies have said so. The industry is concerned that this House has not come to a resolution to turn that agreement into something that it can depend on. I hope he will join colleagues from across the House in advocating the kind of compromise that will enable the whole House, not just by a slim majority but wholeheartedly, to agree a deal that can send confidence to investors in this industry and others around the world.
Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): There is no doubt that this is bad news. At Vauxhall in Ellesmere Port, we have had more than our share of bad news in recent times—we have lost over half the workforce in the last year. Now that we know what the Government are prepared to offer to encourage investment in car manufacturing, can the Secretary of State confirm that the same or very similar terms will be available to any other applicants?

Greg Clark: When I first made the statement to the House on 31 October 2016, I described the programme of support that has been operated for many years, in which investment in training the workforce, environmental improvements and R&D can be applied for, and those applications are subject to independent scrutiny. We have a good record of providing that. It is available to large, medium and small firms and is well known in the sector.

Points of Order

6.45 pm

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will be aware of reports that the Government were offering Labour MPs in economically challenged areas financial support for constituency projects in return for support for the Prime Minister’s Brexit deal. I oppose the Prime Minister’s deal, and there are no circumstances in which I would support it. If reports are correct, my area would therefore not qualify. Can you confirm that targeting individual constituencies in that way raises issues of hybridity, if targeted offers are accompanied by legislation?

“Erskine May” states that the House resolved on 22 June 1958:

“That it is contrary to the usage and derogatory to the dignity of this House that any of its Members should bring forward, promote or advocate in this House any proceeding or measure in which he may have acted or been concerned for or in consideration of any pecuniary fee or reward.”

Will you consider whether a reward includes a benefit to a Member’s constituency? It is arguable that a Member may be under pressure from constituents to accept a reward in the form of targeted support and may thereby be under pressure to vote in a particular way to secure the Government’s offer of reward. Must the offer be made to all economically challenged areas, irrespective of the way a Member chooses to vote on the Prime Minister’s deal?

“Erskine May” states on page 265:

“Conduct not amounting to a direct attempt improperly to influence Members in the discharge of their duties but having a tendency to impair their independence in the future performance of their duty may be treated as a contempt.”

Surely the Government’s offer breaches that principle. Will you consider that matter?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her characteristic courtesy in giving me advance notice of her intention to raise this subject, though not of the particular question that she had in mind. About that latter fact I make no complaint whatever; I simply say it for the benefit of people understanding the context. I knew that she wished to raise the subject, but I did not know precisely what she wished to put to me.

What I will say to the right hon. Lady off the top of my head is as follows. I am not altogether clear that the criterion of hybridity is satisfied by the circumstances she referred to, but I am happy further to reflect on the matter. On the matter of contempt, which is an extremely serious charge, if any right hon. or hon. Member seeks to level that charge against any Member, including a Minister, allegations of contempt have customarily to be raised with the Chair in writing. If the right hon. Lady is moved to allege contempt on the basis of her own conviction and from her study of “Erskine May”, she is perfectly welcome to write to me about the matter, and I will consider it.

It is obvious to me that the right hon. Lady regards the circumstances she has alluded to as, at the very least, very smelly, and that point of view will be shared by many people. That is not necessarily the same as a procedural or other impropriety, but it is very clear that she regards it as malodorous behaviour. It is for individual Members to decide how they vote on these important
matters. As ever in this House, it is not unusual for others to seek to persuade Members to vote one way or another, or for Members to seek to negotiate political outcomes or ministerial undertakings.

I must say that the notion of a trade is a source of concern. I have not witnessed it in this way previously in my time, and it is a matter of concern. I weigh my words carefully because I do not want to make a hasty judgment. The right hon. Lady has raised an extremely serious matter, and she does so on the basis of very long experience in the House. I am not sure—I say this with caution—that she is alleging any specific financial impropriety, but if she were, that would again be a most serious matter. If she does have such concerns, beyond what I have already said to her, she may wish to seek the advice of the Comptroller and Auditor General. I will leave my response to the right hon. Lady there for now.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Indy): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Some of us freely voted for the withdrawal agreement but also represent seats in the north, and I similarly wish that we are not discriminated against because we freely gave our vote without any money.

Mr Speaker: Well, I note that. Without any pejorative reference to any other right hon. or hon. Member, I put it to the right hon. Gentleman that he is truly a sea-green incorruptible. The idea that the right hon. Gentleman would vote for any reason other than his personal conviction is, to me, unimaginable, and that is quite a striking statement from the Chair because my imagination is quite vivid. However, it is unimaginable that the right hon. Gentleman would do other than vote in accordance with his conviction. Indeed, I think he would be rather offended by the suggestion that somebody would try to procure his vote by what he might regard as an improper influence. I think we will leave the matter there for now. I saw somebody else brow-furrowed, but not rising.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In business questions on Thursday, I likened my local town to Aleppo. The Official Report unfortunately described it as “a leper”, which, as you can imagine, is somewhat different from the message I was trying to get across. Although it was probably righter than me, may I ask your guidance? I am happy for the record to stand, but it was not in fact what I actually said.

Mr Speaker: It could be quite difficult now for the hon. Gentleman to correct the record, although if he wanted to consult the Table Office about a written question he might put down, he could probably find his own salvation. For the avoidance of doubt, the hon. Gentleman, as I understand it, was referring to a place, the title of which begins with an A and, because it is a place name, with a capital A; he was not referring to someone suffering from a very serious and regrettable disease. I hope that that is helpful to him, in so far as he is communicating with the “Bridgwater Bugle” or some other organ of note in his constituency. I am sure he will want to ensure that the facts are known, and I have the impression from his grinning countenance that he is satisfied with that reply.

Social Security

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, I propose that we debate motions 1 and 2 together. There are motions this afternoon, and I do not want Members to be confused. More importantly, I do not want people outside this place or viewing our proceedings to be uninformed. There are two motions, both on the matter of social security. The first is the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2019—oh dear, oh dear; just as I say this, the Gallery starts to empty—and the second is the draft Automatic Enrolment (Earnings Trigger and Qualifying Earnings Band) Order 2019, and the pace of departure is hastening as I speak. I suggest, with the leave of the House, that we debate motions 1 and 2 on social security together. To move the first of the two motions, I call the Minister, who has some audience in the Chamber and at least some sort of dedicated and loyal following upstairs.

That the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 16 January, be approved.

Mr Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following motion:

That the draft Automatic Enrolment (Earnings Trigger and Qualifying Earnings Band) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 16 January, be approved.

Guy Opperman: Thank you, Mr Speaker—what an introduction. I will not take the departure personally. With your permission, I will address both the orders at the same time.

The reality is that automatic enrolment is one of this country’s biggest and quietest success stories. It is a cross-party success story that has reformed private pension saving, with nearly 10 million people now signed up to a private pension. Our thanks are due to the 1.4 million employers up and down the country that have supported automatic enrolment.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I am very pleased by the development of automatic enrolment in East Renfrewshire, but while the Minister is at the Dispatch Box, will he take the opportunity to update me on the progress in relation to collective defined-contribution schemes?

Guy Opperman: The good news is that approximately 5,000 jobholders in East Renfrewshire are now benefiting from a workplace private pension, and our thanks are due to the 1,270-plus employers in my hon. Friend’s constituency.

On collective defined-contribution schemes—I know the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), who speaks for the Opposition, is very passionate about them as well—I can confirm that, following the closure of the Government consultation on CDCs last week, the Government intend to proceed with CDC legislation, subject of course to the formal response to that consultation. It is right that I recognise on the Floor of the House the fantastic work my hon. Friend has done in bringing forward a ten-minute rule motion and then a private Member’s Bill to prompt and trigger the consideration of CDCs. This will play a massive
part for the Royal Mail postmen and women who work in all weathers—I know there is interesting weather in East Renfrewshire—to support local businesses and the local economy.

The guaranteed minimum pensions increase order is a technical matter that is debated by this House on an annual basis. It provides for defined-benefit occupational pension schemes that are contracted out to increase members’ guaranteed minimum pensions that accrued between 1988 and 1997 by 2.4%, in line with the increase in the consumer prices index to the previous September.

The automatic enrolment order reflects the conclusions of this year’s annual review of the automatic enrolment earnings thresholds, as required by the Pensions Act 2008. In conducting the review, the Secretary of State has considered both the automatic enrolment earnings trigger, which determines the point when someone becomes eligible to be automatically enrolled into a qualifying workplace pension, and the qualifying earnings band, which determines those earnings on which the enrolled employee and their employer have to pay a proportion into a workplace pension.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The Minister will know that the upper threshold is linked to the higher rate threshold for income tax. Will he explain to the House why the Government are prioritising this £1.3 billion tax cut for higher earners over reversing cuts to universal credit or ending the benefits freeze a year early?

Guy Opperman: The hon. Lady will understand that the trigger and the earnings limit are in line with national insurance figures. The level was £6,032 in 2018-19, which has gone up to £6,136. The upper limit was £46,350, which has gone up to £50,000. There will be more people saving by way of automatic enrolment by reason of these changes, and those enhanced by this will be numbered in the tens of thousands.

With respect, automatic enrolment is supported on a cross-party basis. It is a successful policy, with 10 million people in various constituencies up and down the country now benefitting from it. In February last year, the last group of smallest employers took on their duty to enrol all staff, and we now have 1.4 million employers. In April this year, we go to 8%, and individuals and employers will therefore be saving a substantial amount. The crucial statistic is that only 9% of individuals have opted out of, or ceased to have, an automatically enrolled pension on an ongoing basis.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I welcome the order. In considering the earnings trigger staying at £10,000—I note that that brings about another 40,000 people in, with an inflationary reduction—did the Minister think about the auto-enrolment review and the various recommendations that the trigger should be reduced to the lower earnings threshold, or should at least be extended so that someone could add up all their jobs to determine whether they qualified over that trigger? Is he tempted to make a change down to £6,000 or to a cumulative total, or is he thinking that next year, when we do not have to do the escalation, would perhaps be a better time to do that?

Guy Opperman: My hon. Friend asks his customary astute question, with his deep knowledge of this issue. The reality of the Government’s approach is that we wish to address the increase to 8%, to get to April 2019, address the degree of opt-outs that follow from the increase to 8% and, at that stage, consider where we are. We have already had the 2017 automatic enrolment review, which agrees that the limit will go down to the first pound, and that we will go down from 22 to 18 in terms of the working population. The key point is that we should get to 8%; we should get this country up to a situation where we have ever larger numbers of people being not only part of automatic enrolment, but in a situation where they are up to 8%. That is possibly not the entirety of where we should be going, but, without a shadow of a doubt, it is a massive step forward.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): If I may follow the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills), who is a member of the Work and Pensions Committee, the Government clearly should be worried about people opting out when there are big changes. However, would the Minister and his Department argue to his colleagues from the Treasury, who are sitting just by him, that we could more profitably use some of the huge subsidies that go to higher rate taxpayers for their pensions to pay the contributions of those who are low paid?

Guy Opperman: I am in absolutely no doubt that my esteemed colleagues from the Treasury will be taking due note of the right hon. Gentleman’s advice and recommendations on pension tax relief, as he is the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee. They have encyclopaedic memories: they do not necessarily need to write particular words down, and they also have the benefit of Hansard. However, I am sure that the Chair of the Select Committee would agree that the primary purpose of auto-enrolment is to get to 8% and then to gain a proper understanding of where we are at that stage. There is a perfectly legitimate debate to be had across the House, on what is a cross-party policy formulated over 10 years, about where we then go in terms of employer contribution, employee contributions, the rates that one must go to and the tax relief that applies. That, I would suggest, is for another day. In those circumstances, I commend the orders to the House.

7.3 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): First, in relation to the Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2019, we note it. Secondly, in relation to the Automatic Enrolment (Earnings Trigger and Qualifying Earnings Band) Order 2019, I would like to speak to it briefly.

I am the first to accept that, as the Minister has said, there has been cross-party support over the past 10 years for auto-enrolment, but he will forgive me a commercial for the last Labour Government. It was the last Labour Government who commissioned the 2006 Adair Turner review—I actually chaired some of the policy discussions that led to that decision. The review produced an excellent report, and I was one of those who was pleased indeed that our Government acted on it. However, the success of auto-enrolment subsequently could not have been achieved had it not been for the cross-party approach to which the Minister referred.
[Jack Dromey]

There is no question but that auto-enrolment has led to a significantly better workplace pensions landscape, with an additional 10 million workers estimated to be newly saving or saving more as a result of auto-enrolment into master trusts. That has led now to almost £20 billion of pension saving, mostly by low-income workers. The Opposition also welcomed the moves by the Government to reduce the age of eligibility, which was an important step in the right direction.

However, for all the immense benefits attached to auto-enrolment, it is not a perfect system, and there are many issues that need to be acted on at the next stage if we are to make the pensions landscape better. First, the threshold at which workers are automatically enrolled is too high. According to the latest figures from the Department for Work and Pensions, 37% of female workers, 33% of workers with a disability and 28% of black and minority ethnic workers are not eligible for master trust saving through auto-enrolment.

Secondly, auto-enrolment does not cover the self-employed or workers in the gig economy. It is welcome that the Government are now taking steps in relation to pilot projects to seek to identify the problems and overcome them. It is particularly welcome that, as part of that, they are including at least one or maybe two joint initiatives with trade unions representing workers in sectors where there are large numbers of self-employed.

Thirdly, 8% cannot be the summit of our ambitions—of that there is no doubt. Labour commenced down this path when in government, and this Government have done things subsequently, so of course we have moved step by step. The Minister was right to say that, as we reach 8%, we need to take stock of where we go from there. We will need to build on that at the next stages, and, commensurate with getting the balance right, we will need, dare I say it, more of an emphasis on employer contribution, although employee contributions will of course continue to be crucial as well.

I have just one final point. I was grateful that the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) raised the matter of CDC. A wider point in relation to auto-enrolment is that it has been a positive move towards many more workers saving. We have always said that we do not want, in any way, to threaten good DB schemes, and we always defend good DB schemes first and foremost, but I am afraid that the direction of travel on that has been depressing in recent years. If one falls back on a defined contribution arrangement, however, the problem is, all too often, the inadequacy of such arrangements. The hon. Gentleman was therefore right that, as part of that, they are including at least one or maybe two joint initiatives with trade unions representing workers in sectors where there are large numbers of self-employed.

The GMP was supposed to provide a minimum weekly pension roughly equivalent to the amount of additional state pension that would have accrued if they had not been contracted out. The scheme operated until 1997, and although rights do not continue to accrue, they continue to be protected either by the general level of prices or 3%, whichever is less. However, the changes to the state pension mean that the rights accrued between 1978 and 1988 are not protected or subject to this statutory instrument. That is worth bearing in mind. Many pensioners will be getting much less than was anticipated when the scheme was operational. People who were contracted out were not made aware or did not understand what the implications could be long term, and were given the impression that their retirement income was protected at comparable levels. I would be interested to hear what the Minister is doing to ensure that people are properly advised of potential pension changes and that the pension entitlements accrued by workers are better protected in future, with particular regard to the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—the WASPI women—I am sure.

The SI also highlights why it is so important that the UK Government speed up the pension dashboard process. Having one simple dashboard would make it much easier for people to know exactly what their anticipated retirement income should be. Right now, about 47% of UK adults do not know what is in their pension pot. A dashboard would provide that knowledge. One person in five has said they would be more likely to save if they had more information about their pension savings. When people are better able to plan for retirement, that saves the Exchequer. Once again, I suggest that an independent pensions commission would help to ensure that the complexity and vastness of pensions policy could be effectively studied and improved. I hope the Government will finally consider such a commission.

I turn briefly to auto-enrolment. We welcomed auto-enrolment and the Minister described it as a success story. I will explain briefly how he could make it even
more so. What we are talking about this evening is the earnings trigger at which auto-enrolment comes into effect. This band sets a minimum contribution level for money-purchasing pension schemes. The minimum of the band is also relevant for defining who can opt in if they earn under the earnings trigger. We had hoped the UK Government might have looked at expanding the workforce who would be eligible under auto-enrolment. Consideringhistorical gender pay gaps in lower-paying industries and the fact that women are more likely to take career breaks to care for children, women have always had lower pension savings even though they need bigger pots due to longer life expectancy.

We also know that a large number of those falling below the income threshold will be women. It is therefore disappointing that the Government have not brought forward their welcome proposal to lower the threshold to £6,136, which under current plans will not come into force for some years. It is also disappointing that inclusion of 18-year-olds under auto-enrolment is also not expected for many years.

Finally, I would appreciate the Minister’s guidance on why these two SIs were not consulted on ahead of being presented this evening.

7.13 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The pensions system is overly complex. People no longer work in one job for life; they have multiple jobs over a career. Keeping on top of lots of different pension schemes over a number of decades makes it incredibly difficult to plan for the future. Some people find it very difficult to make savings due to other financial pressures—indeed, before I came to this place my pension contribution was minimal as a huge chunk of my income went instead on paying nursery fees. I am sure that many younger women will have found the same. We are storing up problems for the future.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) said, the Scottish National party has long argued for an independent pension commission, because this issue is too important to be kicked around by Governments of different political persuasions. People need to be able to make plans and future Governments need to be ready for the challenges that an ageing population will bring.

This Government have acknowledged the complexity of the pensions system, but they have not really done enough about it so far. Many of my constituents have contacted me as part of the campaign to show their support for a Government-funded pension dashboard, but the Government are still dragging their heels. The Department for Work and Pensions has indicated that it would prefer for the project to be led by industry, but there are many reasons why that is problematic. It would lead to a patchy system that would not encompass everything. If the Government do not step up and supply data from the Treasury on state pensions and non-contributory public sector pensions, that effectively renders the project useless.

The public’s relationship with the Government relies on a series of contracts. When people trust Government bodies such as Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to give them accurate information about the tax that they owe and then in good faith pay that amount, they do not then expect there to be all kinds of hoops to jump through to access their state pension. Stay-at-home mums, for example, need to be aware that they have to be registered for child benefit to clock up credits towards their state pension record. That is not well enough understood. The Government need to take extra steps to ensure people understand what their entitlement rests on.

People expect—this is not unreasonable—that a competent Government will inform them of their obligations and allow them to effectively plan for the future. You only have to ask one of the 3,400 WASPI women in my constituency how devastating it is to find out, and not because the Government have made any special effort to tell them, that retirement will come much later than planned. Rosemary Dickson, a leading light in the WASPI campaign in the west of Scotland, has been out on the streets. That will continue with a demo on 23 February to let people know, because too many women still do not know about it. There have not been 3,400 women at my constituency surgery to complain about it. The UK Government at the time waited 14 years before beginning to tell women that their retirement would be postponed. Women have been let down across the board by successive Governments in this place and that needs to stop now.

The WASPI women cannot retire when planned and they cannot spend time with their grandchildren as they planned. Many now struggle to make ends meet. The impact of this policy is already bearing out in labour market figures. According to the annual survey of hours and earnings, the gender pay gap for over-60s has increased by nearly 3% in just one year. The gender pension gap is nearly 40% in Scotland. The system is clearly failing women. If the Government are not willing to act to close the gap, they should devolve the powers and let the Scottish Government do it for them.

I am sure there will be those on the Government Benches who would say that the gender pension gap does not really matter, because it is the overall household income that counts. However, there are many reasons that a woman may not want to rely wholly on her partner for financial support. Relationships can and do break down, and it is most often women who are left worse off when they do. There is also a failure to recognise that many more women will be in same-sex relationships and may be doubly losing out as a result. They are reliant not on a man’s income, but on two female incomes in the household. That needs to be recognised, too.

Auto-enrolment has increased the number of people saving for retirement, but the policy needs some work to be more inclusive of those who need it most. With the trigger frozen at £10,000, those earning below that threshold—again, mainly women working part time—are missing out on auto-enrolment. The scheme is of even less use to those women working in insecure employment, such as zero-hours contracts, who do not have consistent earnings and perhaps have additional pressures relating to childcare.

Worse still, there is an incentive for employers to suppress wages to avoid contributing to these schemes. The figures show that 43% of self-employed people do not have a pension and that there are 4.8 million self-employed people in the UK. More work needs to be done to reach out to those self-employed people and to make sure that they do not store up problems for the future, too.
According to the UK Women’s Budget Group, auto-enrolment perpetuates the gender gap in pensions. As with all private pensions, it makes no allowances for the disproportionate caring responsibilities that many women still have. Pension inequality is not a new problem, nor is it going away any time soon. I would like to hear more from the Government about how they are going to have a serious, targeted strategy to address that, particularly for women.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 16 January, be approved.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Resolved,

That the draft Automatic Enrolment (Earnings Trigger and Qualifying Earnings Band) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 16 January, be approved.—(Guy Opperman.)

Sport in the UK

7.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I beg to move, That this House has considered sport in the UK.

I am delighted that the House has the opportunity to discuss this important subject today. This debate takes place just over three years on from the publication of our sport strategy, “Sporting Future”. I will shortly be laying a written statement in the House on the progress we have made on implementing that strategy. “Sporting Future” set out a radical new vision for sport and physical activity. It reassesses how we value and measure the nation’s health and wellbeing. It prioritises tackling inactivity as well as engaging people from under-represented groups. It places five outcomes at the heart of everything we do: physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, individual development, social and community development and economic development.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): On economic development, although the Minister will appreciate that, in essence, sport is devolved to the National Assembly for Wales and the Welsh Government, does she welcome physical regeneration, as has happened in the Llynfi valley in my constituency in the community of Nantyffyllon? It has redeveloped an entire rugby ground, including new facilities for a sports club. This has brought about community cohesion together with whole area regeneration, so sport can not only play a big physical part in improving people’s fitness, but bring about real change in a wider community.

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue. Indeed, I have met my counterparts in Wales and will have further such meetings. I absolutely agree that when communities come together around sport, it is really important that economic regeneration plays its part as well. I think that those in his community are benefiting greatly.

I spent my first three months as Sports Minister meeting people in the sector and seeing at first hand the fantastic work that is going on across the country, as we have heard. This is mainly a devolved policy area, so a lot of what I will talk about this evening relates to grassroots in England-only, but there are some reserved aspects in my policy brief, and we share themes and common goals across the UK. As I have said, I met the home nations Ministers at sports cabinet and I plan to build on relationships during my tenure and have further visits and meetings planned.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Frodsham junior football club in my constituency has done a remarkable job in fundraising for a needed 3G facility. My concern is that the premiership is not doing its bit. What is the Minister doing to ensure that those vast funds—those vast profits—are used for grassroots football?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue. It is something we have heard across the House, and in my first three months in this job, it has been raised time and again. I looked into the eyes of the premiership leadership last week and spoke about many
issues with them, such as how the Football Foundation is doing and how that £100 million that the league gives actually works. I am hot on their heels on this one and it is absolutely right that we continue to work together for all our grassroots sport.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I know that the Minister shares my concerns about financial transparency in the Premier League so that we can see not only how money is being used to support grassroots, but to enable the continuing economic benefits that the Minister spoke about so eloquently. Newcastle United Foundation in my constituency does fantastic work in using the power of football to inspire young people. Unfortunately, the Premier League clubs’ financial transparency does not enable us to see what is really happening to the money in the club itself.

Mims Davies: I hear the hon. Lady—she always wears the outfit of the day when mentioning her football club. It is absolutely vital that when sports clubs are doing well, the economic benefits are felt in the city. Southampton has had a difficult time recently and I know that the city, which is close to me, has felt those pains. I absolutely hear the hon. Lady about the transparency issue and the Premier League. There is work to do to keep those conversations going, but I hear her loudly, once again.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I know that a lot of what the Minister wishes to say will not apply to the devolved region of Northern Ireland, but I recognise that she has indicated how important sport is as an economic driver. Given that no devolved Government are currently operational in Northern Ireland, will the Minister encourage and pick up on those strands and push those issues, so that the North West 200, the biggest motorbike race and festival on the island of Ireland, and the Ulster Grand Prix, the fastest motorcycle road race in the world, are given encouragement and support by central Government?

Mims Davies: I hear the hon. Gentleman. Indeed, my officials and I have had conversations about making sure that we do not forget our links to Northern Ireland. In the sports cabinet, it was said very clearly that we need to be aware of how important sport is to the Northern Ireland economy. I am very happy to continue to look at that area.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to the army of volunteers who support mass participation in sport? In Cheltenham, we have a parkrun every Saturday in Pittville park—it is a 5k run—but it simply would not be possible without the volunteers who make it happen. Will she join me in paying tribute to their valuable contribution?

Mims Davies: I am being given a workout with the interventions this evening and I have absolutely no problem with that. I thank my hon. Friend for raising Parkrun. I will come on to that later in my speech. There are junior parkruns and local parkruns. Frankly, by half past 9, people can get their weekend exercise done because of volunteers, rain or shine—or snow, as we have seen recently. It is absolutely right that we thank our local volunteers for that.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con) rose—

Mims Davies: I am going to set out my thoughts on participation, but I give way first to my hon. Friend.

Maggie Throup: My hon. Friend talked about junior parkruns, which reminds us that habits formed in childhood often last a lifetime. Initiatives such as the Erewash school sport partnership do just that. They start in primary schools and hopefully, some of those children will continue with sport throughout life, which is so important. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Mims Davies: I feel that my hon. Friend has read the next part of my speech. Participation and a culture of participation within families and communities is absolutely vital. I would be delighted to set out some of my thoughts on that, so let us talk about participation. We are making good progress on getting more people active. We want half a million people to be more regularly active across England by 2020, with at least half of those being women. Over 470,000 more people are already active compared with when we launched the strategy in 2015, but delivering long-term change in habits requires persistence. We know that we need to do more to get and keep people active.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): In the three months that my hon. Friend has been in post she has been an absolute champion for women’s sport and women’s participation in sport, and we welcome that. In that spirit, will she join me in wanting to see women’s T20 cricket at the Birmingham Commonwealth games? It is a fantastic sport and we want to see it there in the west midlands.

Mims Davies: My hon. Friend tempts me on that point—he knows it is very tempting and I have recently been hoping to visit his constituency—but that is not fully down to me. However, I have made it very clear that participation, particularly of women, and broadcasting opportunities are absolutely vital, so this is on my radar.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister think that in the 21st century it is a scandal that only 10% of television sport coverage is dedicated to women’s sport? If she does share that view, what will she and the Secretary of State do to get Ofcom to take action against the free-to-air broadcasters on this issue?

Mims Davies: I spoke to the Rugby Football Union just this afternoon, praising it for its women’s Six Nations opportunities and for making sure that there is a chance for women to be seen doing that sport. We also talked about the events list. If we want to inspire people, it is absolutely right that we get chance to see them on the telly or indeed that we can see them play and take part in our local communities. The Secretary of State is sitting next to me and we are very keen—he has had meetings with broadcasters and I have some coming up—that the elite are seen on our TVs and ultimately, that people feel that they can aspire to be part of sport.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful case and I had to intervene on this point, because statistically, one might say that
women in rugby—in terms of the Six Nations—are destined to do better than the men, and the same can be said of the England women’s football team. So, to follow the point made by the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), why are we not seeing more coverage of women’s sport on our screens?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): On a point of clarification, the hon. Lady was talking about rugby union. I say that because there is rugby league as well.

Mims Davies: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

My hon. Friend the Member makes an important point about how women in sport are inspiring others. I was talking about participation and the people we should be inspiring: everybody. If we are to do that, women and girls need the opportunity to be seen on our televisions, so I will absolutely take that away with me tonight.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The gender reward gap between women’s and men’s sport is often reported on and is a serious problem. The BBC has reported that 83% of sports have better gender parity, but does the Minister agree that seeing more women’s sports, such as rugby union, rugby league and football, on television will help to close that gap?

Mims Davies: Indeed. The hon. Lady points out that 83% is getting there, but it is not good enough. In some of my brief conversations with sports journalists so far, I have been keen to point out that this is “sport”, not “women’s sport”, and once we think of it as sport for all and see everybody participating, on the TV or on the pitch, as equally valuable, we will have made real progress, and part of that is equal pay.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): My hon. Friend rightly associates people being inspired to take part in sport with seeing sport on television, but she must be aware that a lot of sport now has to be paid for before it can be viewed and that subscription to channels such as BT Sport can be in excess of £30 a month. Therefore, will she encourage more free-to-air sport as part of the strategy to encourage more people, be they men or women, to take part in sporting events and to enjoy a more active lifestyle?

Mims Davies: My hon. Friend makes a good point about free-to-air sport—indeed, I made that point to rugby union representatives today—but if we are prepared to pay for Netflix, we should also be prepared to pay for great sport. We should have the broadest opportunity for people to be seen participating and inspiring at the highest level.

On participation, I was talking about everyone, and I am pleased that the Chamber feels the same. We must ensure that everyone can benefit from sport. I also want to ensure that we reach harder-to-reach groups and get them active and staying active.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure the Minister knows that basketball is the second most played team sport in the UK and reaches hard-to-reach groups in urban communities. I pay tribute to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and her predecessor, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), for giving £500,000 to GB Basketball. It meant, in particular, that the women could stay on court and qualify for EuroBasket top of their league. It is important to look at UK sport funding to ensure that basketball can make its Olympic dream come true.

Mims Davies: Basketball is a sport that has been helped by the aspiration fund, which makes it possible to turn the dial, become medal winners and so continue to inspire. I am delighted about the fund, and I, too, pay tribute to my predecessor.

I was talking about harder-to-reach groups, and some of those have just been described. We want more women; more black, Asian and minority ethnic women and men; and more disabled people taking part in sport, as well as those who might have a hard time finding the cash for exercise and wellbeing. We want everyone to have the opportunity to take part, including those who struggle to find a family activity that they enjoy—we have heard about that this evening as well. These are often the people facing the biggest hurdles to being active, and they are the people we need to support most. I want to tackle those hurdles and make sport fun.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Is the Minister aware of the work being done by the World Professional Billiards and Snooker Association not only with seniors—I think I qualify as a senior, but then so does Ronnie O’Sullivan—but with people with disabilities, particularly people with autism? Despite that, Sport England does not give snooker any funding. It gives a lot of money to bowls, archery and angling but none to snooker. Would she be prepared to look at that?

Mims Davies: The hon. Lady makes a great point. We need to work with Sport England to reach everyone who can take part in sport in whatever way possible. I was lucky enough recently to speak at an event marking the 30th anniversary of the Paralympics, and it made me think of my young children, who do not see any barriers to participation because of London 2012, which changed so much. It is absolutely right that where there is an opportunity for people to take part in sport we give them that opportunity. That is the focus of my speech this evening.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The Minister is making a strong case for participation in sport, but there is also a clear case in terms of preventive health, given that evidence suggests that being involved in sport reduces by 30% people’s incidence of stroke, cancer and other illnesses. Today being World Cancer Day, does she agree that there is a long-term public purse benefit to getting people fit and healthy through participation in sport?

Mims Davies: Absolutely. I will build on that thought in my speech. It is vital that we work with health bodies and communities and through social prescribing. It can help to keep our communities fitter, healthier and more connected.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Does the Minister agree that this is about not just physical but mental health, and will she join me in celebrating the work of Elaine Wylie, the founder of the daily mile? All over the world,
more than 7,000 schools and nurseries practise the daily mile, and the evidence of the benefit that comes to the children who participate is immense. Would she encourage all our schools and nurseries to engage with the daily mile?

**Mims Davies:** The daily mile has been a revelation in getting youngsters involved. I recently visited a school that was getting involved but which did not have much green space, only tarmac. It was difficult for that school, but the inventive ways in which the daily mile is being used across the country is a sight to behold. I congratulate Elaine on her work.

**Stephen Kerr:** I forgot to mention that it all began in Stirling at St Ninians Primary School—the most important thing of all!

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I have no problem with interventions. The problem is that the people wanting to speak later are cutting down their own time. The time limit was 10 minutes, but it is now down to eight.

**Mims Davies:** I will plough on, but thank goodness for Stirling!

I want us to find different ways of doing things. I want to find the next parkrun or daily mile. I thank the fabulous parkrun family for all they are doing. Building strongly on the success of the This Girl Can campaign, we need to be smarter about how we use data and new technologies to get people moving and—more importantly—staying moving. I want us to make being active easy and fun for everyone and a habit for everyone.

December’s Sport England’s active lives children’s survey will help us to understand how children in particular engage with and think about sport and physical activity. This world-leading study represents a big step forward. We now have robust data that tells us which changes will make the biggest difference to our children’s lives. The first set of results was published late last year, and the evidence it set out was a wake-up call for the sector. Our children are simply not active enough. We all need to address that head on.

I will work with ministerial colleagues in the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care, and I am delighted that we will be publishing a new cross-Government plan to focus on getting kids active in and out of school. I particularly want to focus on after-school periods when children should have the opportunity to be active and safe in enjoyable environments. I want to make sure that all children have access to the right sporting offer and that they enjoy physical activity and therefore can reap the benefits of an active lifestyle. Sport needs to be fun, inclusive and engaging. There is a world of options out there, as we have heard, and I want us to work harder to make sport and physical activity appealing to everyone.

**Why does this matter?** Being active brings many benefits not just to children but to people of all ages. Working with the Department of Health and Social Care, I want us to embrace the use of sport and physical activity in improving health outcomes. Being active can reduce chronic diseases and health conditions such as diabetes and heart disease, and it can ease pressures on our health and social care systems. Given our aging society, we must do everything we can to help people to enjoy healthy, independent and fulfilling lives for longer.

With my loneliness Minister hat on, I must add that getting people active, where that means people being connected, is also vital, and the enjoyment and sense of belonging that can come from taking part in physical activity can be a huge part of that. Real change is already happening in that regard. As part of the NHS long-term plan, NHS England is hiring 1,000 new advisers to expand social prescribing and help patients to lead fitter, healthier and happier lives. About 50% of GP appointments are not directly related to medical conditions, and pills are prescribed. Evidence shows that referrals to, for instance, exercise classes, sports groups or, indeed, ballroom dancing classes can greatly help people’s health and wellbeing.

However, I want to go further, and work with ministerial colleagues to use the power of sport to make lives better. Physical activity can help us in so many ways. Getting more people walking or cycling reduces congestion, improves air quality and can revitalise our high streets. Sport can bring people together and reduce social isolation, and the discipline and teamwork that it encourages can also be an important tool in cutting reoffending rates in the criminal justice system.

My second priority is protecting the culture and integrity of high-level sport. What matters is not just what we do to win medals and create sporting success, but how we go about it. It cannot be right for athletes such as Kelly Sotherton to receive their medals six years late and behind closed doors because the systems are not right. Since taking up my role, I have had discussions with UK Anti-Doping, UK Sport, the World Anti-Doping Agency and representatives of athletes in order to understand what has gone wrong in some quarters, and to make the UK’s position clear.

How can we inspire more people through sport by preserving and strengthening its integrity? People must have faith in sports that they know and love. Our athletes deserve to know that they are competing on a level playing field. We must continue to operate robust anti-doping and governance regimes, both domestically and internationally. We must continue to lead the way.

**Mrs Helen Grant** (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a superb speech and an important point. Does she agree that if fans cannot trust what they see, the integrity of sport will be permanently damaged, and that we need a multi-agency approach, information sharing and, very importantly, much more player education, so that those who are tempted to cheat know that they will be caught and punished?

**Mims Davies:** My hon. Friend has walked in my shoes in this role, and she knows how important that issue is. When I have spoken to athletes, there has been compelling evidence that the integrity of their sport, the hard work that they demonstrate, and everything that they do to lead the way is undermined when people feel that sport does not have the integrity that they hold so dear.

**Dr Poulter:** I thank my hon. Friend for giving way; she is being very generous with her time. She is making a good point about the integrity of sport, but will she also look into some of the often questionable medical exemptions of recent times? There has been reference to a level playing field. It sometimes seems that it is the athletes who have the best doctors, and can obtain the
best medical exemptions and certificates, who can benefit from medications that may enhance performance. In the context of other sports people, that may not be correct when the medical conditions involved do not reach a threshold that I, as a doctor, would consider to be sufficient to require such medications.

Mims Davies: My hon. Friend has made an important point. When sport is being led by the question of who has the best doctor, it is likely that we have a problem.

People need to feel that it is safe to take part in sport, and ensuring that children and those at risk are protected as much as possible is a top priority for me. I have been speaking to my ministerial colleagues in the Ministry of Justice about putting sports coaches in a position of trust to give additional protection to 16 and 17-year-olds, and that work continues. We need to inspire children to take part in sport, to make them feel welcome, and to let them have fun. That golden thread runs through all that we do.

As we have heard, if we do not get this right over time, it will affect our love for our sport. It will affect those who take part in it, and also those who watch it. There are huge benefits to be had from watching live sport. London 2012 showcased to the world the UK’s enthusiasm for that, and we see it week in, week out in our sporting fixtures and at our local sporting clubs. Today our sports grounds attract a wider and more diverse range of spectators than ever before, and it is important for those experiences to be enjoyable and safe for all who attend. I know that many of my colleagues are interested in stadium safety and the long-standing commitment to an all-seater policy. I am expecting a report reviewing existing evidence on that topic very soon, and, along with the Secretary of State, I will consider its findings carefully.

As a new sports Minister considering the experience of attending football matches, I have been immediately struck by the racist and other discriminatory behaviour that has been reported over the last few months. I am sure that all Members have been alarmed by the worrying number of incidents about which we have all been hearing. We can take heart, because people feel more confident about reporting such experiences, but we must not tolerate a return to the worst days of sport.

Football is the national game, which people of all ages and from all backgrounds should be able to enjoy and play. It should bring people together, not foster division. Those involved in abuse are not football fans; they are using football as a cloak for discriminatory and often criminal behaviour. They are not welcome in our stadiums. In the coming weeks, I will bring together football authorities and other organisations with an interest in the issue to discuss what action must be taken to stamp out all forms of discrimination at sports events. Together, we must find a way of tackling such unacceptable behaviour.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): As the Minister may know, I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill on homophobic chanting in sports stadiums—sponsored by colleagues on the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee—to bring it within the remit of the Football (Offences) Act 1991. When will we hear from her whether the Government will support the Bill?

Mims Davies: I think I have made it clear tonight that I am determined to deal with this matter, but I will reserve judgment until I have heard from the authorities. I will write to the hon. Lady.

Football reaches every community in the country, and it can play its part in helping to champion the values that we want to see in our society today. However, we need to get tougher on those who refuse to play by the rules. Zero tolerance means just that. We cannot allow the minority to ruin the sport for the majority of us who love it. I look forward to reporting back to the House on the actions taken as a result of my discussions.

Let me now turn to more positive matters, because I am very conscious that I need to move on.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister include the fit and proper ownership rules in her discussions with the football authorities? My club, Forest Green Rovers, has had a run-in with Bolton Wanderers because Bolton refused to pay the money that it expected for the transfer of a player. So many of those at the lower levels of football are not, dare I say, fit and proper people to run football clubs. Will the Minister look into that?

Mims Davies: I would be happy for the hon. Gentleman to write to me about it. As I think I have made clear tonight, trust and integrity are paramount in sport.

Our sport, internationally, has a massive part to play in our global reputation. We can travel the world and meet people who do not know much about our home town, but they will know if our local football club is in the Champions’ League or has been in an FA cup final. As we leave the European Union, we will work with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Trade to ensure that the incredible contribution of sport can be part of our international profile, and part of our vision for global Britain. I recently met the Japanese Sports Minister, who is keen to learn from our experience of hosting major events so that the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics and Olympics can be an inclusive experience for everyone.

We can continue to deliver major world events, and this summer we will host the cricket world cup, with an expected global audience of 1.5 billion people. It will be a wonderful opportunity to showcase our country, bring communities together and get more people to be active. It is not just cricket—I will rattlthough the other sports. The world wheelchair curling championships take place in Stirling in March; Liverpool will host the netball world cup in July; the world road-cycling championships take place in Yorkshire in 2019; UEFA 2020 Euro fixtures take place at Hampden Park and Wembley; and the UEFA women’s Euros and rugby league take place in 2021, with matches hosted all over England. I am delighted that the benefits will be experienced across the country.

Our investment in major events will deliver opportunities for everyone. Everywhere, people will be able to see at first hand that sport is great. Of course, we look forward to hosting the 2022 Commonwealth games in Birmingham, which will be the biggest sporting and cultural event in the west midlands ever. All those global sports events offer a fantastic opportunity to showcase the UK to the world, and give us an opportunity to showcase our
commitment to fair and inclusive sport, which is why we must take steps to protect the culture and integrity of elite sport.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): In that long list of sports, the Minister failed to mention one particular sport that I am particularly keen on—rowing, which is important not just for the high-class activity that takes place in Henley but because it contributes to the better appreciation of the sport by young people in that area. Will she give credit to those companies for attacking sport, as it were, at both those levels?

Mims Davies: My hon. Friend mentioned high-class behaviour in Henley—I expect nothing less. Absolutely—it is fantastic that rowing is thriving, and I have promised to visit.

The Commonwealth games will take place 10 years after the Olympic and Paralympic games, and I want to build on the success of 2012, and make them an event that is remembered for bringing people together, celebrating diversity, and promoting inclusivity across the Commonwealth and beyond. Its legacy will go further, and embrace trade and investment, culture, sport, employment, housing and tourism. Later this month, I will set out the strategy with UK Sport beyond 2020, the Olympics and the Paralympics, supporting our athletes and all competitors for the next stage. As we heard, UK Sport has recently launched its aspiration fund.

I want to conclude, because I am sure that you want me to do so, Mr Deputy Speaker. [Interruption.] I want the number of people enjoying sport and engaging in physical activity to grow; I want sport to be embedded in Government thinking on health and social care; I want this country’s amazing reputation for hosting the world’s biggest sporting events to continue; I want our sporting bodies to demonstrate strong leadership and a duty of care to all participants; I want Team GB to continue its medal success; and I absolutely want to make sure that everyone can benefit from the power of sport.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): To reassure the House, it was not me who wanted the Minister to conclude—it was all the Members wishing to speak, if that helps.

7.53 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I would like to begin by sending all our best wishes to Cardiff City FC and its fans, who sang continuously throughout the match against Bournemouth on Saturday, in memory of Emiliano Sala. There is no doubt that he will for ever remain in their thoughts.

With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to put on record my disgust at the situation of Hakeem al-Araibi, the footballer who fled Bahrain and appeared in court today in Thailand, facing forced extradition. The Opposition strongly urge the Government to lean on Thailand and Bahrain with maximum force to drop those charges. The United Kingdom has a proud history of assisting those fleeing political persecution, and we should not stay silent on this matter.

Supporters should always be at the heart of sport. Sport should be run in the interest of fans, not the privileged few, which is what I want to focus our debate on. In a world of ever-growing commercialisation, fans are rarely part of the decision-making process; instead, money talks. Nowhere is that more apparent than in our national game—football. The premier league has undergone a transformation in the past three decades, and without a doubt is now the best sporting league in the world, admired around the globe. Wherever we travel, whether Hollywood Boulevard or refugee camps in Bangladesh where I have worked, premier league football shirts are commonplace. It is incredibly moving to know that the UK football scene has such an incredible fan base, which we must nurture.

Fans are desperate for small changes: they want a better atmosphere in stadiums; they do not want to be at the mercy of billion-pound TV deals; they want a say in how their club is run; and they do not want their children to be bombarded with betting adverts. Those form our pledges for supporters, because we believe that fans must have a greater say in the sport that they love.

Gareth Thomas: Does my hon. Friend accept that many fans want to see premier league football clubs doing the right thing by all their staff? Does she share my view that it is highly disappointing that only four premier league clubs pay the living wage?

Dr Allin-Khan: I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent intervention, and I share his thoughts, views and feelings that everyone should be paid the wages that they deserve, particularly when they work hard, out of hours, supporting the beautiful game of football.

Returning to football supporters in stadiums, the current system simply is not working and is not safe. Standing happens frequently, sometimes in steep tiers where the seat in front barely goes above the ankles of the person who is standing behind it. When I brought together 50 supporters’ trusts for a parliamentary roundtable, they made clear what they were asking for: small sections of a stadium that can be converted to accommodate those who want to stand, allowing them to stand safely, while giving those who want to sit the enjoyment of watching a game without people standing in their way. I am a football fan, and I attend matches regularly. I know the dangers that can arise for a young family when there are people standing in front of them. Children often have to stand on their seats to watch the game.

Christine Jardine: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. There was a good reason for redesigning our sports stadiums at one time, but does she agree that the introduction of safe standing areas makes watching live sport in person more affordable for many people?

Dr Allin-Khan: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. We have made it clear that we need to take the decision away from Whitehall. What the Labour party is proposing is a one-for-one seating and standing arrangement. There is no plan to cut the cost of a ticket at this point. It is about enjoyment and safety, which is paramount.

We need to take the decision away from Whitehall and devolve it to clubs, fans and local safety authorities, because they know their stadiums better than any of us. To any supporters watching, let me say that we will continue to push for the introduction of safe standing. The Government cannot kick the can down the road on
this one. Our second pledge is on the introduction of a “fans fare” travel scheme. It is not right that fixtures are constantly rescheduled, so fans miss out on the cheapest train tickets. In the opening three weeks of the premier league season this year, five matches were rescheduled for TV, which made it impossible for supporters to travel to or from the match in time. Fans deserve better—they must be part of the conversation. The Football League, the Premier League, the Rail Delivery Group and fans’ groups are all in favour of the introduction of a “fans fare” scheme, but the Government are dragging their feet. A Transport Minister agreed to meet me, but then cancelled our meeting.

Labour will not sit still. We will continue to push for this. Supporters should not be at the mercy of billion-pound TV deals. The “fans fare” travel scheme would allow them to change the date on their ticket if a match was rescheduled, so they would not miss out on the cheapest train tickets. Those who have tried to attend a match with their partner and two children will know the cost of buying four new tickets to attend a match and see their much-loved football team.

Our third pledge would give fans a say in how their club was run. Overseas investment has revolutionised the Premier League and brought remarkable success for clubs, both domestically and in Europe, but supporters are desperate for a greater say. At the moment, fans are involved in supporters forums, but with clubs increasingly becoming solely owned by rich investors, those forums are becoming meaningless when it comes to making decisions. We would make it mandatory that, when a club was sold, a proportion of the shares being sold should be offered to fans to buy. We would allow supporters trusts to appoint board members who would hold full voting rights, ensuring that fans had a place at the table.

Our fourth pledge relates to gambling. A staggering 55,000 children are problem gamblers, and this is being fuelled by an increase in sports betting. Football stadiums, football shirts and advertising boards are filled with gambling logos and names. This is fuelling a worrying epidemic in children, and not enough is being done. We are pleased that the industry has listened to our calls for a whistle-to-whistle gambling ban across all sports, but we are pleased that the industry has listened to our calls for a whistle-to-whistle gambling ban across all sports, but we would go further and ban gambling companies from football logos and names. This is fuelling a worrying crisis. Should our success be measured by the number of Olympic medals we win? Does she agree that there is still a lack of diversity in the broadest sense when it comes to representation on boards and in senior management positions, notwithstanding the fact that we have a really healthy talent pool? Does she agree that we need to reach a position where people from every background can not only knock on the doors for the very top jobs but actually get them?

Mrs Helen Grant: The hon. Lady is making an important point. Does she agree that there is still a lack of diversity in the broadest sense when it comes to representation on boards and in senior management positions, notwithstanding the fact that we have a really healthy talent pool? Does she also agree that we need to reach a position where people from every background can not only knock on the doors for the very top jobs but actually get them?

Dr Allin-Khan: The hon. Lady makes a most excellent point. If you can see it, you can be it. I firmly believe that, and in my position as shadow Minister for Sport I have always pushed for equality in the boardroom, not only based on gender but across socioeconomic divides and for the black, Asian and minority ethnic community. While I celebrate our wonderful Olympic success in London and Rio, I question whether we should be pumping millions into niche sports to gain a couple of gold medals when sports such as basketball, which is ever so popular in the UK, are going through a funding crisis. Should our success be measured by the number of gold medals we win?

Alex Sobel: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning basketball. I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on basketball. The UK and Team GB are on track for Olympic qualification, which will
happen at the world cup this summer, but we will need the funding from the National Basketball Association and the Women's National Basketball Association to get our players into that qualification tournament and into the Olympics.

Dr Allin-Khan: I know that my hon. Friend has been tireless in his pursuit of ensuring that basketball gets the funding it deserves. I also know that, like me, he was staggered to discover that shooting is getting £6.9 million while basketball, a popular grassroots sport that can be played by all, has had its funding cut.

Should our success be measured by the number of gold medals we can win, or by the millions of people we can motivate to get fit and active and take the opportunity to play the sport they love? Just £23 million a year is being put into grassroots sports by the Government, and half of that was put in under Labour. Local government cuts have resulted in more than 1,000 grass pitches, swimming pools and sports halls being closed over the past two years. The discussion surrounding the sale of Wembley stadium sparked an interesting debate about the funding of grassroots sport in the UK. We believe that the Football Association answered all our questions and had the best intentions, but did we really need to consider selling our national stadium to build grass roots facilities fit for the 21st century?

Mike Amesbury: Since 2010, more than 110 publicly funded swimming pools have closed, denying working-class children the opportunity to get active and to excel. The Minister has talked about her aspiration to get the nation moving more. She has the right aspiration, but actions—and money—speak louder than fine words.

Dr Allin-Khan: I thank my hon. Friend for making that valuable point. If we do not invest in our young people at grassroots level, we will be fuelling our obesity crisis even further. If the Government are serious about taking a public health approach to active lives, they could support local authorities and national governing bodies in building sporting facilities.

Christine Jardine: The hon. Lady talks about sports funding and the funding of facilities. Is she aware that the Scottish Rugby Union, based at Murrayfield in my constituency, feels that it has not benefited from lottery funding in the way that other sports have done? For example, it has had no lottery funding to help it to improve the stadium. Does she agree that it can have an ongoing impact on grassroots sports such as rugby if those bodies do not get the lottery funding that will enable them to invest?

Dr Allin-Khan: I agree. No sport should be left out and no one should feel that they are not part of the conversation and benefiting from pots of money that may be available.

I am going to make progress and get to the end of my speech, because I am aware that many Members want to speak. How can the Government support local authorities? They could broaden the Treasury’s infrastructure guarantee scheme to include the building of sports facilities. Currently, just £2 billion out of £40 billion has been allocated. If our public health approach truly wants to consider preventive measures, it is essential to underwrite schemes to build pitches, swimming pools and athletics tracks. We have a national obesity crisis. The Government could revolutionise grassroots sports if they looked carefully at that scheme, so I encourage them to do so.

We can boost funding for our most popular sports, help build the necessary facilities and give everyone the opportunity to reach their potential, regardless of where they live or how much money their family earn. We can level the playing field and ensure that sport is run in the interests of all those who love it, not just a privileged few.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): If Members speak for up to six minutes each, that would really help us. Some Members may pull a face, but that is because of the Front Benchers, not me.

8.10 pm

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), who spoke on behalf of the Opposition. She made a powerful speech, but I have to say that it was quite negative. She talked about all the things she does not like—including betting, big football clubs and sitting down at the football—but we should be talking about the positive things that sport can achieve and what it brings to all our communities. Let us not be dour; let us be positive about the power of sport.

The Minister gave a brilliant speech. We were lucky to have the Tour de France visit Yorkshire not so long ago, and she gave us a tour de force today about all the benefits of sport.

As well as being the home of brewing, my constituency of Burton and Uttoxeter is also the home of the English football team. We are delighted to have in Burton—I share it with my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant)—St George’s Park, the home not just of the English football team but of all 28 England national football teams, including the disability teams, the women’s team and the blind team. It is a truly inspirational facility. I took some credit from the Bring it to Burton campaign, which I ran when I was a candidate. That was obviously instrumental in the £105 million being spent in my constituency to develop that state-of-the-art facility. The 13 pitches have attracted teams such as Barcelona and Monaco, and the Irish rugby union team have trained there. We are a magnet for sporting excellence and it is a great pleasure to have the facility in my constituency.

We also have Uttoxeter racecourse for the sport of kings. I am delighted that we play host every year to the west midlands grand national, which attracts some 16,000 people to my constituency on the day and puts £1 million into local businesses over that weekend. We talk about the power and benefit of sport, but its financial benefit to my constituents and those businesses is really important.

John Lamont: My hon. Friend is making a powerful point about horse-racing, which in terms of attendance and revenue created is the second biggest sport in the United Kingdom; it is a great shame that it has not been mentioned so far in the debate. My constituency has Kelso racecourse, which contributes greatly to the local economy. Does my hon. Friend agree that horse-racing is very much an underrated sport and that it does so much to promote sport and physical activity?
Andrew Griffiths: Absolutely—my hon. Friend is spot on. I am lucky enough to know very well David MacDonald and his team who run Uttoxeter races, and it is thriving. Horse-racing is a great sport that inspires people and gives a great day out. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we should not underestimate the real benefits of horse-racing to the United Kingdom.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): May I seek clarification on the previous intervention? In what terms is horse-racing the biggest sport? It may be in terms of betting revenues, but it is certainly not in terms of participation.

Andrew Griffiths: I believe my hon. Friend for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) may have been referring to attendance, but I understand the hon. Lady’s point.

Football is at the crux of the point I really want to make. We have had a great sporting weekend, with some fantastic sporting triumphs, including England’s success over Ireland in the rugby—*Interruption* / I will not mention the cricket. I was lucky enough to attend another sporting giant of a match on Saturday: the thrilling nil-nil draw between Burton Albion and Oxford United. I was delighted to be there.

Burton Albion is a small club. It was only promoted to the football league in 2009, yet by 2017 it had been promoted to the championship. That is a Roy of the Rovers-type success story for a club that is embedded in the community. Thanks to the hard work and determination of the chairman, Mr Ben Robinson, and Nigel Clough, our inspirational manager, who has a huge sporting history behind him, the club has done incredible things. We talk so often about money in sport, but Burton Albion is a shining example of what heart and passion, rather than just money, can do in terms of delivering.

Mrs Helen Grant: On the commercial benefits of and money in sport, does my hon. Friend agree that women still lag behind men in commercial sponsorship and that sponsors should become more alive to the benefits of association with some of our fantastic female role models?

Andrew Griffiths: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Women’s sport, such as women’s football, is thrilling to watch, and the advertisers should get on board and realise how powerful it could be for their brands.

Finally, I hope that the Minister has heard what I have said about the power of community trusts, and that she will agree to visit the mighty Pirelli stadium, where she will be able to see the work of Burton Albion Community Trust in my community.

8.17 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): For those of us who stayed up into the wee small hours last night to watch the Superbowl, it has already been a long day. The game itself could have got sport stopped, to be honest, but it would be remiss of me not to thank the Renfrewshire Raptors, the Flag American Football team, for hosting the Superbowl party last night.

I should also say at the outset that Scotland currently head the Six Nations table, a position that I fully expect them to stay in until the end of the competition. I will also use this opportunity to praise my own club, Paisley rugby club, which after a slow start is now unbeaten since October, probably because I retired a number of years ago.

It is good to see the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) in his place, given that he was running the line at the St Johnstone-Celtic game yesterday. As a St Johnstone fan, I am hugely disappointed that he did not find a way to disallow the two Celtic goals in their 2-0 victory. In recent years, with European qualification and a Scottish cup win, it has been easier to be a Saints fan than a Scotland fan. However, recently we have had cause for optimism, with Shelley Kerr’s women’s team backing up qualification for the Euros by qualifying for this summer’s World Cup in France, for the very first time.

In my first shameless plug for the all-party parliamentary group on Scottish sport, which I chair, I draw attention to the fact that on 13 March both Shelley Kerr and Ian Maxwell, the chief executive of the Scottish Football Association, will give a presentation to the APPG on the women’s game and the recent UEFA report on the social benefits of football to Scotland. Everyone is welcome to attend.

Sport offers so much in personal development, self-confidence, discipline and social skills, and it plays a vital role in building strong communities and a healthy society. For many, sport can be all-consuming, whether simply as a fan of a local football team, as someone who enjoys a game of golf at the weekend—when the weather permits in Scotland—as a linesman or as a performance athlete who dedicates their life to be the best at what they do. It would be a grave mistake indeed to understate the importance of sport to people’s lives.

Thanks to the media, when we think of performance athletes, we tend to think of multimillionaire football players, but professional athletes come from a wide range of varying disciplines that are all unique and as important as each other. The vast majority certainly do not provide people with the opportunity to retire to a life of wealth and comfort while still in their 20s.

For many athletes, including those who bring home Olympic medals, transitioning to a life beyond professional sport can be a challenge. That challenge often includes uncertainty in establishing a viable career beyond sport, but it can also include poor mental health and battles with depression and anxiety.
Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): On mental health, a survey by the Rugby Players Association in England reveals that 62% of players suffer mental health issues after retirement and 52% feel their life is out of control after two years. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, UK-wide, the Government need to take a better, more holistic approach to helping people not just in rugby but in professional sport to be able to cope when they come out of sport by injury or by the end of their sporting life?

Gavin Newlands: I could not agree more. As the hon. Lady is a former international rugby player herself, her point is even stronger, and I will echo that in my later comments.

I have been seeking an Adjournment debate on this issue without success, so I will outline some of the issues now. The Glaswegian Olympic silver medallist Michael Jamieson spoke about the difficulty towards the end of his fantastic career as he battled depression caused by a gruelling training regime. He made the decision to retire, and it was the right decision for him. After some difficulties, he is now an example of an athlete who has made the transition well, as he has now built a successful career as a leading coach, but his story is by no means the norm. Such difficulties have been relatively common in football, but, since the advent of UK Sport lottery funding, they have become more widespread in other sports, and the current cliff-edge approach to UK Sport funding in no way helps the scenario.

Last year, the BBC reported on examples of athletes finding the transition difficult. Rower Mark Hunter competed at three Olympic games, winning gold in Beijing and silver in London:

“It doesn’t matter how good you are, how much money you earn—you have to learn to cope with that loss of purpose. Athletes think everyone cares about what you are doing but most people don’t care until you are performing at the highest level.”

In Athens in 2004 I came last and that was my darkest point. I had no money, I had nothing. I used to drive down back roads thinking, ‘if I crash I wouldn’t care right now.’ I didn’t tell my parents but I was lucky I had so many friends around me to help me escape. I’d gone to the ultimate event and come last. We came last, the funding is cut and it’s like ‘get out’. I had no money, I had nothing.”

Ollie Philips was world rugby sevens player of the year in 2009:

“Because I had to retire through injury, it felt as though I had been robbed of my rights and the dreams that I was hoping to achieve. Once I realised that ‘right I am now not a rugby player any more’, there was a really tough period. It’s such a destructive experience on a personal level—everything is affected by it. That experience of feeling valued and adored. Suddenly you’re not as good; you’re not in the limelight. And as a result you chase highs and ego boosts. They give you a kick in the short term, but the highs are high and the lows are very low and you don’t know how to get out of them.

There were times when I looked at myself and thought, ‘I don’t want to be here.’ I’ve probably accepted not being a sportsman but have I truly accepted that it’s not me anymore? Maybe not entirely.”

Switch the Play, which has presented to the all-party parliamentary group on Scottish sport, is an excellent social enterprise—it is shortly to become a charity—dedicated to improving the support offered to elite and aspiring athletes as they transition to a life outside sport, and it has done excellent work on this issue.

One of those athletes is Beth Tweddle, who most Members will know. She is an Olympic bronze medallist, a triple world champion, a six-time European champion and a Commonwealth champion—the list goes on. Beth made the decision to retire after a glittering career, but she was seriously concerned about what she would do with herself after focusing on gymnastics for 21 years. Switch the Play helped to provide her with training, and she found the confidence to become a company director for Total Gymnastics.

Research by Abertay University’s Professor David Lavallee shows that athletes who engage in planning for their future feel less stressed and are better able to focus on their sporting performance. The study also found that the levels of support provided to athletes in planning their retirement can also influence their performance. Switch the Play and others do excellent work, but we cannot expect such organisations to give that peace of mind and care alone.

Sporting bodies and, of course, the Government therefore have a duty of care to our athletes and must ensure that they have all the support, training and opportunities they require to live life and build a career after retirement, whether that be in their sport or in any other sector. I hope the Minister will meet Switch the Play and me to discuss this issue further.

Most Members, and particularly Mr Speaker, could not have failed to be moved by Andy Murray’s press conference, in which it was clear he is very much struggling to come to terms with his possible upcoming retirement. I am sure the House will join me in welcoming his recent successful hip operation, which at the very least will give Andy a much better quality of life, without pain, to spend with his children. Of course, we all hope the operation will enable Andy to continue playing top-level tennis, but, if it fails, he has an astonishing career to look back on. He is a two-time Wimbledon champion, a US Open champion, a Davis cup winner, twice Olympic champion and, probably most impressive of all, a world No. 1 in the era of Roger Federer, Nadal and Djokovic.

I can only hope that Andy is as proud of himself as Scotland is of him. Without a shadow of doubt, Andy is Scotland’s greatest ever sportsman or sportswoman. What can we say to Scotland’s, and probably the UK’s, greatest ever but thank you? Thank you for the memories, the inspiration and the sheer joy that he has given to the nation.

Stephen Kerr: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gavin Newlands: I give way to Andy Murray’s Member of Parliament.

Stephen Kerr: Sir Andy Murray is the pride and joy of Dunblane and the Stirling district. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, to commemorate an extraordinary career and an amazing contribution to Scottish sport, some form of statue to Sir Andy Murray should be erected in Dunblane?

Gavin Newlands: There is a danger that we might get a bit ahead of ourselves but, yes, I agree that, in the time to come, there should be a statue to Andy Murray in Dunblane, perhaps to sit alongside his gold post box. I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman will commission the statue himself.
That brings me on to the Murray legacy. The staggering success of the entire Murray family is and will continue to be a positive thing for Scottish tennis, as well as tennis across the UK, yet their rise to become the best tennis players in the world has exposed funding and governance imbalance issues that need to be taken seriously, lest we risk squandering the opportunities that their success could provide us with: opportunities not only to nurture future champions, but, just as importantly, to give more people the opportunity to play tennis. To achieve that, we need to be frank about where we are going wrong.

At the age of 15, Andy was advised by one Rafael Nadal that he would have to move away from the UK if he wanted to become a professional. That was 16 years ago, and not much has changed. Scotland is one of the world’s leading nations for tennis, thanks to the success of not only the Murrays, but Gordon Reid, the former world No. 1 in men’s wheelchair tennis, and others. However, it is an indisputable fact that Tennis Scotland has been drastically underfunded by the Lawn Tennis Association. Despite Scotland’s enviable success, the LTA gave Tennis Scotland just £650,000 in 2017, from a budget of £60 million UK-wide. That means that Scotland, with some 8.5% of the UK’s population—and the UK’s best players, Davis cup coach and so on—received just 1% of the revenue funding available from the LTA. In 2018, that allocation was slashed to just £582,000.

John Lamont: The hon. Gentleman is making an important point about the funding for sports development. Does he therefore agree that it is unfortunate that shortly before receiving the extra revenue from the sugar tax from the UK Government the Scottish Government slashed funding for sportscotland by a fifth?

Gavin Newlands: Far be it for me to disagree with the hon. Gentleman, but last year the Scottish sports budget grew by £2 million—more than 7%—and Derek Mackay offered to underwrite any loss from the lottery sports funding of up to £3.5 million. So I will not hear any Scottish Conservative nonsense about the Scottish Government on this issue. This debate at least should be a consensual one.

The perfect example of this problem can be seen in the availability of the indoor courts that make the game possible, particularly in Scotland, given our weather conditions. At the last count, there were 102 facilities in Scotland, compared with 1,484 in England. Of course, this is not just the fault of the LTA; government at all levels, as well as non-governmental bodies, have also to address issues of access. But what a shame it is that, particularly in Scotland, the biggest issue that young people who wish to get into the game may face is finding somewhere to play. Speaking to the Scottish context, Murray said:

“I know in Scotland that there have not been many indoor courts built in the last 10 years. That seems madness. I don’t understand why that is. You need to get kids playing; you need to have the facilities that allow them to do that.”

The all-party group on Scottish sport has looked at these missed opportunities, taking evidence from the then chief executive of the LTA, Michael Downey, Judy Murray and Blane Dodds, the chief executive officer of Tennis Scotland. Following this investigation, the LTA loosened its purse strings somewhat and, along with sportscotland, delivered a capital investment fund specifically for tennis facilities in Scotland.

Andy Murray has criticised the LTA for not doing enough to build on his and his family’s success, recently saying:

“Maybe it’s something I should have given more thought to while I was playing but I never felt that was my job to do that.”

He is right. It is not his job—it certainly should not be—to be getting involved in the governance of his sport; our athletes, in whichever sport, should be able to put 100% of their concentration into their game. But the Murrays have felt the need to intervene as, staggeringly, tennis participation numbers continue to drop, despite the success of top-level tennis players across the UK.

Two things must change: we need a sharp increase in the number of facilities available across Scotland, and the UK as a whole; and we need parity and fair funding between the game’s governing bodies. That means that the LTA needs to provide Tennis Scotland with the funding it needs to do its job properly.

Over the past few years—I say this from speaking to other Scottish sporting bodies—it has become increasingly clear that the issues we see arising within tennis are very common in the governance of other sports. Many of these non-governmental bodies feel strongly that there is a lack of “equal status” and “equal standing” between the Scottish bodies—this applies to other devolved bodies, as this is not simply a Scottish issue—and their English counterparts, with many UK-wide NGBs functioning as extended versions of their respective English bodies.

One chief executive I spoke to said that their respective English body acted like they were the “GB” organisation, rather than one of four separate bodies. That too often leads to the organisations responsible for Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland being cut out of processes, with no say in crucial decision making. That leads to the kind of situations we have seen in UK Athletics, where a shambolic leadership team are trying to ride roughshod over the devolved athletics bodies. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) seems to have a cough, but I will come back to him shortly.

A recurring concern of all Scottish NGBs is that there is a lack of systematic process, with the English bodies often unilaterally taking action over the others on UK-wide decisions. That is not to say there is not some excellent practice that we can learn from; the governance of swimming has been cited to me as an example of a better system working between the UK’s countries. I look forward to raising this issue with Dame Katherine Grainger, who, in addition to being one of the UK’s most decorated Olympians, is also the chair of UK Sport, as she will be attending a meeting of the all-party group on Scottish sport on Monday 25 February.

On devolved sports, another area that needs to improve is broadcasting, and the all-party group has been looking at this subject. The level of media coverage awarded to Scottish sport is regularly a contentious point among sports fans, with claims regularly being made that individual sports in Scotland do not receive the coverage they feel their sport is entitled to. For example, early last year, Scottish football fans took to Twitter to complain that ITV/STV aired the England v. Malta game but did not
air Scotland’s crunch game against Lithuania. STV responded to those complaints saying that it did not have the rights to the match, as they were sold on a UK-wide basis. At the time, STV responded on Twitter by saying:

“Scotland, we hear you.

We’d love to bring you the match, but as football rights are sold UK wide it’s sadly out of our reach!”

The current list of events was drawn up in 1998, more than two decades ago. I fully appreciate that, because of England’s size, the rights for England internationals are commercially viable for commercial public service broadcasters, and that is not the case for Scotland. If Scotland games were added to listed events, the Scottish game, which is not exactly flush with money, might be forced to accept a smaller rights fee package. I hope to address several other issues to do with broadcasting in an upcoming roundtable with partners and broadcasters in Scotland.

Finally, next Tuesday Glasgow Life will present on the impact and legacy of the Glasgow 2014 games. With Birmingham 2022 on the horizon, Members from the midlands may find that interesting. I hope the Minister will confirm that the Scottish Government will receive the full Barnett consequential that should flow from the Birmingham 2022 spending commitments.

In conclusion, the great American football coach Vince Lombardi once said:

“It’s not whether you get knocked down; it’s whether you get up.”

And with that, I’ll get down.

Several hon. Members rose——

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. As colleagues will see, a large number of people want to speak in the debate. The Front-Bench speeches were quite long and I have to impose an immediate five-minute limit. I urge people to be considerate, because that limit may well have to come down.

8.36 pm

Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con): In the spirit of the sporting values of keeping to time, being efficient and delivering on goals, I will try to keep to my five minutes. It was originally going to be a 10-minute oration, of which I was terribly proud, as the new chairman of the all-party group on sport, but that has now obviously bitten the dust.

We are a great sporting nation. We all remember the super Saturday of the 2012 Olympics and Archie Gemmill versus Holland in 1978. I was fortunate enough to be at the World cup semi-final last year. It is obvious that we are sports mad. Some 27 million of us do more than two and a half hours of sport a week. For the nation, sport probably ranks as the No. 1 pastime, of which I was terribly proud, as the new chairman of the all-party group on sport, but that has now obviously bitten the dust.

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When I had the pleasure of being a Minister, for those two glorious years at the Ministry of Justice, I embarked straight away on trying to introduce sport into the criminal justice system as much as possible. To say that when I suggested this I encountered some resistance—a degree of inertia at the Ministry of Justice—would be an understatement. It took me six months to convene my first meeting on sport and its value in the criminal justice system. What was fantastic about that meeting, when it actually took place, were the people who attended—people who were already deploying sport effectively in the criminal justice system. They were trying to help often vulnerable adults and young people to turn their lives around.

There were such inspiring characters at that first meeting, including David Dein, who used to be a director at Arsenal and who, along with Jason Swettenham from Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service, is embarked on a project winning professional football clubs up and down the country with prisons. There was also John McAvoy, an infamous armed robber from an armed-robbing family, who discovered while he was a prisoner that he was an outstanding indoor rower, set a load of world records and is now a Nike-sponsored endurance athlete; and Jane Ashworth at StreetGames, which works in the community to try to dissuade people from committing crime in the first place. These people were putting into practice, via their own hard work, charity and so on, something that I think the Government should have been doing for a long time.

Off the back of that first meeting, we had a second, and I managed to eke together the massive sum of £70,000 to commission a report on the value of sport in the criminal justice system. That report, by Rosie Meek from Royal Holloway College, is worth a read. Anybody who is interested in the value of sport and the impact it can have should read it. It is particularly interesting on the impact of contact sports such as rugby, including the work of Saracens at Feltham, and boxing.

Unfortunately, the Government, and No. 10 in particular, took a rather odd view of the introduction of controlled boxing into controlled circumstances. That view was not backed by any evidence whatsoever, but was driven by the fear of silly headlines in tabloid newspapers.

Boxing in the community—Fight for Peace is a particular example of a charity—is undeniably doing remarkable work in trying to dissuade young people from participating in a life of crime. Anthony Joshua, a classic example of someone who was on remand, turned his life around through boxing. The list of examples of where sport has changed people’s lives is long and continues to grow. If we can bring about a change in our prisons whereby sport plays a significant part in a typical prisoner’s life, we would be doing something remarkable. If we could take prisoners out of the environment in which they find themselves—often locked up, drugged up and so on—and put them into a sporting environment, I am utterly convinced that we could address the rather woeful reoffending levels that we have in the adult male estate, and particularly in the youth estate.

In summary, I am a passionate sports fan. I was alright at sport as well once upon a time. It has made a huge impact on my life, and I just wish that we could use the sporting values of fair play, participation, resilience, hard work and the pursuit of excellence in every aspect of Government policy—in healthcare and education—but I feel particularly passionate about changing the lives of offenders and giving them a second chance.

8.41 pm

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee)
whose evidence at the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee on the report on sport in prisons I very much valued and enjoyed.

My constituency of Cardiff Central, and our capital city as a whole, had the most amazing sporting year last year: Cardiff City got promoted to the premier league; Cardiff Blues won the Challenge Cup; Cardiff Devils won the Elite Ice Hockey League; and Cardiff’s Gemma Thomas won the Tour de France. At the age of 11, Anna Hursey, my constituent, became the youngest competitor in the Commonwealth games, playing table tennis for Wales.

Cardiff University and Cardiff Metropolitan University in my constituency have, for many years, produced world-class sportsmen and women. In cycling, we have Olympic gold medallist Nicole Cooke. In athletics, we have Lynn the leap, the long jumper; and Aled Davies, the Paralympic gold and bronze medallist in the discus and shot. In cricket, we have captain of the World Cup-winning England team Heather Knight, and in basketball, we have Steph Collins, Great Britain’s captain and the most capped basketball player in British history. Of course, in Rugby, we have: Gareth Edwards, Jamie Roberts, Non Evans, JJ Williams, Ryan Jones, Heather Price and my brilliant hon. Friend, the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), who got her first cap for Wales while at Cardiff University and went on to be the most capped basketball player in British history.

Of course, in Rugby, we have: Gareth Edwards, Jamie Roberts, Non Evans, JJ Williams, Ryan Jones, Heather Price and my brilliant hon. Friend, the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), who got her first cap for Wales while at Cardiff University and went on to be the most capped basketball player in British history.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. I would like her to join me and the House in congratulating an ex-pupil of mine, a lady called Alex Callender from Bryngwyn School in Llanelli, who got her first cap for Wales.
I was very pleased that she mentioned referees, although she then mentioned others involved in sport, including hotdog sellers. Many things are said before and after “referee” when people describe me, but I have never heard “hotdog seller” before, so that is a new one. At this point, I remind the House of my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, as a qualified Scottish Football Association referee; I also officiate for UEFA and FIFA.

I want first to focus on a point made by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) about facilities, because facilities are extremely important to all our communities. In the last week, I have raised a number of points about budget cuts, so today I do not want to get into the politics of the budget cuts, who is to blame, and how we can fund things more or less centrally in Scotland or through Westminster.

I want to highlight the major impact that budget cuts are having on facilities in Moray. When our swimming pools in Keith and Lossiemouth are under threat, I stand with the hundreds of campaigners who went to a public meeting in Lossiemouth and are signing petitions to save their swimming pool in Keith.

The Active Schools programme is hugely important in Moray, and a number of parents and others have contacted me since Moray Council has decided to axe the programme. The programme is a partnership between councils and sportscotland, with the aim of promoting more and higher-quality opportunities to take part in sport. In 2017-18, over 90,000 participant sessions in Moray were held through Active Schools, with 35% of all school pupils in Moray participating in the sessions. Some 50% of those in my former council area of the Milne’s associated school group were involved in the Active Schools programme. There are 487 people involved in delivering these sessions, 93% of whom are volunteers.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is talking about budget cuts. In Clackmannanshire, we are facing cuts to Alloa leisure bowls, which is the only remaining public swimming pool in the county. Does he agree that we should be saving and investing in these facilities to give these opportunities to our young and old people, not taking them away?

Douglas Ross: I fully endorse my hon. Friend’s point.

If the Active Schools programme is taken away, that will devastate our communities and our young people. Sportscotland is giving £272,000 in the next financial year to Moray Council to run this and other sports programmes, and that funding is under threat if we ultimately do away with Active Schools.

In speaking about facilities in Moray that face potential closure, I also want to highlight what will be a great addition to our facilities in Moray—Moray sports centre. It will be built in 364 days, and delivered on time and on budget. It will cost £8.4 million, with £8.15 million of that investment coming from the Moray Sports Trust and £250,000 from sportscotland. It will be a great facility with eight courts allowing for regional-level competition in many sports. That is really needed in Moray, as I am sure it is in other communities. Athletes young and old often have to travel to Inverness and, more often, further afield to Aberdeen, to train several times a week, so having a facility like that is a huge breakthrough for sport in Moray. It is more than 30 years since a major new public sports facility was built in Moray. I really pay tribute to Sandy Adam, Kathryn Evans, Grant Wright and everyone else involved in constructing this outstanding facility, which will be opened later this year and will be a huge benefit to the local area.

There are many things that I would like to have spoken about, but time is clearly constrained, so, as a football referee, I want to focus on football and refereeing. We have already heard about the Scottish women’s team qualifying for this year’s World cup in September. That was a great achievement for Scottish sports stars and for our women’s team. I know that everyone in the country will be getting behind the team later this year at the finals. There will also be a derby match between England and Scotland that will, I am sure, allow for interesting debates across the Chamber as it is being played. It is great to see women’s football doing so well in Scotland and across the UK. If I may, I will make a quick pitch for the reception I am hosting on Wednesday night to promote opportunities for women and girls in the football industry. I hope that the Minister, the shadow Minister and the SNP spokesperson could perhaps come to that event. Many people are going to be speaking there, and we really have to do everything we can to promote having more women in football and in sport generally.

On football refereeing, I could speak not just for five minutes but for five hours and maybe even for five days. We do not mention refereeing enough. Without the referees, and indeed the other officials, there is no football. We are quite often derided for our decisions, but it is quite simply the fact, in any sport, that without officials that sport cannot take place. Without a Deputy Speaker in the Speaker’s Chair, this debate cannot take place. That shows how important it is to have someone neutral keeping an eye on the time and on the behaviour of the participants. When I was a Member of the Scottish Parliament, I led a debate on our Scottish officials who had been selected to represent Scotland at Euro 2016. It is important when our sports stars—the men and women who play the sports—qualify for international tournaments, but when we have officials who are selected to represent their country, whether they be tennis umpires or snooker referees, we should celebrate that as well.

8.53 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross). Many community organisations in England would recognise his concern about funding cuts. I come from the constituency that produced Sir Roger Bannister. Members of organisations such as Harrow Athletic Club, Metros Running Club and Jetstream Tri Club pound the paths in Harrow that Sir Roger once trod. I am only too well aware of the funding constraints facing Harrow Council and, indeed, other local authorities.

I want to concentrate the bulk of my remarks on two issues, and if time allows, I will raise one other issue at the end. The first issue is the one I raised in my intervention on the Minister, which is the coverage afforded on television and in the media more generally to women’s sport. As the father of a four-year-old daughter, I have been struck by how little coverage of women’s sport there is on mainstream television. There has been some
improvement of late, and it is certainly true that there is a spike whenever a major women’s championship takes place. However, the highly commendable organisation Women in Sport, which did research into this issue, notes that only 10% of TV sports coverage is dedicated to women’s sport at the moment, compared with 7% across all media. When it looked at a number of countries, it identified that there were more hours of women’s sports coverage in the media in Romania than here in the UK.

It is not as if there is not substantial interest in seeing more coverage of women’s sport. Recently released figures show that there is a growing appetite for watching women’s sport. Indeed, research from specialist data measurement company Nielsen shows that almost 50% of people would watch more women’s sport if it were accessible on free-to-air television, while almost 40% would watch it if it were available online.

If we are to see a significant change, it will come down to Ministers holding the feet of the free-to-air broadcasters to the fire. It would be good to hear more about what the Minister is willing to do in that area. If the free-to-air broadcasters are not willing to move quickly, changes to the licence arrangements may be required to apply the appropriate financial pressure.

I share the view of my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) that reform of the premier league is overdue. There is not enough financial transparency. Our fans do not have enough power to hold owners to account. There certainly is not enough investment from premier league revenues into grassroots sport. If the Football Association has to think about selling our greatest sporting asset—Wembley stadium—to get substantial investment into grassroots sport, that is an indicator that the Premier League is not doing enough. A 10% share of the TV rights that the Premier League secures every year would have raised more than the amount of money that the Football Association hoped to generate for grassroots sport from the sale of Wembley stadium.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) is right to say that not only the Welsh rugby union but a whole series of premier league and championship football clubs could do a lot more to tackle the issue of paying the living wage to the poorest paid workers in sport.

Lastly, there are Indian elections coming up shortly. I raise that in a debate about sport because it would be wonderful to see an Indian premier league match hosted here in the UK. Many of my constituents would welcome the opportunity to see that just as much as American football is enjoyed at Wembley stadium.

8.58 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas). It will come as no surprise to the Minister that I am making the case tonight for a stadium in Cornwall. Dr Caroline Court, director of Public Health Cornwall, said in Cornwall’s physical activity strategy:

“Physical activity is a key component in improving the health of the local population... Working together with sectors such as education, sport and leisure, planning, transport and economic development, we can achieve a step change for the health and prosperity of all of Cornwall’s residents.”

Mike Thomas, the director of Cornwall Sports Partnership, wrote:

“Inactivity is a stubborn long-standing problem, which without intervention is not going to go away. We cannot afford to be complacent and the situation could get worse. Opportunities to be active in everyday life are engineered out of our lives and older residents in Cornwall spend longer in ill health than in other parts of the country.”

Mr Thomas—no relation—concluded:

“Never has the need to reduce inactivity levels in Cornwall been more urgent.”

The vision statement for Cornwall Sports Partnership reads:

“The vision is a future where everybody in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly is active as part of daily life, regardless of age, gender, culture or circumstance.”

Its 2020 target is that 50,000 more people in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly will be more physically active as part of daily life by 2020. Its strategy has five key themes: physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, individual development, social and community development, and economic growth. At the time of writing the strategy in 2016, 42% of children aged five to 15 in Cornwall were described as inactive—42%—and 28% of adults were described as inactive.

Hon. Members can see why so many of us in Cornwall are working so hard to deliver the stadium for Cornwall project. What is the stadium for Cornwall? It will be a multi-use sports and education facility, and a centre for the promotion of health and wellbeing across the duchy. It will be the permanent home of Cornish Pirates and Truro City FC, with an accessible location, all-weather pitch, improved facilities, and the sharing of costs will put both clubs on a long-term sustainable footing.

There will be 180 days of community-based sport on an all-weather pitch. Meanwhile, a new sports and leisure suite, to be managed by Greenwich Leisure, will meet the strong and growing demand in the surrounding districts.

What have we been doing to deliver the stadium? In 2009, I was involved in and part of a working group on developing the scheme. In 2015, we caught the attention of the Conservative Government, and we were promised Government support to deliver the stadium. Direct central Government funding is needed. This ambitious and much-needed stadium for Cornwall project is requesting just £3 million of Government money to unlock a further £11 million. The Minister has been clear this evening that this Government are committed to the health and wellbeing of everyone and to reducing demand on NHS and care services where possible.

It is important that the Government get behind this stadium because the Cornwall Sports Partnership is nowhere near delivering the extra 50,000 more people in the Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly being more physically active as part of daily life. It is already accepted that the geography of Cornwall presents challenges for access to sport and that Cornwall is not receiving its fair share. Sport England acknowledged just last month that there is a rural location factor and that access to and between facilities is a real issue in Cornwall. It also acknowledged that there has not been the same investment in Cornwall as in other parts of the country.

The stadium for Cornwall project is committed to delivering better health outcomes, improving the lives of vulnerable adults and families, improving the physical and mental health of children and young people and
increasing the aspiration of young people, especially those who are disadvantaged. Those of us who have been engaged in the project for some time recognise that there is significant political will for the stadium to be built. We are also confident that this is a sound investment for the Government, because it provides an opportunity to improve the health and wellbeing of tens of thousands of people of all ages across the duchy.

Those who have been involved in the stadium for Cornwall project for a long time believe that the Government would welcome the opportunity to back and fund this initiative, but we are also perplexed. Given the positive case I have set before the House today, I cannot pretend that the stadium for Cornwall partners are not frustrated by the hurdles we are having to jump over and perplexed by the hoops we are having to jump through to secure just 20% of the funding for an initiative that delivers on something at the heart of the need to reduce inactivity levels in Cornwall been Government funding.

I remind the House and the Minister that never has the need to reduce inactivity levels in Cornwall been more urgent. Will the Minister please take note of this challenge and do whatever is in her capacity to deliver this sound investment for Cornwall’s health and wellbeing?

9.3 pm

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas). I look forward to going to see Yorkshire play Cornwall, one day in the future, at that new stadium in Cornwall. I intend to take as my mantra for my few remarks tonight the words of the hon. Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), who is no longer in his place. He charged us all to be cheerful and look on the bright side tonight, so that is what I want to do.

As you may remember, Madam Deputy Speaker, I warned the House during the Christmas Adjournment debate that the future of Keighley Cougars rugby league team was at stake. The team that first brought razzmatazz to rugby league was in danger of going under. However, the first good news that I can bring to the House is that Keighley Cougars are now back in safe hands, having been sold to Mick O’Neill and the consortium that first brought razzmatazz to rugby league 20 years ago. Keighley are an example of a community club that really helps to define a town. I hope that the years to come are good ones and that we can redevelop the site as a whole sporting site, with the Cougars next to Keighley cricket club.

Various speakers have mentioned the soft power of sport. We have heard about the soft power of the premier league. I speak as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Mongolia, as you well know, Madam Deputy Speaker—you have entertained Mongolian visitors on my behalf. There are 1,000 members of the Liverpool supporters club in Mongolia who will be gripped tonight watching West Ham and Liverpool—[Interruption.] I have not yet heard the score, although someone mentioned that it was 1-1 slightly earlier on.

Parkrun has also been mentioned, and that is soft power as well. It started in the United Kingdom, and it has now spread to 20 countries. It reached Keighley last year. The average time for the average parkrun has gone up to 29 minutes and 30 seconds, as more people, and different members of the community, have embraced the parkrun. My average time is slightly faster than that, even though we have three hills to climb on our parkrun in Keighley. So that is another reason to be cheerful.

Canoeing has not been mentioned tonight. I can reveal exclusively that, together with my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) and colleagues from across the House, I will be tabling an extremely important motion about canoeing tomorrow. In Scotland, people can canoe wherever they like. In England and Wales, there are 42,000 miles of inland waterways, but people have uncontested access to only 1,500 of them. That is unfinished business from the right to roam legislation. In many countries in the world people can canoe, and canoeing is also a great Olympic sport. I would like Ministers to have a look at that issue.

I want to finish on sports broadcasting, which has been mentioned quite a lot tonight. Incidentally, we can look forward to the women’s netball world championships and the women’s football world championships live on free-to-air TV later this year. However, one thing we should be proud of in our country is the listed events regulations. They are an intervention in the market, and I think they are supported by all parties. There are reasons to look again at them to see whether we need to extend them. For example, there is not one women’s team sport on the list. The women’s World cup is on free-to-air TV this year, but as it becomes more popular, it may become tempting to subscription broadcasters.

The Six Nations has been mentioned very much tonight. Last week, it appeared that it was under threat and that it could have gone off to Amazon or Google, in a deal that would have created a new world rugby championships—I thought we had the world cup in rugby and that we did not really need a new one. The good news is that, over this weekend, the chief executive of the Six Nations has confirmed that he wants to keep the tournament on BBC and ITV. He sees value in that in terms of uniting the nations. I commend the Sports Minister on speaking out about this at Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions last week. I hope those on the Labour Front Bench—there was no mention of listed events from Labour Front Benchers earlier—will mention them in summing up.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a national tragedy that we will have an Ashes series this year—14 years after the magnificent 2005 victory—that will not be on free-to-air television? Is it not about time that cricket realised how much this has cost cricket since that summer?

John Grogan: My hon. Friend makes a great point. To be fair to the England and Wales Cricket Board—the cricketing authorities—I think it is now beginning to realise how much this has cost cricket since that summer in 2005, when the Ashes were, I think, on Channel 4. There was a spike in the number of people participating in cricket. I think the latest figures from Sport England suggest that there are now a third fewer participants in cricket, and that is because it has disappeared. A photo of Joe Root—despite the weekend’s results, perhaps the greatest living Yorkshireman—was shown to a group of schoolchildren not so long ago with that of a World Wide wrestler. Very few of them recognised Joe Root; they all recognised the World Wide wrestler, and that is because of the power of television. One good thing, however, is that some T20 cricket is coming to the BBC next year.
Finally, there is one commitment the Minister could give, either now or in the future, in relation to free-to-air coverage. There has been a lot of talk about bidding for the men’s 2030 World Cup. The last time there was a bid for the World Cup, the Government headed by Gordon Brown was pressurised by FIFA. It was insistent that for England to have any chance of getting the World Cup we would have to scrap our listed events legislation as it applied to the World Cup whereby every game would be free to air. But FIFA is now under new management and I hope Ministers will make it clear at the very start of the negotiations that if the World Cup is to be in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, it will be live and free on free-to-air TV.

9.10 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

I had written a 300-page speech to bang on about sports, so I have had to cut it down significantly. Nobody has mentioned my favourite sport of hockey, so I will take the opportunity to do so. In 20 years as a player—I used to be all right, but my knees cannot take it anymore—as a coach and now as a chairman of a hockey club, I have seen the changes that have taken place in the sport. England Hockey has worked to make the sport more inclusive and accessible, with initiatives such as “Back to Hockey” for older players, Quicksticks and walking hockey. In recent years, there has been a massive growth in participation. Hockey is not unique, but it is a rare example of a sport played equally by both men and women, and with equal coverage.

There has been a huge growth in the number of under-16 players, particularly girls. That is no doubt due to the massive success in the 2016 Rio Olympics, where the GB ladies won the gold medal. Since then, participation has gone through the roof. In my mind, that gold medal and England’s netball success in last year’s Commonwealth games are huge sporting highlights. It was a great privilege to see how that affected people—watching sport live and free to air on TV had an impact across the piece. I talked to people about hockey who would never normally have taken an interest. I have had the great privilege of playing alongside some of the ladies at junior level at Belper hockey club, including Hollie Webb who scored the winning penalty in the final. They are an incredibly inspirational bunch of people.

I would like to raise with the Minister the big challenge of playing surfaces. There has been a massive expansion in the number of 3G pitches—the Football Foundation’s investment in Mansfield is very welcome—but hockey cannot be played on a 3G pitch. A lot of local authorities do not seem to recognise that. My own club is looking to acquire land and construct a new 3G pitch, but that is not possible given the type of surface that the hockey community requires.

I want to raise a couple of points about football and the English Football League. The arguments are well-rehearsed so I will not go into great detail, but safe standing has been mentioned. It seems strange to me that we can have existing terraces in football stadiums, but new ones cannot be brought in. Scotland has allowed clubs to introduce safe standing. Celtic trialled it and did so successfully. I would love to be able to see that in EFL clubs across England. It would provide the opportunity to bring in more revenue, which is so important for the clubs. We should definitely look into that, and I welcome the Government’s willingness to review it.

The other thing is alcohol served during games. The opportunity for smaller clubs, and the Chancellor, to bring in that additional revenue could be really positive. In rugby, we see—even when games are in the stadiums that are shared with football teams—that the money spent in the club is more than double the amount spent for football. Some of that is based on being able to purchase alcohol in the stadium. I do not see how it is that much safer to tank up before a game and down a pint at half-time than it is to be able to drink sensibly throughout a game.

I also want to mention Powerchair football, which we have in my constituency at West Notts College. It involves electric wheelchairs controlled, in some cases, only by a thumb. It is an incredible, life-changing thing. Ricky Stevenson, who is now chair of the international Powerchair football federation, is from Warsop in my constituency. I urge the FA and the Government to support that sport—it is a real inspiration—as much as possible. There is an awful lot more that I would like to say, and I have a vast list here—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order.

Ben Bradley: But I am forced to stop, so I will not say it.

Madam Deputy Speaker: After the next speaker, I will take the time limit down to four minutes.

9.15 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Since I have hardly got any voice, I might not make the five minutes—and I do have a cough. I might say to the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands). I am only going to speak about concussion in sport.
My doctor has told me that I should not really be here tonight, but I care about this issue passionately, so I want to speak about it.

On 19 January 2002, Jeff Astle died. He was a very famous player for West Bromwich Albion. When the coroner came to examine his brain, it was decided that he had died from heading the ball. It was termed an industrial injury and yet, still today, we have made remarkably little headway.

Ben Robinson died on 29 January 2011. He was just 14 years old. He had had concussion and then went on to play again, and later that day, or two days later, he was pronounced dead at the local hospital because he had suffered from double impact syndrome, where effectively, the brain sort of explodes inside the head. His family have done an amazing job, as have Jeff Astle’s family, in trying to keep the issue of concussion in sport alive.

There have been many recent issues. Last May, the 17-year-old Adrien Descrulhes died after a head injury in France. Also in May last year, the 18-year-old Canadian, Brodie McCarthy, was killed in a rugby match. In December, Nicolas Chauvin, an 18-year-old student at Paris Descartes University—he was a flanker in the academy at Stade Français—was also killed following a similar accident. That is one of the reasons why the French rugby union is campaigning for changes in the sport, which I think we need to listen to very carefully.

If anybody saw the Chelsea versus Bournemouth match the other day, they would have seen David Luiz, the Brazilian player, receive the ball very hard on the head. Interestingly, some of the spectators sort of revelled in the violence of that moment. One person wrote:

“Poor old David Luiz getting a bullet in the mush seems very popular with a lot of your following”—meaning the opposite team. He said “Terrible” and then he added:

“Must admit did a thumbs up myself.”

This is one of the problems. In some sport at the moment, there is a kind of glorification of such violent moments, and we need to think very carefully about that.

In the United Arab Emirates match against Australia in the Asian cup quarter final, Fares Juma Al Saadi clashed heads with Mathew Leckie, and then he went back on. He then played a few days later in another match and even the players’ union, FIFPro, questioned whether the protocols had been properly adhered to.

The significance of this, first and foremost, is that there is still remarkably little understanding of chronic traumatic encephalopathy, which is the steady acquisition of more damage to the brain by virtue of lots of small concussions. Individual events may not have done an enormous amount of harm, but they may over time.

I have a terrible fear that many of my constituents who have played rugby many, many times and have been concussed many, many times, who are now in their old age or in their middle age and who worry about fatigue, concussion, in many people’s minds, is what happens when someone is knocked unconscious, but that is about 10% of concussions. There are a lot of other different symptoms from concussion, so it is very misunderstood.

In youth sport, concussion rates are 18 times higher in rugby, five times higher in hockey and twice as high in American football—those are USA figures. Unfortunately, when I asked the Government for statistics for this country, I was told there were none, which means we have no idea how many concussions there are in sport at the moment. Some sports are getting better, but the Government do not keep the information. It is important that we change that.

My impression is that football is making progress only because it is terrified of litigation, which is a terrible mistake—it should care about the players for heaven’s sake! Research funding is minimal in this field, and as for the protocols in football, it is preposterous that, although the Football Association and the premiership have made some strides in recent years, FIFA still does not allow subs to come on, as happens in rugby. Subs are necessary because it takes 10 minutes to do a proper assessment at the pitch side. It cannot be done in three minutes, and any ref who thinks it can is living in cloud cuckoo land, and dangerously so. Players and coaches often think they know best, but the only person who knows best is a doctor, who knows what they are talking about. If in doubt, sit them out. We can save lives and people’s brains.

9.20 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant).

Sport has many forms. As far back as 1770, a racecourse was established in Ayr, and the sport of horse-racing has remained a local economic driver to this day. The present day Ayr racecourse is a modern venue with approximately 24 race meetings each year, including the prestigious Ayr gold cup and the Scottish grand national. It is Scotland’s premier racecourse. The racecourse and the sport of horse-racing generates income for the town, creates employment in the stables, grounds, catering outlets and so on, and affords invaluable work experience in various disciplines.

Today being World Cancer Day, it is interesting and a pleasure to note that Ayr racecourse has in the past supported race days for the local hospice and, I am sure, will do so in the future. It is also a changing venue. It holds ladies’ nights and special themed days for families, and so on. It has become a very enjoyable day out.

Scottish Racing’s economic impact study in 2016 established that more people went to racing than visited golf tournaments and rugby matches. The total attendance at Scottish racing in 2016 was over 300,000, with almost a third attending Ayr racecourse. Ayr racecourse generates more than £25 million per annum for the local economy—not an insignificant sum—and supports a significant number of local jobs in the community.

My constituency has a proud sporting tradition. Annually, we host the bowls Scotland national championships at Northfield and there is Cambusdoon cricket club, a very healthy cricket club. Former England cricket captain Mike Denness was from Alloway and educated at Ayr Academy. Ayr United football club is currently excelling in the league, although its pursuit of the Scottish cup came to an abrupt halt when a healthy and robust local junior team, Auchinleck Talbot, knocked them out—a wee red face for Ayr United, but well done to Auchinleck Talbot!
We also have golf, not least Turnberry—now known as Trump Turnberry, after its famous owner—which held the 1977 open championship and its famous “duel in the sun” between Tom Watson and Jack Nicklaus. We have a healthy rugby scene in my constituency, at Cumnock and Millbrae and Ayr. I commend Carrick Academy, in Maybole, for its range of healthy young rugby teams, covering all ages and genders. I give full credit to that school for bringing on the young ones in sport, particularly rugby, a sport that, through the British Lions, brings our UK nations together every four years to tour Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

My constituency also has swimming. Cumnock pool, New Cumnock pool, Britain’s newest, finest and warmest open-air pool, and Girvan and Ayr pools have gained popularity with locals, and it is a lovely area for cycling, too, while Scotland, being quite unique, also has curling, a sport suitable for all ages and genders. As a Scot, it would be remiss of me not also to mention the successes of Andy Murray, an exemplar in the field of tennis. Along with, I am sure, the whole House, I wish him a full and speedy recovery.

Such sports give people an ideal opportunity to engage with each other at a time when Governments and the NHS fear that some sections of the population are becoming insular and isolated to the potential detriment of their health, not least given the challenges of obesity.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Gentleman’s time is up.

9.24 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Let me begin by mentioning a great sports club in my constituency, Glasgow Warriors, which is currently second in the Guinness Pro14 League. No doubt it will take the top spot very soon. It shares its ground at Scotstoun, which is round the corner from my house, with Victoria Park athletics club. Both clubs are involved in great schools outreach activities in an attempt to engage young people who would not normally have experience of their sports.

I am now going to make a rather controversial statement which may cost me some votes: I am not a fan of football. There are many reasons for that, but one thing that bothers me is the reporting of it, which dominates television and the print media. I heard a Member say earlier that 10% of written reports were about female sport. I find that hard to believe, because I regularly look through the sports pages just out of principle to see how many articles there are about women. The reporting is pretty much all about football, and it is almost entirely male.

That has serious implications for the health and wellbeing of girls in particular. We know that teenage girls are far more likely to drop out of sport than boys. They are not seeing role models. They are not seeing girls like them succeed in various sports. It is great to hear about the increased participation of women in, for instance, football, rugby and cricket, but more traditional girls’ sports such as gymnastics, dancing, swimming and athletics do not receive much coverage.

Many people will not know that I was a gymnastics coach for a number of years, and coached at elite level. The hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) spoke of the difficulties experienced by those who did not have support. That is absolutely true: without parental and financial support, it is almost impossible for young people to participate in elite sport. They need their parents to run them to the venues, and to pay the costs of lessons and competitions.

However, there is also a big role for recreational sports, and sports for people with additional needs. As the Soviets knew when they were great at gymnastics, the more people participate in sport, the more excellence rises to the top of the pyramid, so we need to increase participation. There is a very special club in my constituency, the Glasgow Eagles sports club in Drumchapel. Its specialities are basketball and table tennis, but it is a club for people with additional needs, and it has done a great deal of work with autistic adults. It deals with mass participation, but the mass participation of people with special needs.

I think it is important for us also to recognise the dark side of sport. We know that in the past paedophiles have used sports coaching to groom young children. I urge every Member to support the Close the Loophole campaign by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which is ensuring that 16 and 17-year-olds are given the same protection as younger children, particularly in areas such as sport, in which relationships can develop over a long period.

9.29 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Sport has always been an integral part of my life, and I hope that I have passed that on to my children. I first picked up a tennis racket when I was 11, and I hope that I will play until I am 80. That is one of the great aspects of such sports.

In the few minutes available to me, I want to focus on women in sport. For too long, women have been the underdogs. In schools, boys got all the glory—the blazers, the badges, the awards—but I am pleased to say that that has started to change. Women’s participation in the Olympics increased from 23% in 1984 to 46% in 2016. In Rio, women won more medals in a great many sports than the men, including, rowing, swimming, taekwondo, field hockey and judo. Winning gold in the women’s hockey in the London 2012 Olympics gave a huge boost to women’s hockey. Taunton Vale hockey club is testament to that. It is the eighth largest hockey club in the country, with six women’s teams. The talented women in our UK netball team, by winning gold in the Commonwealth games in 2018, have stimulated women to play netball: 130,000 women have taken up netball since April 2018, which has led BBC and Sky to announce a deal to broadcast every minute of the world cup. Taunton boasts a very good netball club—Taunton netball club—which I cannot let pass without a mention.

I was extremely heartened at a recent meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on cricket, of which I am a proud member, to hear Tom Harrison, chief executive of the England and Wales Cricket Board, say that women’s cricket is the biggest growth area in cricket: howzat, Mr Speaker! I have a daughter who played for Somerset, so I have spent a great amount of time following cricket. Well done to Clare Connor, director of England women’s cricket, who really is proving that we can move on in this area.
I am very proud to say that Somerset county cricket club will host the women’s Ashes this year. All my colleagues are invited, but I would particularly like to extend an invitation to the Minister. The matches will bring untold riches to the economy in Taunton Deane, and introduce many more people to the amazing style and performance of the women’s game.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I am going to do something completely different from all the other speakers and speak about country sports and shooting. That is the subject that I want to put on record in Hansard.

As well as supporting those sports, I am a dedicated conservationist. Back home on the family farm, I am always thinking of new ways to conserve the habitat. I have planted over 3,500 trees, and dug two duck ponds. There is a purpose in that, to be honest, and we also maintain the hedgerows. Not only does that maintain the natural habitat but it encourages new habitats. In the past few years, we have seen the return of the yellowhammer, a bird that is much sought after in the UK, and birds of prey.

Surprisingly, shooting is worth £2 billion to the UK economy and supports the equivalent of 74,000 jobs. In these uncertain times, it is a sector that is proving its popularity and it is important to participants. It is estimated that shooters spend £2.5 billion each year on goods and services, and shoot providers spend around £250 million each year on conservation. People who participate in shooting manage 10 times more land for conservation than the country’s nature reserves. Undoubtedly, for many people, country sports play an integral part in society.

In Northern Ireland, we excel at many sports, but at two in particular: boxing and shooting. I am never sure why that is—perhaps it is because they are contact sports, but perhaps it is for other reasons. I am proud of the shooting sports in the UK and of the benefits that they bring for individual discipline as well as for group participation and team building. Shooting is not only a hobby but a necessity for many jobs. It is also a competitive sport for the shooters from the UK who take part in a variety of domestic and international competitions. At least 600,000 people in the UK shoot live quarry, clay pigeons or targets every year, including some 280,000 people who take part in clay pigeon shooting and 168,000 people who take part in small or full bore rifle shooting. They are a tremendous group of people who enjoy the sport and the community of being involved in the sport together. I often feel that many people do not give the sport the respect that it deserves. My local shooting club, at Carradore in my constituency, hosts a charitable event called the Swaziland cup, where amateurs and professionals come together to win the cups and raise hundreds of pounds for the children of Swaziland. The club also hosts the little choir when people come for an afternoon of safe fun and good food. I have never won the Swaziland cup, but maybe next year I will.

There is so much good being done by the shooting community and the sport is a way of keeping body and mind healthy and together. I recently read an article that listed some of the benefits. For example, it builds core strength. The Minister said earlier that sports can make us physically fitter and more mentally alert. Shooting builds core strength and helps us to build our centre. Adjusting our body weight to the balls of our feet and remaining still in our shooting stance is great exercise for our core muscles, which support proper posture. Arm strength, mental processing and efficient problem-solving are major components of shooting. It encompasses all the things the Minister referred to, including adrenaline, mental focus, stamina, running through stages, carrying heavy gear and often navigating over uneven terrain with challenging props. Practical shooting requires fitness and stamina to run between arrays, to focus on our front sight, to think about our trigger press and to control our breathing. Stress relief and a vision training mindset are all things that the Minister referred to in her introduction, and they can all be achieved through participating in shooting sports.

Shooting is certainly a sport at which we can excel. Northern Ireland does well in it, as do Scotland, Wales, England and the Isle of Man, when given the opportunity. I want to use this opportunity to express my disappointment that shooting was not included in Birmingham 2022 as an essential part of the Commonwealth games. Shooting is a great sport, whether out in the countryside or at a range, and we must send the message to the Commonwealth committee that its inclusion is vital to the integrity of the Commonwealth games.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): In 1979, David Jones, the janitor at St Cadoc’s Primary School in Newton Mearns, coached his team of 14 primary 7 schoolboys to the first of three consecutive mini world cups at Overlee playing fields in Clarkston. That was the beginning of a remarkable local legacy, which over the next 20 years saw the team grow to include around 50 pupils from three year groups. By 2004, teams included...
all seven years of the primary school. A couple of years later, the primary school team had evolved into a local club, with more than 250 registered players from over 10 different schools. Continuing its growth beyond those foundations as a school football team, the club converted to a registered charity, whose aim is “to encourage public participation in sport”.

As of December 2018, 900 registered girls and boys now play netball or football for the club each weekend. Recognising the value of sporting activities to local kids, fees are kept as low as possible and the club also operates a hardship policy to ensure that every child can participate, no matter what their family circumstances might be.

Backed by an incredible team of volunteers, the club continues to go from strength to strength. St Cadoc’s is an incredible example of a small school team growing into a true community-wide organisation benefiting hundreds of local kids each week, but it also needs a bit of help. It has exhausted local facilities and, with its size and ambition, it has reached the limit of what is possible. This has meant putting on hold its community outreach programme, which it had hoped to launch as soon as possible. The programme will take St Cadoc’s to the next level in its work in the community, providing wheelchair football at the local special needs school, walking football for the elderly, and specialist sessions for children and young adults with Down’s syndrome.

On 28 April 2019, the club will attempt to complete 5,000 miles in 12 hours at Eastwood high school in Newton Mearns to raise the money it needs to deliver its outreach programme for the entire community, and that is where I and—whether by agreement or force—my wonderful constituency office team will be helping out, completing a few miles ourselves to help the club to reach its goal. St Cadoc’s youth club rightly has a place in the heart of the East Renfrewshire community, and in my view it is precisely the sort of grassroots club that in the heart of the East Renfrewshire community, and in my view it is precisely the sort of grassroots club that underpins the health and wellbeing of our young people, and the success of our great nation in sport.

I would also like to take this opportunity to mention an important professional sporting event taking place this week. For the first time in 26 years, Great Britain will host a home tie in the Federation cup, the women’s equivalent of the Davis cup tennis competition. The team of Jo Konta, Heather Watson, Katie Boulter, Harriet Dart and Katie Swan, captained by former British No. 1, Ann Keotha vong, will compete against Harriet Dart and Katie Swan, captained by former team of Jo Konta, Heather Watson, Katie Boulter, equivalent of the Davis cup tennis competition. The

we are very proud of what he has done to carry Scotland’s saltire into international arenas. I think I can say, without fear of contradiction, that that is also true of Opposition Members.

It is an enormous privilege to be the Member of Parliament for Stirling, and that privilege takes on even more gloriousness when we consider the contribution that Stirling makes to the sporting life of the United Kingdom. We have already heard about Sir Andy Murray, but Stirling has also produced other great competitors, such as the legendary Billy Bremner. Who can forget how fierce a competitor he was in football? We also have Gary and Steven Caldwell, the famous brothers—by the way, we bought their parents’ house from them. We also have the renowned jockey, Willie Carson, who is also a star of “A Question of Sport” and “I’m a Celebrity...Get Me Out of Here!”

Anna Sloan is also from Stirling, and she is Scotland’s pride in curling, which I am glad to have heard mentioned so often. The Scottish National Curling Academy is based at the Peak in Stirling and has produced Olympic and Commonwealth gold for Team GB and for Scotland. The Stirling Smith Museum has the oldest curling stone in the world, dating from 1511, and we also have the oldest football in the world, which was found in the rafters of Stirling castle and dates from the time of Mary Queen of Scots.

That is the history, but Stirling also has a proud football tradition. We have Stirling Albion and other great clubs, such as Milton football club, which is based in Bannockburn and plays in the Scottish Amateur Football Association’s Caledonian League and does fantastic work with the community.

When it comes to swimming, Stirling is a superpower. If Stirling had been a country at the Commonwealth games, we would have been in the top five for medals in swimming and 17th in the overall medal table, ahead of 23 other countries.

Basketball has been mentioned a few times. The Stirling Knights have won 19 national titles and produced 30 players for Scotland. They are winners. They have won the Scottish cup, the league cup and a youth tournament in Spain.

Stirling County is an incredible rugby club with an incredible legacy and tradition. It has produced great players for Scotland and has a big Scottish cup game with Hawick. I think, a week on Saturday.

Let me pause on Stirling county cricket club, because I have an affection for that particular institution. My son Jared played cricket for Stirling county. I pay tribute, as did the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), to the people who make sport happen in our communities. I want to mention specifically Raymond Bond, who for years and years nurtured the talent of young people in Stirling to play cricket. It is people like Raymond Bond whom I pay tribute to in my speech tonight. They are the people who make this country the superpower that it is when it comes to sport. We should nurture that in our constituencies.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point about people who volunteer and get things going. Will he also congratulate Ammar Ashraf, the community engagement co-ordinator for Cricket Scotland, who is doing an awful lot to bring people into the sport in communities?
Stephen Kerr: Cricket is a fantastic sport for developing so many of the qualities that one needs to be successful in any avenue in life, so I am only too happy to join in that tribute. We should celebrate those who make sport happen—the volunteers, the coaches, the people who give selflessly of their time and their talents in order to foster the talent and enjoyment of others in sport.

Mr Speaker: I call Kevin Foster, who must sit down before 9.48 pm.

9.44 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): That is noted, Mr Speaker. Thank you for calling me to speak in this debate, and it is a pleasure to have a short time to make some observations about the varied role of sport in Torbay. Sport is the life of the constituency I represent.

It is worth starting with Torquay United who, bluntly, after some rather lean seasons have recently been enjoying more pleasant times for them and their fans. A potential move from Plainmoor—the historical stadium still has a terrace, on which I sometimes stand—to a new stadium is being debated. One thing that disappointed me when we met the club, which will be of no surprise to anyone at the local paper, is the lack of even the most basic details about exactly what it plans to do. It is right that the council has indicated it will engage constructively, but councillors have been right to resist a formal agreement until the plan is much clearer on a range of issues, including whether the indicated site, Nightingale Park, can be built on. Surprisingly, that issue has not yet been rectified.

Speaking of new stadiums, the Minister will know that my background is in Coventry, where the Ricoh arena was built. I have heard the comments this evening about whether people should again be able to sell alcohol in the stands at football matches, or whether we should revert to new forms of standing. I would give the cautionary tale that many Coventry City fans will recall an infamous FA cup fixture at Hillsborough a couple of years before the disaster that followed. Many of those fans feel they had a pre-experience of the disaster, and the lessons were not learned. Any changes to the rules that were brought in after the disaster must be carefully considered and evidence-based—we should not just debate what might sound good on the Floor of the House. I am confident the Minister will follow the approach I suggest.

I have a great deal of time for a raft of voluntary sports clubs in Torbay. Paignton rugby football club, the Cherries, are doing a great job of getting more youth teams playing and getting involved in rugby. Cary Park tennis club is doing a lot of work on the intergenerational experience of sport by having days for grandparents and grandchildren to come and play on its new facilities. The clubhouse has been expanded, and the club is making tennis very accessible. I am sure the club would welcome you, Mr Speaker, if you fancied popping down for a game.

We have Barton cricket club, where Agatha Christie kept score under a tree that we have sadly lost in storms over the years. The club is still there and is still playing a vital part in the local community. The former editor of the Herald Express, Jim Parker, has dedicated decades to supporting the club.

When most people hear about rowing, they will instantly think of a lake, but the guys and girls at Paignton and Torquay rowing clubs go out on the sea, which is a remarkable spectacle.

Finally, I pay tribute to the army of volunteers across Torbay who help to make many of these clubs function by giving up their time to help the people develop towards their goals, and only for the satisfaction of knowing they have made a difference to local people. Without them, the sporting life in our bay would be a lot less and our community would be a lot poorer.

9.48 pm

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the many Members on both sides of the House who have contributed to such an important debate. On my own side, my hon. Friends the Members for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), for Keighley (John Grogan) and for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) each gave heartfelt speeches focusing in particular on giving a bigger voice to fans and on equality issues in sport, from pay to participation.

I cannot take part in this debate without mentioning Crystal Palace football club in my constituency. It is known as a club that reaches out and plays a full part in the wider community. This winter, with homelessness soaring to record levels and temperatures plunging below freezing, Crystal Palace have opened the doors of Selhurst Park to provide food and shelter for people sleeping rough, which shows us that our top clubs offer much more than just sport. They are part of the fabric of our society, and they deserve recognition for that fact.

We have heard much this evening, and rightly so, about the importance of grassroots sport and sport for all, yet this is an area where funding cuts have had the greatest impact. ITV News reports that local authority sports funding is down by £400,000 in London alone over just five years. Councils are struggling to cope with Government funding cuts of up to 80% since 2010, at a time when demand for high-cost statutory services like social care is rising, the result of which is severe cuts to non-statutory services, including grassroots sports.

The Government’s latest plans to remove deprivation levels from what they are, I presume, ironically calling the fair funding formula will slash what remains of grassroots sports in our most deprived communities. These are the communities where violent crime is rising fastest. There is ample evidence that diversionary activities for young people prevent those most at risk from getting involved in crime, yet this Government run the risk of further driving up violent youth crime with a perverse approach of targeting their harshest cuts on our very poorest communities.

Towards the end of last year, the Government trumpeted their new loneliness strategy. Sports are some of the most effective ways to tackle loneliness among young people, yet grassroots sport funding is facing yet more cuts. The simple truth is that the Government will not make any impact on issues such as loneliness if they keep cutting the very things that allow communities to tackle loneliness.

Last summer, the Government published their obesity strategy. The King’s Fund points out that about a third of children under 15 in the UK are overweight or obese. It tells us that children are becoming obese at an earlier
age and staying obese for longer and that children from lower-income households are more than twice as likely to be obese as those in higher-income households. The Government’s reaction to that so far has been negligent. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting has previously pointed out, in the past two years alone, Government cuts have seen 100 swimming pools drained, 12 athletics tracks closed, 350 sports halls shut and 800 grass pitches sold off. How are we, as a country, to tackle this health and inequalities crisis if the Government allow grassroots and community sports to disappear at this rate?

Sport has the power to tackle some of the great challenges of our age, whether loneliness, obesity or mental ill health, yet the Government have chosen to cut sport to the bone. Sport can help to prevent these problems. Spending on grassroots sport is not money down the drain; it is a sensible investment that saves money in the long run by keeping people healthy and bringing our communities back together. The Government need to match their warm words tonight with action. They need to get serious about the power, impact and importance of sport for all of our communities.

Mr Speaker: Has the hon. Gentleman finished his contribution?

Mr Reed: I have, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: It was very brief. I call the Minister, who need not feel obliged to speak until 10 o’clock, as I know she made a very full contribution earlier.

9.52 pm

Mims Davies: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members and friends from around the Chamber for their contributions this evening. We heard 36 contributions, excluding those made from the Front Bench. I know some were very full, but I felt, three months into the job, that they were important in putting matters on the record, and I took 21 interventions. I hope therefore that Members will feel that they have had a chance to participate this evening.

The hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) rightly pointed out the need to focus on school sport, and our new school sport plan will look at the quality and quantity of sport in schools. The Government give £320 million a year to the PE premium to support PE and sport in primary schools. I want to make sure that that is used well. We also heard about the closing of swimming pools and facilities. Facilities are extremely important, and Sport England is investing £40 million in its strategic facilities fund and £15 million in its community asset fund to help local communities and local people find the facilities they need. She mentioned our Foreign and Commonwealth Office colleagues and the concerning issue regarding Hakeem. FIFA, too, has expressed concerns, and I know that we will be working with colleagues to hear these worries about his treatment.

Concerns were raised about gambling advertising, and I want to address this very broadly. Since I have taken on this role, I have had roundtables with both the betting and gambling industry, and I have met the Gambling Commission and Gambling with Lives. We are making sure that a responsible gambling message runs through all our messaging, so we make sure we are protecting our vulnerable people and make sure the industry listens and works with us. We have seen that with the whistle-to-whistle changes. The Gambling Commission has toughened up and will be using sanctions. It does have the teeth and needs to use them. We have had several conversations about that.

The hon. Gentleman also talked about perhaps our greatest ever sportsman, Sir Andy Murray. If retirement is where he is headed, we wish him well, but I am sure that he will not be kept quiet.

My hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) spoke about the power of sport and physical activity and the good that they can do for mental health. Sport England has funded the Get Set to Go programme, in partnership with Mind, and it has received £3 million since 2014. We also launched the mental health and elite sport action plan last year to help to bolster the support for our top-level sports people and allow them to think about their future. I will be part of the Bring it to Burton campaign, because I will be coming to Burton, as requested.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about the importance of country sports and their practicality and about how we can all excel at sport. That just shows the power of sport: there is something there for everyone, and we should not rule anything in or out. Give it a go, because we do not know what we do not know. It is absolutely right that we talk about the whole breadth of sports in the UK.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) told us about the superpower of swimming and about Stirling Knights basketball club. Again, that shows how, up and down the land, we demonstrate all different powers and abilities through sport.

I could go on, and I will, because I feel it is important. I was pleased to hear the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) talk about the importance of body image and thinking beyond that to the power of sport for women and girls. I have previously spoken about the need to focus on opportunities for those with special needs and autism, and I will be taking action on that in my new role. She also mentioned the concern about predatory behaviour. I opened my remarks on that issue and I salute the NSPCC campaign. It is absolutely right that we keep sport safe and enjoyable.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) about her love of tennis and what sport can do for women who get involved. I also talked about perhaps our greatest ever sportsman, Sir Andy Murray. If retirement is where he is headed, we wish him well, but I am sure that he will not be kept quiet.

Mr Speaker: Has the hon. Gentleman finished his contribution?

Mr Reed: I have, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: It was very brief. I call the Minister, who need not feel obliged to speak until 10 o’clock, as I know she made a very full contribution earlier.

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Mr Speaker: It was very brief. I call the Minister, who need not feel obliged to speak until 10 o’clock, as I know she made a very full contribution earlier.
robust business case for the needs in his area. There has been some positive discussion, and I am delighted that we can build on that.

Members have talked about how important it is that broadcasters and sponsors give women's sport the profile that it deserves, and I will work on that. Women's sports' media profile has grown since London 2012, but we all acknowledge that there is more to do.

The hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) was an active participant in the discussion about free-to-air coverage. On the possibility of the 2030 World cup being broadcast free-to-air, the process is in its early stages, but we are an active partner in that bid and any related discussions.

We have heard how sport absolutely has the power to change lives up and down the land. We have heard how important it is in different ways. We have heard about our local heroes—our referees. Without our officials and volunteers, how do we inspire? Volunteers absolutely do that work at the heart of our communities up and down the land. We have also touched on the serious side to sport and talked about some of the issues. We need to make sure that sport is run with safety and fairness at its heart. We have spoken about sport at the top level, and we should be very proud of our sporting successes. In the coming years, we look forward to welcoming sports fans to all the amazing events that we will host here in the UK. Ultimately, as I said, sport needs to be fun. It needs to continue to bring people together, and I look forward to working with all Members to help more people to enjoy the benefits of being active.

Finally, let me touch on loneliness. Some £11.5 million has been given out to all different types of groups across the land to tackle loneliness and keep connectivity. Sport absolutely has the power to reach all communities. I will keep the remarks made by the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) under review, and I absolutely concur with him on the need to make sure that we support all sports and ensure that activity is there for everybody, young or old. That is my absolute priority in this role.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered sport in the UK.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, I propose to take motions 4, 5 and 6 together.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES)

That the draft Collective Investment Schemes (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, that were laid before this House on 17 December 2018, be approved.—(Iain Stewart.)

Question agreed to.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ROAD TRAFFIC)

That the draft Motor Vehicles (International Circulation) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 20 December 2018, be approved.—(Iain Stewart.)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Closure of St George's Cross branch of the Bank of Scotland

10.1 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): There are bank branch closures happening up and down the country from a large number of different outlets. Today's petition concerns the Bank of Scotland in St George's Cross in my constituency. Bank of Scotland is one of the banks that is still part-owned by the taxpayer, which is why it is even more disappointing that these closures continue to happen and continue to have such a negative impact on local communities and economies.

The petition states:

The Petition of Residents of Glasgow North,

Declares that proposed closure of St George's Cross branch of the Bank of Scotland in Glasgow will have a detrimental effect on local communities and the local economy. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges her Majesty's Treasury, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Bank of Scotland to take in account the concerns of petitioners and take whatever steps they can to halt the planned closure of this branch.

And the petitioners remain, etc. [P002323]
**Orkambi**

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

10.2 pm

**Bill Wiggin** (North Herefordshire) (Con): Last week, one of my constituents, whose daughter suffers from cystic fibrosis, came to see me. He explained that every year that access to Orkambi or other such similar drugs is delayed takes 10 years off the life of his daughter.

My constituent explained how the long hours in hospital and in treatment mean that cystic fibrosis defines his daughter’s life. However, clinical trials by Vertex seven years ago marked the start of a new hope. Vertex’s amazing progress suggested that he might not outlive his daughter, that she could have the fullest life now possible, and that he would not have to tell her that she was likely to die when barely into adulthood. The whole House will understand that never in his worst nightmares did he consider the fact that these drugs would succeed yet be unavailable to his daughter.

**Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that Orkambi, which is manufactured by Vertex, is licensed and available in Ireland and the Netherlands where there are only 1,000 cystic fibrosis sufferers, but not available in the UK where there are more than 10,000 sufferers? Does he agree that that is a terrible shame?

**Bill Wiggin**: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman hears the rest of the speech before he expects to draw any conclusions.

Cystic fibrosis is a life-limiting genetic disorder. Patients with cystic fibrosis experience a build-up of thick mucus in their lungs. This can have a wide range of effects on their respiratory, digestive and reproductive systems. The disease is widespread in the UK. One person in 25 carries the faulty cystic fibrosis gene. Statistically, that is 26 Members of this House whose future generations could be affected by this cruel disease.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this debate to the House; there is such a good crowd in the Chamber tonight due to the importance of the issue. I also thank him for being an advocate of Orkambi not because I have had any dealings with the company, but because I have many constituents who are affected. One grandmother in particular has asked me to make a plea because the life not only of their grandchild, but the lives of the whole family, have been turned around by this drug. I want this drug to be available for families throughout Northern Ireland and the whole United Kingdom. Does he agree that this Crown licence is a way to get around the stalemate that is preventing CF sufferers throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from accessing this drug, which is proven to deliver tremendous improvement in quality of life?

**Bill Wiggin**: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman’s constituents will be grateful to him for raising the issue in the House this evening.

Every week, five babies are born with the disease, according to Great Ormond Street Hospital, and every week two young people die as a result of cystic fibrosis. The disease accounts for 9,500 hospital admissions and over 100,000 hospital bed days a year. There are two main ways to treat cystic fibrosis: conventional treatments target the symptoms, and precision medicines such as Orkambi tackle the cause of the condition. For conventional treatment on the NHS, the average waiting time to be admitted to hospital is 45 days.

Orkambi presents a relatively safer, more effective and clinically meaningful alternative. In treating the root causes, it reduces lung damage and cystic fibrosis-related diabetes, and improves pancreatic function. The drug has been approved by the European Medical Association, and the Food and Drug Administration in the United States. It avoids the high risk associated with organ transplants.

Orkambi treats the F508del mutation, which around 50% of people with CF in the UK carry. Essentially, the drug permits more chloride ions to pass into and out of the cells. This helps to keep a balance of salt and water in affected organs. Ivacaftor is one of the active substances in Orkambi. It increases the activity of the defective cystic fibrosis transmembrane conductance regulator protein, thereby making the mucus less thick. Decline in lung function is the most common cause of death for people with cystic fibrosis and, although not a cure, Orkambi has been found to slow the decline in lung function by 42% and reduce hospitalisations by 61%.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Before coming to this place, I was a respiratory physio and worked with many people with cystic fibrosis. The cost of hospitalisation and treatment far outstrips the cost of this drug for many people with cystic fibrosis. Should not the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence change its criteria and look at the value of life, instead of only the day-to-day cost of this drug?

**Bill Wiggin**: No, I do not agree. The purpose of this debate is to show an alternative that allows NICE to spend taxpayers’ money on drugs for other conditions while still allowing cystic fibrosis sufferers to have access to this vital drug—and not just to Orkambi, but to the next generation of the same sort of drugs. Bear with me because we have not got to the good bit yet.

In July 2016, NICE recognised Orkambi as an important treatment, yet was unable to recommend the drug for use within the NHS on grounds of cost-effectiveness. The drug is estimated to cost around £104,000 per patient per year and must be taken for life. Orkambi is not provided by the NHS, except in rare cases on compassionate grounds. It remains patent to its manufacturer, Vertex Pharmaceuticals, under UK patent law. In July 2018, NHS England made what it said was its best and final offer to Vertex of £500 million over five years. This was described by the NHS as the “largest ever financial commitment” in its 70-year history. Tragically, Vertex rejected the offer.

We all know that it is essential that a solution is found as soon as possible to make the drug available, as every day counts in slowing the progress of the disease. In an email to me, Vertex states that it “is committed to finding a sustainable solution for access to our medicines for Cystic Fibrosis patients, including Orkambi”.

That is not quite the impression I have received so far. I sincerely hope that that is indeed its highest priority.

The drugs that constitute Orkambi—Ivacaftor and Lumacaftor—can be synthetically developed at low cost, yet their price remains inaccessibly high.
Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): As some of my colleagues will know, I have a 14-year-old niece with cystic fibrosis, as well as many constituents who have it. I often wonder how people within the community, too, is the hon. Gentleman aware that in 2017 Vertex earned £2.5 billion from the sale of Orkambi and the chief exec was paid more than $17 million? I think that the Department of Health and Social Care probably has to go some way towards meeting Vertex on this, but it seems to me that there is an awful lot of money sloshing around and both sides are in a position where they could compromise.

Bill Wiggin: First, let me say how sorry I am to hear about the hon. Lady’s niece. We should take this very seriously. The figures that I have are even worse than the ones that she has laid out.

The price remains inaccessibly high, and this is entirely due to the powerful patent laws that allow pharmaceutical companies to monopolise drug production. Vertex expects to retain monopoly intellectual property protection on its cystic fibrosis drugs well into the 2030s. Analysts conservatively estimate that it will generate profits of $13 billion on Orkambi and another related drug, Kalydeco, alone. This could be used to fund further research and development—to reward its shareholders for its brilliant breakthrough and perhaps to encourage it to do more. But no, Vertex has spent $500 million on buying back its own shares. Well, that should certainly boost executive remuneration.

I am aware that provisions exist under the Patents Act 1977 for the Government to take independent action against Vertex. Crown use licensing is a powerful legal tool that can be used to safeguard public health. It can ensure the availability of fairly priced medicines in a competitive pharmaceutical market. Section 55(1) of the Act states that the Government can be granted non-authorised use of patents “for the services of the Crown”. That can be granted at all stages of manufacture, use, importation, sale and retention of a product. This is a legal opportunity to break the lethal deadlock that eats away at the youngest sufferers who stand to gain the most from this medicine. Crown use licensing has been used by the UK Government before, to great effect. They can suspend a patent and thereby force down the high price of particular pharmaceutical or medical equipment. For example, in 1991 the Government authorised the supply of machines known as lithotriptors for treating kidney stones. More recently, breast cancer patients have lobbied the Scottish Government to implement a Crown use licence on the drug Pertuzumab. Crown use licensing could similarly be used to overturn the patent monopoly on Orkambi by Vertex.

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): I applaud the hon. Gentleman for his initiative and guarantee him my 100% support. Does he not agree that this drug should be supplied on the NHS? We are all born equal in this country, but unfortunately if you are a millionaire you cannot get it. I have constituents—Emma and Chris Corr and their young daughter Harriet—who are considering leaving England so as to be able to get the care that they need. Does he agree that this country is unfair?

Bill Wiggin: I tragically allowed the hon. Gentleman’s intervention one sentence too early. I was about to say that Crown use licensing would make the drug available to cystic fibrosis sufferers at a reduced price on the NHS, so I absolutely agree.

Those are just a few examples of how Crown use licensing can set the ball rolling on increasing public access to precision medicine. The UK Government have a powerful policy mechanism already behind them. They are now in a position to make a huge difference to many people’s lives. A bio-generic version of Orkambi manufactured at a lower price would save our NHS time, money and resources. The majority of medicines already in use by the NHS are generic versions of originator products.

I have a daughter whom I love unconditionally. Putting myself in the shoes of my constituent, I can only imagine the anguish that he faces, let alone the suffering of his daughter. We know that young children stand to gain the most from access to Orkambi, and I am sure that the Minister wants to give the taxpayer the opportunity to access this drug under the NHS and NICE.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): Has my hon. Friend looked at the cost and time delay involved in producing the generic alternative that he describes? Has he factored into his argument the potential cost of litigation, which I assume Vertex would pursue? I wonder whether his proposal might actually be less cost-effective and speed-effective than trying to put a bomb under the two parties to reach agreement.

Bill Wiggin: I have. This drug would cost £104,000 if bought from Vertex and about £5,000 if it were made generically, so there is a huge saving.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is making an excellent case. Those of us who have been active on this issue—it is wonderful to see so many of them in the Chamber—have faced the argument from the company that it wants to have a licence for a whole class of these medicines, so that it can plan that future investment. He seems to suggest that that is not necessarily a valid argument. I wonder if he could respond to that argument, which has been used against those of us who have suggested that there should be a fairer way of proceeding.

Bill Wiggin: I am not quite sure I follow. I would have been much more sympathetic to Vertex if it had not been doing share buybacks. If a company expects to make $13 billion of profit, it will have factored into its calculations a reasonable profit margin. I believe that Vertex has an unreasonable profit margin. I support the private sector, and I like the idea of that R&D going on to benefit the shareholders, but I also recognise that we have a responsibility. As people who want to see patients cured, we want to see this deal done ideally by Vertex and NICE. This is a £500 million gamble for Vertex, because it will not get the money if it does not do the deal.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He mentioned the R&D that is going on. That R&D does
not exist in a vacuum; it is done on patients, with input from doctors. Does he agree that the company, no matter how much profit it might want to make, has a moral obligation to cystic fibrosis patients?

**Bill Wiggin:** I absolutely agree, which is why I am suggesting that the Crown use licence ought to be used and taken seriously. I imagine that people working for Vertex are listening closely to this debate. They will have heard the hon. Lady’s point, and I think they need to move on from this attention to profit margin.

As a Conservative, I understand the importance of managing the expectations of private companies. We in Parliament have a responsibility to people with cystic fibrosis to stand up to the greed. That is what we are doing now, and it is lovely to see so many Members here. I urge the Government to consider enacting a Crown use licence to break the deadlock on this patented drug and reduce the price of Orkambi and the suite of medicines that go with it, which are so desperately needed not only by our constituents, but by their children.

10.18 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine):** It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair for the Adjournment debate, Mr Speaker. My hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) and all Members who have contributed to the debate, some of whom I recognise from previous debates, have spoken on behalf of constituents from the heart as usual, regardless of political persuasion, with one voice. That is good to hear. I had a school here this morning, and the students asked me what the biggest misconception about this place is. I said that we get on rather well, and that is good to hear. I had a school here this morning, and the students asked me what the biggest misconception about this place is. I said that we get on rather well, and that is good to hear.

Adjournment debates are always a good example of that, in my experience—and as Public Health Minister, I have significant experience of the Adjournment debate, as does my poor Parliamentary Private Secretary.

Everyone has been speaking without political bias and with one voice, and that voice wants patients to benefit from effective treatments for cystic fibrosis. So do I, and the Government wholeheartedly share that view. We have urged Vertex to accept the fair offer that NHS England has made to the company, which would guarantee immediate access for NHS patients to all Vertex’s cystic fibrosis treatments. I hope that the pleas we have heard from my hon. Friend and other Members will carry weight in the Cabinet Office. I commend my hon. Friend’s efforts in raising this. Indeed, it is right that we consider every possibility. Every effort must be made to ensure that effective medicines are made widely available to cystic fibrosis patients. There is no doubt and no debate about that.

I can assure my hon. Friend that we, too, have considered this option. Indeed, I have received initial advice on Crown use licensing. While the use of these mechanisms is not our preference, we are looking at all options. Crown use licensing is complicated, and it would not represent a quick solution to ensuring patient access to Orkambi. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) said, in a reasonable part of his contribution, that the current “deadlock”. As the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) on securing this Adjournment debate. We have been debating this in this place for months, and the fact is that our constituents and patients still do not have access to Orkambi. May I say to the Minister that it is time that Ministers themselves took over these negotiations and responsibility for sitting face to face with and eyeballing the company so that our constituents get the justice they deserve? These negotiations between NHS England and the drug company have got us nowhere, despite the efforts of right hon. and hon. Members in this House. Will Ministers now directly get their hands dirty, roll up their sleeves, participate in these negotiations and bring this matter to a conclusion on behalf of our constituents?

**Steve Brine:** Okay, the hon. Gentleman has got his press release with his intervention. Perhaps I should go back on what I said at the start. All he has done is to take away time, on what is a very complex issue, from my trying to set out a response to my hon. Friend’s Adjournment debate.

My hon. Friend has called on the Government to consider making use of the legal provision in UK patent law of Crown use licensing to break, as he rightly puts it, the current “deadlock”. As the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) said, in a reasonable part of his intervention, it is a deadlock and it has been going on far too long. I commend my hon. Friend’s efforts in raising this. Indeed, it is right that we consider every possibility. Every effort must be made to ensure that effective medicines are made widely available to cystic fibrosis patients. There is no doubt and no debate about that.

The UK is one of a limited number of countries that actively protects the role of intellectual property in medicines development in international forums. We believe, however, that there is a balance to be struck between providing incentives to create and commercialise new medicines and ensuring that they remain affordable to the taxpayer—our constituents.

The 2019 voluntary scheme for branded medicines pricing and access, alongside the statutory scheme for branded medicines, are two mechanisms that are in place for ensuring branded medicines are affordable to the NHS. The 2019 scheme provides for flexible commercial arrangements between companies and NHS England—in other words, the customer in this scenario.

In theory, Crown use licensing could be utilised with respect to Orkambi. However, in the past Crown use has only really been intended or designed to deal with emergencies, where a particular patented product is not available in the UK at all. Crown use has not historically been intended to circumvent commercial agreements or to create a mechanism for the production of medicines at a lower price.

The relevant legislation on Crown use states that compensation would need to be provided to the original patent holder—in this case, Vertex, and that would stick in the throat of many of us—which would need to take into account any loss of profit from not being awarded a contract to supply the patented medicine. Unless an
agreement could be reached with Vertex, it would be for a court to decide on an amount in this instance. This would of course need to be paid from the public purse. If a Crown use licence were issued, then there would be a subsequent, critical question about how the medicine would be produced and authorised as the usual licensing requirements would apply, with approval required by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency.

Vertex has protections in the form of both data and marketing exclusivity for Orkambi, and it will continue to have these for a number of years. As such, unless another manufacturer conducted its own clinical trials, there are no realistic alternatives at this time to produce it and the NHS does not hold such a capacity. Using this route, it could take several—many—years before the drug was available on the market, and it would, in all likelihood, be very expensive for another manufacturer. The total length of time and cost of manufacturing and licensing—plus the compensation to the patent holder and a potential appeals process through the courts, which seems inevitable everywhere we turn these days—could be potentially significant.

We also do not know what impact Crown use would have on the other medicines that Vertex supplies to the NHS or the pipeline of products that it is developing. We should remember—and my hon. Friend reminded us of this in his opening speech—that around 50% of people with CF would benefit from Orkambi; in other words, 50% would not.

Crown use could have the effect of putting patients at a disadvantage, jeopardising access to future medicines and potentially setting a precedent of issuing further licences at very high cost.

Ian Austin: Will the Minister give way?

Steve Brine: Just because I cannot resist the hon. Gentleman, I will give way to him.

Ian Austin: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. He is setting out all the arguments against Crown use licensing. I agree with the point that he has made in the past—that Vertex needs to show flexibility on this—but I think we all think that the Government also need to show flexibility and to think carefully about whether the NICE guidelines work when evaluating these new, precision medicines. What we would all like to hear from him tonight is what he proposes to do, and what the Government are going to do, to break this deadlock and bring these negotiations to a conclusion.

Steve Brine: In response to the hon. Gentleman and to one of the other interventions about compromise and meeting in the middle—there is lots of talk about compromise at the moment—I suggest that the £500 million offer is a pretty good first step from the Government. I suggest that that is a pretty good attempt to meet in the middle. That is our constituents’ money.

Mr Hepburn: Will the Minister give way?

Steve Brine: I will not.

The hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) talked about breaking the impasse and breaking the deadlock. I said in response to the point from my hon. Friend about Crown use that I have not closed the door on it tonight. I am not trying to put obstacles in the way. I have been asked a question at the Dispatch Box about the practical realities of making this policy move, and I am setting out for the House’s benefit—on the record for everybody listening and for Members—the practicalities.

My hon. Friend talked about use of similar mechanisms by other countries. It is always interesting to understand what other countries are doing and what they are considering and implementing in their health services—there is much that we can learn from each other. However, I cannot comment on the circumstances that would prompt another country to take these steps; other countries have different health systems, and they do not have NICE. We have said—the hon. Member for Dudley North touched on this in his intervention—that we are looking to review the NICE processes, but we should also remember that NICE is respected around the world. If we did not have NICE, we would probably have to invent NICE—that is the truth for Ministers in this Government, as it would have been for Ministers in the previous Government.

I understand the sense of frustration in this Chamber.

Mr Hepburn: Will the Minister give way?

Steve Brine: I said I would not.

I think the House gets a minuscule sense of my frustration about the situation. I want this sorted. I have constituents who contact me about this too. I am sure the key question we are all thinking about is, where does this leave us now? I suppose that is the point of the intervention that the hon. Member for Dudley North made. I just want to be clear that we are still taking a very close interest in this matter.

The reason I responded so robustly to the earlier intervention about Ministers getting their hands dirty is that I do not think that is particularly helpful. Ministers are not the customer here: NHS England is the customer. Vertex is the seller and NICE is involved. Ultimately, we have made a very, very generous offer to this company, and I think that it should look again, and look long and hard, at its moral obligations as much as anything else, as somebody mentioned in their intervention.

Of course I recognise the impact that these protracted discussions are having on the daughter of my hon. Friend’s constituent. I heard the lady on the “Today” programme this morning on Radio 4, and it breaks our hearts to hear these stories. Of course we want this sorted. For many of the patients who suffer from this debilitating disease, including constituents of my own, it is extremely disappointing that Vertex rejected the final offer made by NHS England, as well as rejecting the opportunity for NICE to appraise its new medicines.

I have talked about the £500 million over five years; it is the largest ever commitment of this kind in the 70-year history of the NHS—it is not insignificant. It is a huge sum of money and of course NHS England must also fund other drugs for other distressing diseases. My hon. Friend made reference to that. I do not often get asked to come and answer Adjournment debates about spending less on precision drugs for other conditions. There are many, many other drugs that demand our funds. Vertex must re-engage with the NICE appraisal process. We understand the frustration of the CF community. However, it has been made crystal clear to Vertex that its drugs need to be priced responsibly and that any reassessment of Orkambi’s effectiveness must be carried out by NICE’s established process.
[Steve Brine]

The position of Vertex is unreasonable. It is unacceptable to us, to patients and to our constituents. I know that other countries also worry for their patients because of Vertex’s unfair pricing of this drug, so let me put on record once again that Vertex should and must take up the very generous offer that NHS England has made. That offer will improve the lives of eligible cystic fibrosis patients and their families. For all the reasons I have set out, it is far and away the quickest and simplest way to resolve this matter.

Question put and agreed to.

10.30 pm
House adjourned.
Mr Gauke: The hon. Lady makes a very important point. If someone is given a short sentence, it can mean that they lose their home, which would put them in a more difficult position, and then on their release they would be at much greater risk of rough sleeping. We are looking at our options, and I welcome her support. We are running pilots at Pentonville, Bristol and Leeds to see what we can do to address the problem of rough sleeping.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I very much welcome the Secretary of State’s much more realistic and nuanced approach to sentencing and the use of imprisonment. Does he agree that it is essential that we have space in our prisons for those whose crimes are so serious that only custody is appropriate, but that we do not overcrowd prisons with those who have mental or medical difficulties, or literacy or social problems, or those who might be better dealt with through rigorous community sentences?

Mr Gauke: I completely agree with the Chair of the Justice Committee. There are serious crimes for which a strong custodial sentence is exactly the right answer, but there are also cases for which short sentences, in particular, are ineffective for rehabilitation and do not serve society well. Prison should be used when appropriate, and we should look to develop alternatives to prison wherever possible.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I am heartened by the Secretary of State’s answers thus far. Last September the prisons Minister, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), said that “the evidence on what could be done to reduce reoffending by not overusing short prison sentences inappropriately is a good lesson from Scotland from which we wish to learn.”—[Official Report, 4 September 2018; Vol. 646, c. 41.]

At Holyrood, however, the Scottish Conservatives have long campaigned against the presumption against short sentences, claiming it to be a soft-touch approach. Does the Secretary of State agree that the Scottish Conservatives are out of touch in wanting to pursue an old-fashioned and entirely ineffective approach?

Mr Gauke: I will focus on the approach that I want to take in England and Wales. If we can find effective alternatives to short sentences, it is not a question of pursuing a soft-justice approach, but rather a case of pursuing smart justice that is effective at reducing reoffending and crime. That is the approach that I want to take in England and Wales.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): But the full force of the law too often is not very forceful at all, is it?

Mr Gauke: In reality, sentences and the prison population have gone up in recent years. I maintain that there are circumstances in which significant prison sentences are right as a means of punishment and a demonstration of society’s abhorrence at particular behaviours, but we also have to bear it in mind that some people who go to prison end up in a cycle of reoffending, with little achieved to the benefit of society or those individuals.
Probation Service

2. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): If he will make it his policy to return the probation service to the public sector.

18. **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): If he will make it his policy to return the probation service to the public sector.

**The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke):** With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer Questions 2 and 19 together.

Mr Speaker: Order. I think that the Secretary of State's intended grouping of Question 2 is with Question 18, which was tabled by the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), who was looking mildly perturbed, but whom I hope will now be greatly reassured.

Grahame Morris *indicated assent.*

Mr Speaker: It is good to see the hon. Gentleman reassured.

Mr Gauke: We have made it clear that the probation system needs to improve, and we have taken decisive action to end current community rehabilitation company contracts and to develop more robust arrangements to protect the public and tackle reoffending. We have seen examples of good and innovative work from CRCs in Cumbria, where probation is being adapted to a rural setting, and in London, where CRCs are working with the Mayor's office on programmes to rehabilitate offenders involved in knife crime.

I believe that public, private and voluntary organisations all have a role to play. The reforms that we are making are crucial to integrating the system better so that different providers can work more effectively together, and we will set out our proposals later this year.

Alex Cunningham: I am grateful for that comprehensive answer but, in the light of the prisons Minister's praise at our last session of Justice questions for the not-for-profit Durham Tees Valley CRC—one of the best, if not the best, at inspection, and, according to Napo, also one of the best to work for—may I ask how the Secretary of State will protect this rare success story, given that his own privatisation plans are set to allow security giants such as Sodexo to swallow it up?

Mr Gauke: I, too, pay tribute to the work of that not-for-profit CRC and its focus on rehabilitating offenders. The expertise and commitment of not-for-profit organisations are vital in helping offenders to turn their lives around, and the changes on which we are working will ensure that the probation system benefits from having a diverse range of providers, while also doing more to deliver operational stability.

Grahame Morris: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer, and for drawing attention to the statistics that we have seen in Durham. However, probation failures cause reoffending and place strains on already overburdened police resources. Will the Secretary of State consider meeting police and crime commissioners such as Ron Hogg, Durham's police, crime and victims commissioner, who happens to head the only outstanding police force in the country, to discuss the devolution of probation services so that they can be tailor-made to meet the needs of local communities?

Mr Gauke: I have already met a number of police and crime commissioners to talk about this very issue, but I should be happy to meet Mr Hogg, as well as other PCCs, to discuss these matters again. We want to ensure that PCCs can play a full and active role in this process, and I am heartened by the determination and willingness of many of them to do all that they can to help to develop it and to ensure that we have a strong probation system.

**Prisons: Criminal Activity and Drug Abuse**

3. **Mr Robert Goodwill** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): What steps the Government have taken to tackle criminal activity and drug abuse in the prisons in the 10 prisons project.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): Turning around the problem of drugs in prisons involves focusing on relationships, staff and perimeter security, but for the first time, every one of those 10 prisons will have proper dog teams, X-ray scanners and full airport-style security. I believe that that will drive down the supply of drugs in those prisons, and I expect to be judged on the results.

Mr Goodwill: The Minister won the admiration of the nation when he put his neck on the line in pursuit of his ambitious targets to reduce drugs and violence in our prisons. What other practical steps is he taking to meet those targets and to ensure that our prisons not only keep prisoners in, but keep drugs out?

Rory Stewart: As well as ensuring that people are searched at the gates, we are investing more in netting and grilles. We are also investing a great deal more in staff training and support. Last week, I was lucky to be able to visit Newbold Revel, our prison officer training college, to see the passing out parade of the new set of individuals who are bringing standards to those 10 prisons.

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): Violence in prisons has reached record levels, with assaults on prison officers up by 30%. When will the Government realise that their cuts are causing this crisis in our Prison Service?

Rory Stewart: The assaults on prison officers are genuinely shocking. That is why we have doubled the sentence for such assaults, and why we are investing in perimeter security. It is also why I have said that if I do not bring down the incidence of that violence, including assaults on prison officers, I will resign.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): When I last visited HMP Bullingdon, it was explained to me that much of prisoners' mail is saturated with drugs. How is the plan to photocopy mail where appropriate going?
Rory Stewart: Every one of the 10 prisons where we are running the pilots will either photocopy the mail or put it through it through a Rapiscan, which will identify Spice and other psychoactive substances to ensure that prisoners cannot use mail to bring drugs into prison.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. In calling the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), I congratulate him on his tie, inserting only the modest caveat that it is perhaps a tad understated.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): This is my celebration tie for Autism Day, Mr Speaker—a little bit of flamboyance for autism.

Nobody wants our prisons to have a culture of drugs and violence, but can the Minister imagine what it is like to be in prison and not to be guilty? I co-chair the all-party group on miscarriages of justice—we are meeting tonight. Some people do 18 years in prison are then not found guilty, but have no compensation and no reintroduction into society. When are we going to do something about that?

Rory Stewart: I think that this is a slightly different subject, but I would be very happy to sit down with the hon. Gentleman to look at the rare but tragic cases on the subject, but I would be very happy to sit down with the hon. Gentleman to look at the rare but tragic cases on the subject. However, I think that this is a slightly different subject, but I would be very happy to sit down with the hon. Gentleman to look at the rare but tragic cases on the subject.

Domestic Abuse Victims

4. Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): What support his Department provides to victims of domestic abuse in taking abusive former partners to court. [908990]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): Domestic abuse is a dreadful crime. We are determined to ensure that those who commit it face justice and that the victims of it are supported and feel able to come forward. A range of measures is available to support victims in taking their abuser to court, including eligibility to apply for special measures, and the use of video links and recorded evidence. However, we believe that we can and should do more, as we set out in the draft Domestic Abuse Bill, which was published last week.

Robert Halfon: In June 2012, Eystna Blunnie, a 20-year-old, heavily pregnant woman, was unlawfully beaten to death by her abusive former partner—her unborn child also died—despite the abuser being known to the authorities and the Crown Prosecution Service. Will my hon. Friend take steps to strengthen the support and protection available to victims of domestic abuse to help to prevent such tragedies from ever happening again and so that such a situation never occurs in Harlow again?

Edward Argar: I was sorry to hear about the dreadful and tragic case of Eystna Blunnie in my hon. Friend’s constituency. Strengthening the protections that are available to victims lies at the heart of the draft Bill. Its provisions include automatic eligibility for special measures in court for domestic abuse victims and, to better protect victims, a new domestic abuse protection order to enforce more stringent conditions on suspected and convicted perpetrators where breach will constitute a criminal offence.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Before Christmas, Sammy Woodhouse and I met the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer). Will the Minister update the House on the action taken after that meeting, particularly in relation to guidance issued to local authorities on exemption regarding the duty to notify? Is the Department willing to conduct a review to get to the heart of the scale of the issue that affected Sammy?

Edward Argar: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady and to Sammy for their work in highlighting the terrible situation and looking at what more can be done. I know that she had a positive meeting with my hon. and learned Friend and we are determined that the family court system should never be used to coerce or re-victimise those who have been abused. My hon. and learned Friend is liaising with the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services in respect of councils’ obligations and has invited the president of the family division to consider clarifying the practice direction on notification.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): The Public Accounts Committee held an inquiry into children’s social services yesterday. Does my hon. Friend agree that domestic violence is one of the key causes of the growth in the number of children being taken into care in local authorities? Will the Department work closely with the Department for Education to ensure that children’s social services have the information and finances that they need to deal with that growing problem?

Edward Argar: I can offer my hon. Friend the reassurance that we are working extremely closely with colleagues across Government to do that. We often see that some of the young people who end up in the criminal justice system have come from homes or families where they have witnessed domestic abuse. It is incumbent on us all to do all we can to tackle that.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): Practice direction 12J requires that a court must be sure, when ordering parental contact, that neither the child nor the other parent is at risk of harm. The direction makes it clear that this is an obligatory requirement, but campaign groups and lawyers say that its implementation is patchy, as we saw in the Sammy Woodhouse case. Will the Government task the new domestic abuse commissioner with responsibility for monitoring its implementation, with annual reports of any breaches to be laid before Parliament?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the shadow Minister for her question, and I should have said in response to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) that I knew that the shadow Minister was concerned about this case and had done work on it. As I have set out, in the shorter term we have asked the president of the family division to look at that practice guidance to see whether it is working as it should. The hon. Lady mentioned the domestic abuse commissioner. In the context of the draft Domestic Abuse Bill, the commissioner will have powers to investigate these matters. I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady, as my opposite number, to discuss how that might work in practice.
Mr Gauke: I agree with my hon. Friend. The additional 4,300 prison officers will help to ensure that we can do this. A particular area on which I have been keen to focus is the education and employment strategy, which will ensure that we provide those prisoners who are prepared to take responsibility with the opportunity to educate and prepare themselves for the world of work. I am very keen that we should continue to do that.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): We found out from the Secretary of State’s Department last week the alarming fact that 51% of our youth offenders now come from a black minority or ethnic background. That puts us in a worse position than the United States. Given that context in our prisons, will he revisit my review, and may I meet him urgently to discuss how we can accelerate progress?

Mr Gauke: I am grateful for that question, and I would be happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman. I know he regularly meets the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), on this subject. I am also concerned about the proportion of BAME children in custody, which is something we take very seriously. My Department has introduced a dedicated team within the youth justice policy unit with a key focus on explaining or changing disproportionate outcomes for BAME children in the justice system.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): The Justice Secretary has been in post for just over a year. In that time, every set of prison safety figures has shown violence spiralling out of control. In January 2018, assaults were up 12% year on year, reaching new record highs. In April 2018, assaults were up 13%, reaching new record highs. In October 2018, assaults were up 20%, reaching new record highs. And last week we saw yet more record highs—a record high for assaults on staff, a record high for prisoner-on-prisoner violence and a record high for self-harm. Does he agree that his Government have lost control of violence in our prisons? When will they get a grip?

Mr Gauke: Clearly, the figures set out last week, which relate to what was happening in July, August and September 2018, are not acceptable and we need to bring those numbers down. That is why we have increased the number of prison officer staff, it is why we are focusing on purposeful activity and it is why we are taking steps to reduce both the supply and the demand for drugs. We are seeing some encouraging signs, but I do not want to make too much of that as yet. We need to wait to see the numbers in April, when we will have details about the last quarter of 2018. I am beginning to feel that we have turned the corner, that the additional staff are making a difference and that the measures we are taking are making a difference, but I fully accept that much work still needs to be done.

Prison Officer Safety

6. Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What progress the Government have made on improving the safety of prison officers.
24. Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): What progress the Government have made on improving the safety of prison officers. [909011]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): We do not tolerate violence against our dedicated and hard-working prison officers. We are strengthening frontline officer numbers and rolling out the key worker scheme so that we can improve prisoner-staff relationships and tackle the causes of violence. We are giving officers the tools they need, like body-worn cameras and PAVA spray, to respond where incidents occur.

Andrew Bridgen: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer but, in order to protect prison officers, what measures are the Government taking to ensure that the police and the justice system take crimes committed in prison as seriously as those committed outside in the community?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend makes a fair point, and it is important that crimes committed within prisons are taken seriously, just as crimes committed outside prisons are taken seriously. We have taken a number of steps, and I have already alluded to some of the measures we are taking to help prison officers in these circumstances. We also recently changed the law to strengthen sentences against those who commit crimes against prison officers.

Gordon Henderson: A week before Christmas, one of my local prison officers, Ashley McLean, received horrendous facial injuries when he was violently attacked by a prisoner who was allegedly high on Spice. This was not an isolated incident. It happens every day of every week in one or other of our prisons. Much of that violent behaviour, as we have heard, is caused by drugs, so what steps are being taken to increase sentences for those found guilty of supplying drugs to inmates?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend rightly highlights an horrific incident, and I know the prisons Minister has already replied to a letter from him on this matter. We are fully committed to addressing the significant increase we have seen in the number of assaults on our hard-working prison staff. The new Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018 increases the penalty for those who assault emergency workers, including prison officers, and I understand that the police are continuing to investigate this particular incident.

Joy Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): We have already heard that assaults against prison officers are at record levels, and those levels are rising at a record rate. Why is the Secretary of State more interested in taking prison officers to court for raising health and safety concerns than in sitting around the table and working with them to develop an urgent violence reduction strategy?

Mr Gauke: We are very focused on reducing violence, which is why we are taking the measures that we are: introducing the extra staff; giving prison officers access to PAVA; increasing the use of body-worn cameras; and increasing measures to stop drugs getting into prisons—as we have heard, they can often be a driver of this violence. So that is precisely what we are doing and will continue to do.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I recently met someone who trained to be a prison officer and left the job after six months. He told me that the three months of training left him ill-equipped to deal with the violence and intimidation, and to deal with prisoners with mental health problems. The Secretary of State will know that this is not an isolated case—it is widespread. What is he doing to improve training for prison officers so that they are equipped to deal with these incidents and have support when they are encountering this type of violence?

Mr Gauke: I assure the hon. Gentleman that we are constantly looking at ways in which we can improve the training for prison officers. The prisons Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), has been very focused on that. We have managed to increase the number of prison officers significantly—as I say, the figure is up by 4,300. We are now seeing those prison officers gaining more experience and becoming increasingly effective. As I say, there are reasons to be cautiously optimistic that we are moving in the right direction, but there is still much more that needs to be done.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What specific assessment has the Secretary of State made of the opportunities associated with the use of body-worn cameras by prison officers, given the successes we have seen in policing?

Mr Gauke: Again, my hon. Friend is right to highlight this issue. The increased use of body-worn cameras can help to ensure that we have evidence that can ensure that wrongdoing by prisoners can be brought to book—it can enable prosecutions to be brought. It also provides an ability to ensure that the truth can always be discovered, which is important. Body-worn cameras are not the sole answer, but they are part of an answer on how to bring the number of these incidents down. The nearly 6,000 additional body-worn cameras, alongside staff training, can help us to move in the right direction.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Every assault on a prison officer is, of course, one too many. In the last full year, there were five times fewer serious assaults on prison officers in Scotland than there were in English and Welsh prisons. Given that stark contrast, and the fact that while this Government were slashing prison officer numbers by nearly a third their numbers in Scotland actually rose, will the Secretary of State meet the Scottish Government to discuss what he could learn from Scotland’s approach to this issue as well?

Mr Gauke: We have a co-operative relationship with the Scottish Government and that will continue. Let me point out that since October 2016 we have seen an increase in prison officer numbers of 4,300, which is to be welcomed. At one stage, people said, “Those are new numbers but they are very inexperienced”, but of course as each month goes by those prison officers are gaining experience and confidence. I believe we will see improvements in the months and years ahead.

Prisoner Transfer Agreements

7. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): How many (a) compulsory and (b) voluntary prisoner transfer agreements the UK has with other countries. [908994]
The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for advocating on this issue consistently and for reinforcing a policy that has led to nearly 45,000 foreign national offenders being deported. In answer to the question, let me say that 46 of the 110 prisoner transfer agreements we have are compulsory. However, it is worth pointing out that, were we to leave the European Union with no deal and no transition period, we would lose 26 of those and face significantly greater challenges in deporting foreign national offenders who constitute nearly 40% of the cohort.

Mr Hollobone: I understand that under those 26 EU agreements only about 200 prisoners have been compulsorily transferred to other EU countries, so that would make little difference. The point is that at any one time 10% of our prison population is made up of foreign national offenders. The best way to reduce overcrowding is to send these people back to prison in their own country. Will the Minister negotiate more compulsory prisoner transfer agreements so that we can get these people back to prisons in their own abode?

Rory Stewart: I agree strongly with what my hon. Friend says, and indeed we are actively engaged in this; my right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor will be in Romania to discuss these issues, and I am meeting the Albanian Justice Minister this afternoon. But it is important to understand that, if we are going to put someone back into prison in another country, that country’s police, courts and prison service need to be onside, and that is a diplomatic challenge.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): One of the saddest groups in our prisons are those women from abroad, usually with children, who have been duped into being drug mules. In the past, the Government have helped with the building of prisons abroad to allow those women to go back to their country of origin; is that still this Government’s policy?

Rory Stewart: As a former Minister in the Department for International Development, I assure the hon. Gentleman that we remain open to that. We have recently faced problems in Jamaica because there has been political resistance, not from us but from the Jamaican Government, to British development money being used in that way. We remain open to investment in the rule of law, and if it helps us to return foreign national offenders, at the same time as helping prisoners in that country, we will do that.

Court Closures and Staffing

8. Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of recent (a) changes in court staffing and (b) court closures on access to justice.

Helen Hayes: Three years ago, I expressed concerns about the impact that the closure of Lambeth county court would have on the efficiency of the court system and access to justice for my constituents. Lambeth was closed two years ago and the workload was moved to Clerkenwell and Shoreditch. Yesterday, I heard from a local legal aid solicitor that Clerkenwell and Shoreditch county court is completely overwhelmed, that delays of six to eight months to receive court directions are common, and that the contact centre cannot provide up-to-date information on cases. When will the Government act to sort out this shambolic mess?

Lucy Frazer: I am happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss that specific situation. The MOJ is taking a number of steps to improve court timeliness, which is of course important. We are digitising a number of services—people can now track their tribunal appeal online—and recruiting more judges to tribunals, with more than 225 recruited over the past year. I am happy to discuss that particular case.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Under the smokescreen of a digital revolution, the Government have taken the axe to our court system. A victim of crime who wants justice through their day in court will now have a much more difficult experience, perhaps having to travel much further after the closure of hundreds of courts, and perhaps finding that the help and support they need are lacking after the sacking of thousands of court staff. Given the recent chaos, instead of forcing through yet more court reforms, will the Minister agree to a moratorium on further cuts and closures, at least until this House has been offered a chance to scrutinise changes that will affect access to justice for decades to come?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman is right to identify the fact that an IT issue affected courts towards the end of January. That disruption was caused by an infrastructure issue in our supplier’s data and I apologise for any issues for people who were affected. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we have consulted on what principles will guide any future court closures, and that consultation has now come to an end.

Victims: Policy Alignment

9. Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that measures in the victims strategy, the forthcoming violence against women and girls strategy refresh and draft domestic abuse Bill are aligned.

[908996]

22. Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that measures in the victim strategy, the forthcoming violence against women and girls strategy and domestic abuse Bill are aligned.

[909009]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): The victims strategy is the first time that the Government have taken the axe to our court system. A victim of crime who wants justice through their day in court will now have a much more difficult experience, perhaps having to travel much further after the closure of hundreds of courts, and perhaps finding that the help and support they need are lacking after the sacking of thousands of court staff. Given the recent chaos, instead of forcing through yet more court reforms, will the Minister agree to a moratorium on further cuts and closures, at least until this House has been offered a chance to scrutinise changes that will affect access to justice for decades to come?

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been developed with this vision in mind, and have been designed to sit within the framework of the wider victims strategy. The Bill is a joint Home Office and MOJ Bill, with close ministerial and official-level working to ensure close alignment.

**Huw Merriman:** To return to a theme raised on the Opposition Benches earlier, there is great support on the Government Benches for closing the loophole that may allow convicted rapists to gain notification rights to children conceived through those heinous crimes. Will the Minister assure me that if it turns out that practice directions will not have the requisite strength, legislation will be looked at? When he meets the hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) to discuss the possibility of the commissioner having powers with regard to practice direction 12C, will he consider including practice direction 12J under those same powers? That will also give safeguards to women and children.

**Edward Argar:** Building on the answer that I gave to the shadow Minister, I hear what my hon. Friend says and I know his work in this area and his commitment on the issue. I am very happy to look at the points that he raises. It is a draft Bill and I very much hope that he will consider putting his views to us in that process.

**Mike Wood:** For many victims of domestic violence and coercive control, like my constituent Chloe, and for their families, the process of giving evidence and preparing for trial adds to the pain of the original abuse. What is the Minister doing to support vulnerable witnesses, including victims of domestic abuse?

**Edward Argar:** We are determined to improve the family justice response to vulnerable witnesses, including people such as my hon. Friend’s constituent Chloe and victims of domestic abuse. Family judges have a range of powers to make sure that difficult courtroom situations are handled sensitively. In particular, we are looking to give the courts a specific power to prevent perpetrators of certain offences, including domestic abuse, from cross-examining their victims in person. We will also give the courts the power, in certain circumstances, to appoint a lawyer to conduct cross-examination on the preventive party’s behalf.

**Victims Law**

10. **Mary Robinson** (Cheadle) (Con): When the Government plan to consult on a victims law. [908997]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar):** In the victims strategy published on 10 September, we committed to consult on the detail of a victims law in the course of 2019. In taking that work forward, we have already begun discussions with both victims and victims’ groups. We will consult on amending the victims code before bringing forward detailed proposals for a victims law. That will allow us to update entitlements to ensure that they better reflect victims’ needs before considering the detail of legislation.

**Mary Robinson:** I welcome the Department’s victims strategy, particularly the review of the criminal injuries compensation scheme. The Manchester Arena bombing almost two years ago left people with serious and life-changing injuries and brought to light questions about the scheme’s suitability in providing support for victims of terrorism. Will my hon. Friend outline what plans are being considered by the Department to improve support for victims of major tragedies such as the Manchester bombing?

**Edward Argar:** The Government are committed to ensuring that victims of terrorist attacks such as the Manchester Arena bombing receive the help and support that they need. In the victims strategy, we set out our intention to consult on changes to the criminal injuries compensation scheme, including considering how the scheme can better serve victims of terrorism. Terms of reference were published on 18 December 2018, with the review expected to report this year.

**Derek Twigg** (Halton) (Lab): My constituent, Helen Hill, whose husband was murdered in 2002, has started a petition that has more than 8,000 names. The petition is about having supervision for life for murderers. I am sure the Minister understands the suffering that she has endured and is enduring to this day. Is not she the sort of person to whom he should be talking as a result of this, and will he please agree to meet me and Mrs Hill in the near future?

**Edward Argar:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that specific case and I am very happy to meet him.

**Farmer Review**

12. **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): What progress the Government have made on implementing the recommendations of the Farmer review, published in August 2017. [908999]

**The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart):** I pay tribute to Lord Farmer for this review. We have accepted all its recommendations and have implemented more than half of them. I meet Lord Farmer very regularly, most recently last Sunday, because we realise that good family ties can reduce reoffending by 37%.

**Fiona Bruce:** Women prisoners face particular difficulties when parted from their families—do their families. What consideration has been given to this issue?

**Rory Stewart:** The specific issue raised by my hon. Friend relates to women in the criminal justice system, many of whom are the primary carers. So putting those women in prison has a very serious impact on their children, many of whom, unfortunately, then go on to commit crime themselves. We have therefore commissioned Lord Farmer to do a review looking specifically at the family ties of women.

**Criminal Justice: Children**

13. **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): What steps he has taken to reduce the number of children in the criminal justice system. [909000]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar):** As far as possible, we believe that children should be diverted from the criminal justice system through liaison and diversion services. A custodial...
sentence should be used only as a last resort. As we have seen over the past 10 years, the number of children entering the criminal justice system has fallen by 86%, with the number getting custodial sentences falling equally dramatically.

Bill Esterson: According to the latest research, between 40,000 and 120,000 children are born every year with foetal alcohol spectrum disorders. Those with FASD often do not understand consequences, so will the Minister look at the special courts that have been set up in Canada, designed to reduce reoffending by helping those with FASD to understand the consequences of their actions?

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. If he writes to me with more details, I will be happy to look at the matter.

Mr Speaker: If the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) were standing on this question, I would call her; if she does not, I will not.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: But she is doing so, so I will.

23. [909010] Mrs Latham: As well as the importance of employment opportunities for ex-offenders, does the Minister agree that the provision of affordable housing for former prisoners is a significant factor in preventing reoffending, and will he outline what steps he is taking on this?

Mr Speaker: Just a heads up in case the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) requires it—the same would apply to him in a moment.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) rose—

Mr Speaker: No, no, not now. The hon. Gentleman can work up his question while the Minister is responding to the hon. Lady. [Interruption.] No, no, I am giving him preparation time; he should be thanking me.

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) makes an important point about the importance of stable accommodation, which can play a key part in reducing reoffending and giving people the opportunity to get their life back on the right track. We are working with partners across the Government, local authorities and others to ensure that the system works for those people.

Jim Shannon rose—

Mr Speaker: We are all now uncontrollably excited.

Edward Argar: Reducing reoffending is a key goal of the prison system, as we set out in the White Paper. Plans such as the New Futures Network show that we are serious about this. Research published by the Ministry of Justice last year showed that prisoners who have undertaken learning activity have a significantly lower reoffending rate on release than their peers, with a one-year proven reoffending rate that is 7.5 percentage points lower. Offenders who found P45 employment in the year after leaving prison had one-year reoffending rates that were six to nine percentage points lower than similar offenders who did not find employment.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): While the total number of children in prison has declined over the years, the number of black and minority ethnic children in the prison system has remained static. How can the Lord Chancellor reassure BME communities that their children are not being disproportionately targeted?

Edward Argar: The shadow Minister makes an important point, building on the point made earlier by the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). I am concerned about the black, Asian and minority ethnic people in the prison system who are disproportionately targeted.

Edward Argar: The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): We are making good progress with Wellingborough and Glen Parva Prisons, which will be modern and provide uncrowded capacity and will open in 2021 and 2022 respectively. This is against a background where the long-term population trend has put a stress on the prison estate. I am pleased that the prison population has decreased by around 2,000 in the past year. We will continue to look into how we can ensure further reductions, including looking at better community sentences. Our new prison estate will have up to 10,000 new uncrowded prison places, creating the physical conditions for governors to achieve better educational, training and rehabilitation outcomes.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): What steps he is taking to reduce prison overcrowding.

14. Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): What steps he is taking to reduce prison overcrowding.

16. Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to reduce prison overcrowding.

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Mohammad Yasin: Nearly two weeks ago, I raised concerns about broken screens at HMP Bedford that have resulted in my constituents having to put up with loud, intimidating and lewd behaviour from prisoners, and daily intrusions on to their properties by criminals smuggling contraband through their gardens and over the prison wall. The Minister committed to immediately raising the matter with the governor. Will he confirm what action has been taken?

Mr Gauke: The Prisons Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), has indeed visited Bedford Prison and is in contact with
the governor. The prison is introducing new scanners to help to address some of these issues. We will look at anything that we can do to ensure that no burden is placed on the local community.

Janet Daby: Overcrowding in our prisons leads to inhumane conditions and puts pressure on provision, services and training. That is unacceptable. The public expect reform and rehabilitation. What is the Minister doing to address this issue, as well as the over-representation of black men within our prisons?

Mr Gauke: I agree with the hon. Lady about the importance of rehabilitation. We have stressed that point, and it has been stressed a number of times this morning. Of course we want to bring overcrowding levels down. It would be fair to say that overcrowding levels have been pretty consistent; they are essentially at the same level as in 2010. On the disproportionate numbers of people from ethnic minorities within the prison system, we take that seriously, as the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), has just pointed out. I look forward to meeting the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) to discuss this shortly.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): One source of overcrowding is the indefinite detention of prisoners using the imprisonment for public protection—IPP—sentences, which were introduced under the previous Labour Government but ruled unlawful in 2007. Why are 3,300 prisoners still in prison having served their sentence? Many of them—51%—have served five years or more after their sentence and are still in prison to this day.

Mr Gauke: Over time, more of those IPP prisoners are being released, but the Parole Board has to make a judgment in each individual case on whether there is a risk to society from releasing a particular individual. Those judgments can be difficult. Sometimes the Parole Board faces criticism when it does decide to release somebody in these circumstances. These matters have to be addressed on a case-by-case basis.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Last year, almost half of prisoners held at HMP Birmingham were held in overcrowded cells, contributing to the crisis of violence that six months ago forced the Government to step in and take control away from G4S. On the last occasion I asked about this, the Minister of State was unable to give a response, so will the Secretary of State now confirm that he will not be handing HMP Birmingham back to G4S, and will he draw the obvious conclusion that privatisation has been a failure in our prison system?

Mr Gauke: We will not hand HMP Birmingham back if it is not safe for us to do so. I am afraid that the attack on any involvement of the private sector in the prison system that we hear from Labour Front Benchers does not represent a balanced approach. We have to look at the successes that exist within the prison system, where the private sector has run very effective prisons. That cannot be ignored, notwithstanding the very real problems that exist, and have existed, with Birmingham.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The prison is introducing new scanners to help to address some of these issues. We will look at anything that we can do to ensure that no burden is placed on the local community.

Mr Speaker: Finally, before we move on to topicals, I say to the right hon. Gentleman that he is an extraordinarily senior and distinguished denizen of the House, but he will have to be a little patient and he may get his chance in due course, queuing up with the rest. Meanwhile, he will, I am sure, celebrate the success of his hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone).

Prisoner Rehabilitation

15. Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What assessment has made of the adequacy of prisoners’ access to rehabilitation programmes.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): Over time, we have invested more and more in this, particularly in individualised rehabilitation programmes. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to Stephanie Covington and Edwina Grosvenor, in particular, for their trauma-informed approach to counselling.

Jamie Stone: When we think about prisoners, we should understand that we all have a past that we cannot change but a future that we can change, hopefully this side of eternity. Many prisoners out there have records of good conduct and are desperately trying to turn over a new leaf. Surely we should therefore be doing everything in our power to encourage still more firms, companies and other organisations to offer suitable short-term placements to these people, because those placements can be so successful in terms of rehabilitation.

Rory Stewart: Absolutely. It totally transforms a prisoner’s life to have a job, and it leads them to be less likely to reoffend, therefore protecting the public. I pay tribute particularly to the work of Tempus Novo in Leeds, which brings businesses into prison, with two experienced ex-prison officers, and helps companies to become comfortable with employing ex-offenders, thus ultimately changing lives and protecting the public.

Topical Questions

T1. Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): Yesterday, I published my review of the Parole Board rules and the Government’s response to the public consultation about creating a new reconsideration mechanism for Parole Board decisions. I have decided to proceed with changes to the Parole Board rules that will introduce such a mechanism later this year. Our report also sets out additional reforms that will bring greater transparency and improvements for victims. I announced the launch of a tailored review of the Parole Board that will consider whether more fundamental reforms are necessary in the longer term, including those that may require primary legislation.

Alan Mak: New technology can play a key role in reducing the flow of contraband into our prisons. Will my right hon. Friend outline what support and financial investment his Department is providing in that area?
Mr Gauke: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We are strengthening the countermeasures against contraband for every route into prison, and technology is an important part of that. In 2017, we invested £2 million in modern technology, including hand-held and portable mobile phone detection devices. In 2018, we invested a further £7 million to enhance security in prisons through scanners, improved searching techniques and phone-blocking technology. In the work that my hon. Friend the Prisons Minister has done with 10 of our most challenging prisons, he is emphasising the use of technology to search letters, bags and people, and he announced last week that those prisons all now have scanners that can detect drugs on clothes and mail.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): There is deep concern that the Government want to use the cover of Brexit to roll back citizens’ rights. Such fears have been further fuelled by the recent failure of Ministers in a letter to the House of Lords EU Justice Sub-Committee to rule out repealing the Human Rights Act 1998 post Brexit. Labour introduced the Human Rights Act. We will fight any attempt by the Tories to undermine it or dilute our hard-won rights. Will the Secretary of State give a reassurance today that the Government will not repeal or reform the Human Rights Act in the aftermath of our departure from the European Union?

Mr Gauke: We certainly have no plans to do so, but on the subject of human rights, I am a little surprised that we are getting lectured by the hon. Gentleman, who will not condemn the Venezuelan regime.

T2. [909013] Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Body-worn video cameras are available to every prison officer in England and Wales, but they are not routinely provided in Scotland. Will the Minister outline the benefits to both prisoners and officers of those cameras and encourage the Scottish Government to follow this Government’s lead?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): We often pay tribute to the Scottish Government, but I am proud to say that we are ahead of them on this. We have rolled out body-worn cameras, which are making an enormous difference to safety in prisons. We are also ahead of the Scottish Government in having fully smoke-free prisons. There is something, at least, that Scotland can learn from us.

T3. [909014] Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State agree that it is unconscionable that the workers who clean his offices and the security guards who keep the Ministry of Justice safe are not paid the living wage? Will he commit today to finally paying them a wage they can decently live on, with terms and conditions that mean they can take a family holiday?

Mr Gauke: As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, the cleaners and security guards are employed by private contractors, and that is a matter for them.

T4. [909015] David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Following the sexual assault of four female prisoners by a male claiming to be transgender, what additional advice has been given to prison authorities about housing transgender prisoners?

Mr Gauke: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The Secretary of State for Justice sets the policy on these questions, and its application. New guidelines will be published shortly, to ensure that it continues to strike the right balance between ensuring that all female prisoners are kept safe, that transgender prisoners have their rights respected and that we comply with our legal obligations under statute.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): We take the Karen White case very seriously. In the light of that, we are reviewing both the content of prison service instruction 17/2016, which sets the policy on these questions, and its application. New guidelines will be published shortly, to ensure that it continues to strike the right balance between ensuring that all female prisoners are kept safe, that transgender prisoners have their rights respected and that we comply with our legal obligations under statute.

T5. [909016] Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): Can the Minister tell the House whether it is a requirement for prison governors to stay up to date with control and restraint training to receive the required hours addition allowance?

Rory Stewart: That is a highly technical question. I will look into it and get back to the hon. Lady.

T6. [909017] Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): People were shocked to read that over half the knife crime in London is associated with teenagers or children. Can my right hon. Friend reassure the House that he is working with the Home Office to ensure that the new knife crime protection orders will effectively target children who are carrying knives and not end up putting into custody children who are at risk but have never carried a knife?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We are working with the Home Office to ensure that these orders are truly preventive in nature and put children on the right path away from a life of crime. These orders will give the police the opportunity to intervene earlier, and the court can include in the order a range of conditions that can be both prohibitive and proactive. They will be used only if the court is satisfied on the balance of probability that the child has carried a knife, or if they have been convicted of a relevant criminal offence and the order is necessary to protect the public or prevent crime. Sentencing is, of course, for the judge, but we are consulting on these proposals.

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State is providing much exercise for the knee muscles of Opposition Members. It is an important fact of public interest that I think thus far he has not noticed, but of which he may wish to take account.

T7. [909018] Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): The Government continue to drag their feet on publishing their review of legal aid. Will the Minister tell the House exactly when we can expect it by?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): We said that we would publish the review early in the new year, and we will be publishing it early in the new year. The hon. Lady should expect it shortly. This is a serious matter that takes time. I would like to quote the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), who told the Law Society Gazette early last year “that I would rather the government take this seriously and take their time with it.” That is exactly what we are doing.
Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Access to justice was denied to a constituent of mine who had a child taken away from her after birth, by social services. She has struggled to find legal representation because lawyers refuse to take on a local authority with huge financial resources. How will the Government help constituents such as mine?

Lucy Frazer: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. Care proceedings are incredibly important, and when a child is taken away from their parent, it is a tragic matter that affects them for a long time. My right hon. Friend should be aware that legal aid is available for public law cases. I am very happy to discuss that particular matter with her.

Mr Gauke: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. Does the Minister agree with the Taking Control coalition who are pressing us on this issue. Does the Minister agree with the Taking Control coalition to solve this issue.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Speaker. I call Bob Neill—one sentence.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that it is vital to ensure continuity of contractual obligations and enforceability of judgments once we leave the EU, which would be prevented by a no-deal outcome?

Mr Gauke: Yes.

Mr Speaker: Splendid.

T9. [909021] Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): Nepacs provides a very valuable family support service to Kirklevington Grange Prison in my constituency, but its Big Lottery funding runs out in May. Will the Minister meet me and Nepacs to see whether there is any way we can continue this great service?

Rory Stewart: I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman, and to do so as soon as possible.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Over the past eight years, the number of trials listed at Northampton Crown court without a firm date—categorised as floating trials—has increased from 10% to 23%. Why is this, and what can be done about it?

Lucy Frazer: This is a really important point because it is important that justice is not only done but done speedily. I should emphasise that listing is a judicial function, but it is important that Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service works closely with the judiciary on it. For that reason, I held a roundtable only a few weeks ago—with the judiciary, listing officers, the Bar Council, the Criminal Bar Association and the Law Society—to solve this issue.

Mr Speaker: I call David Hanson—in a sentence.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The number of outstanding repairs in prisons is 22,000 higher than this time last year and the number of outstanding planned repairs is 9,000 higher. Why is this?

Rory Stewart: It is largely to do with degradation across the estate, but we have had significant improvements in the performance of Amey recently, and we have of course taken Carillion back in-house so a Government company is now operating there. We therefore expect improvements to go with millions of pounds of extra investment into the estate.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Does the Minister agree with the Taking Control coalition of debt support charities that independent regulation of the bailiff industry is necessary to protect the public from the unscrupulous practices that have driven some of my constituents to the point of suicide and despair?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Lady is right to highlight that unscrupulous practice by bailiffs is unacceptable. I know that she will be aware that we are looking into the matter, and our call for evidence closes on 17 February, so I encourage anyone who is interested to submit. One of the questions we ask in the consultation is about an independent regulator.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): Studies of offenders have suggested that 45% of young people and 24% of male adults screen positive for a childhood history of ADHD. Will the Minister therefore agree to attend the next meeting of the all-party parliamentary group for ADHD?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Lady is right to highlight that unscrupulous practice by bailiffs is unacceptable. I know that she will be aware that we are looking into the matter, and our call for evidence closes on 17 February, so I encourage anyone who is interested to submit. One of the questions we ask in the consultation is about an independent regulator.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Wales has the highest incarceration rate in western Europe, which has risen to 154 per 100,000 of the population. Custodial sentences are also up in Wales but have dropped 16% in England. What more can Ministers do to bring about a bespoke solution for Welsh prisoners and to try to improve the criminal justice system in Wales?

Rory Stewart: The big transformation that will take place in Wales is bringing probation back fully under Government control, so we will have a much closer connection between prisons, probation and the devolved authorities. In the Welsh context, we think that is particularly suitable for the devolved Administration and should address some of those concerns.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Why is it that grown men in their 30s and 40s involved in county lines cases are escaping jail, even though we know that their trafficking in drugs and children is blighting the lives of children growing up in communities such as mine?
Rory Stewart: This is an enormously important issue. It is fundamentally a question for the police and Crown Prosecution Service, but I absolutely agree that those people should be prosecuted and put into jail.

Mr Speaker: I call a south-west London knight, a former Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change and, by all accounts, a cerebral denizen of the House of Commons, Sir Edward Davey.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Thank you, Mr Speaker, especially for allowing me to exercise my knees more than usual today.

Will the Secretary of State confirm that the offer and acceptance of payments to and by an MP for the benefit of their constituents by a Minister of the Crown in an attempt to influence votes in this House could represent breaches of sections 1 and 2 of the Bribery Act 2010?

Mr Gauke: I am loth to provide legal advice, but the right hon. Gentleman has clearly raised a significant point. I would like to hear more of what he is saying and I am happy to discuss this with him. He is clearly alluding to something, but I am afraid that I am not quite aware what it is.
Mr Speaker: Before we move to the Urgent Question in the name of the right hon. Member for Tottenham, I have a brief announcement to make to the House.

Her Majesty the Queen has been pleased to approve that Dr John Benger be appointed Under Clerk of the Parliaments—that is to say, Clerk of the House of Commons—in succession to Sir David Natzler KCB who will retire in March.

For the benefit of colleagues and others who take an interest in our proceedings, I can say that Her Majesty's approval of the appointment of Dr Benger followed an open competition and selection process composed of an independent non-executive member and four members of the House of Commons Commission—myself, the Leader of the House, the shadow Leader of the House and Stewart Hosie MP.

I wish to emphasise that it was a robust and rigorous process and that Dr Benger was the unanimous choice of the selection panel. For those of you who do not know him, I hope that you will come to do so. He is at present the Clerk Assistant of the House and Managing Director, Chamber and Committees. He has held that post since July 2015. My colleagues on the panel and I have come to know him well over the years. We believe that he has outstanding qualities and that he will be an outstanding successor to the outstanding Clerk who will retire shortly.

I hope that that public information notice is of interest to the House.
of those cases is a shocking indictment of your Government’s pandering to far right racism, sham immigration targets and the dog whistle of the right-wing press. You have spoken about being a second—

Mr Speaker: Order. I have the highest regard for the right hon. Gentleman. Occasional descent into the use of the word “your” by accident is one thing, but a calculated repetition of the word “your” is not appropriate because a debate is conducted through the third person. I have not made any statement. I am not responsible for any scandal and I mildly resent any suggestion to the contrary. [Interruption.] Well, not this one anyway, as an hon. Lady rightly chuntered from a sedentary position. But I do not want to interrupt any further the flow of the right hon. Gentleman’s eloquence, or, for that matter, the eloquence of his flow.

Mr Lammy: You are quite right, Mr Speaker.

Every single one of these cases is a shocking indictment of this Government’s pandering to far right racism, sham immigration targets and the dog whistle of the right-wing press.

The Home Secretary has spoken about being a second generation migrant himself. On taking this job he promised to do whatever it takes to put this wrong right. We are now 10 months on from when the scandal broke. Not a penny has been paid out to any Windrush victim in a compensation scheme. The independent Windrush lessons learned review has not yet reported. I say to you, Home Secretary, before the review is even complete, why, why, why are you deporting people? We have heard about deportation flights to Jamaica this week. You have detained up to 50 black British residents and given them open window removal notices. Why are you deporting them, given that this review has not reported and there has been no compensation?

How can you be confident that you are not making the same mistakes? Movement for Justice is working with 26 of those who are at risk of removal. Thirteen first came to the UK as children; nine came under the age of 10. Eleven people have indefinite leave to remain. Another has a British passport. Thirty-six British children have come forward with a well thought through compensation scheme that is generous and supports members of that generation. In the meantime, we have put in place the vulnerable persons scheme that I referred to earlier, and an exceptional payments scheme, which has started making payments.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): It was a Labour Government who in 2007 passed the UK Borders Act 2007, which he supported, requires that the Home Secretary issues a deportation order for anyone who is a foreign national offender. It does not matter which part of the world they are from, whether it is the United States, Jamaica, Australia or Canada. That is a legal requirement. If he does not want that to happen, he is asking me to break the law, and he is also saying that a person who is convicted of a serious offence as a foreign national offender should be allowed to stay in this country, so either he has changed his mind or he does not know what he is talking about.

Lastly, the right hon. Gentleman brings up the compensation scheme. He is right to raise that because we are absolutely committed to making sure that those who were wronged receive proper compensation. That is why I appointed an independent person, Martin Forde, QC, who has done an enormous amount of good work on this. He asked for an extension of the compensation scheme so that he could speak to even more people who were affected. I brought that to the House and I accepted that extension, and we are now working through what he and his team have done to come forward with a well thought through compensation scheme that is generous and supports members of that generation. In the meantime, we have put in place the vulnerable persons scheme that I referred to earlier, and an exceptional payments scheme, which has started making payments.

I just say this finally: if the right hon. Gentleman really wants to help, he should reflect on his tone and not use this as some kind of political football.

Mr Javid: First, let me thank the right hon. Gentleman. At least he has raised this important issue of Windrush—it is good at any time to update the House on this, in many different ways—but I have to take issue with his tone. He does himself no good service—a huge disservice—in the way that he speaks and the tone that he has used to suggest that there is even an ounce of racism in this House, and to ignore the facts. He chooses to ignore—

I could have made this into an honourable debate by looking at the actual issues and thinking about how we can help people who have been affected.

The right hon. Gentleman chooses to ignore that, for members of the Windrush generation who have been affected in a wrong way—as I have recognised and as many Ministers have recognised at the Dispatch Box—this began under previous Governments and continued under successive Governments, including the Government that he was part of, when he voted time and time again for compliant environment restrictions. He supported those restrictions on a number of occasions and now he chooses to speak out about some of the inadvertent effects of that.

The right hon. Gentleman also rightly brought up the issue that—as I have said before, including in the House—sadly, some people who were wronged are deceased, but he should know that a number of those people died under a Labour Government. The deportations took place under a Labour Government and he makes no apology for that. The right hon. Gentleman mentions the deportations of foreign national offenders. I think the information that he referred to, if I have understood him correctly, is about a charter flight to Jamaica of foreign national offenders only—every single one of them convicted of a serious crime. The UK Borders Act 2007, which he supported, requires that the Home Secretary issues a deportation order for anyone who is a foreign national offender. It does not matter which part of the world they are from, whether it is the United States, Jamaica, Australia or Canada. That is a legal requirement. If he does not want that to happen, he is asking me to break the law, and he is also saying that a person who is convicted of a serious offence as a foreign national offender should be allowed to stay in this country, so either he has changed his mind or he does not know what he is talking about.

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I just say this finally: if the right hon. Gentleman wants to help, he should reflect on his tone and not use this as some kind of political football.
Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend refers to a law, which represents the will of this House, that was passed in 2007, which, I say again, the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and many of his colleagues supported, and which requires the Government to deport foreign national offenders who have committed serious offences. None of those being deported is a British citizen a member of the Windrush generation, who are exempt under section 7 of the Immigration Act 1971.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): This morning, the news broke that Ms Sims had been denied help from the Windrush compensation scheme because she was not from the Caribbean. Just like Windrush, this is a result of the Government ignoring credible warnings about the impact of their policies. The National Audit Office found that the Home Office showed a surprising “lack of curiosity about individuals who may have been affected, and who are not of Caribbean heritage.”

What steps is the Home Secretary taking to ensure that, as Martin Forde QC has recommended, officials are aware that people other than those from the Caribbean are eligible? Will he commit to widening the remit of the Windrush review and compensation scheme? Can he justify Windrush victims being defined so narrowly? Some 186 people were formally refused help from the Windrush scheme. Can he guarantee that none of them was in fact eligible?

We have heard reports that the Home Office is restarting charter flights to Jamaica. Like those of many MPs, my constituency office phone has been ringing off the hook. Some 85,000 people have signed a petition. Why does the Home Secretary consider now an appropriate time to restart these flights? Victims of this scandal have not yet received compensation. The Windrush lessons learned review has not yet reported. A full year after the scandal broke, we do not know how many people have already been detained or deported. The hostile environment remains in place.

I understand that many of the detainees have been convicted of a criminal offence, but after Windrush, the Government have not proved they have the processes in place to make sure the wrong people do not end up on this flight. Will the Home Secretary urgently bring available to the House at the end of last year.

Sajid Javid: First, I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s tone and approach of asking sensible questions, and he deserves answer to them all.

The hon. Gentleman raised the case of Ms Willow Sims, who I heard on the radio this morning. It was the first time I had heard about the case, and I was very concerned. She said she had written to me, which I was interested to hear, and I checked this morning. We received the letter on 28 January, which might help to explain why I have not seen the letter yet. That said, the Department was aware of the case before that, because her Member of Parliament wrote to the Department—in October, I believe—and Ms Sims is now getting the help she deserves. We will look further at why she was turned down for help by the taskforce, because that should not have happened.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s comments. It is very important that we clear up these difficult cases. Can he confirm that those applying to settle under the Windrush scheme are receiving support in navigating the immigration system and that his Department continues to take a sympathetic and proactive approach when resolving applications?

Sajid Javid: I am happy to confirm that to my right hon. Friend, and he is right to raise it. From the moment the taskforce was set up, it was designed to make it as easy and simple as possible for people to use, and, as I said earlier, it has so far correctly documented almost 2,500 people.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I wish also to raise concerns about removals and deportations to Jamaica being resumed. By all accounts, we are talking about people who came as children, about parents with British children and even about Commonwealth soldiers. To all intents and purposes, therefore, we are talking about people who are British even if they are not formally citizens. The Home Secretary has mentioned foreign national offenders. Will he publish the full list of offences people are being deported for?
Even the issue of foreign national offenders is not straightforward. Stephen Shaw said in his updated report on detention that “a significant proportion of those deemed FNOs had grown up in the UK, some having been born here but the majority having arrived in very early childhood. These detainees often had strong UK accents, had been to UK schools, and all of their close family and friends were based in the UK.”

In other words, the Home Office is often really deporting UK offenders to other countries. Has the Home Office even begun to engage with the issue Mr Shaw himself has raised? I am asking the Home Secretary not to break the law but simply to review it and change it if necessary.

What work has been done to establish how people from other countries, including Commonwealth countries, have been impacted by Windrush-type disasters? Finally, what will the Home Office do to prevent probably hundreds of thousands of EU nationals from being subject to the same hostile environment measures when they miss the cut-off date for settled status applications?

Sajid Javid: I want to be clear again about the flight to Jamaica mentioned by hon. Members: not a single person being deported is British—a person cannot be deported and be British; they are all foreign national offenders, and under the 2007 Act, where someone is given a sentence of at least one year, the Home Secretary is required to make a deportation order, and where it is four years or more, the Home Secretary is required by law to order a deportation.

The wording of the hon. Gentleman’s question seemed to suggest that he knew who was on the flight and who was not. Let me say gently to him that the flight has not happened yet, but the deportation of anyone who is on it will be carried out absolutely according to the law. Ultimately, this is about public safety, because these are individuals who have committed serious offences. I ask the hon. Gentleman to reflect on the fact that if we did not carry out the law, we would not only be breaking the law. Let us imagine what would happen if one of these people—someone, say, who had been convicted of murder—were allowed to stay in the UK and then committed that act again, against one of our constituents.

What would the hon. Gentleman be saying to me then?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me gently point out that approximately 30 Members are seeking to contribute. I am keen to accommodate them, but it is imperative that we have short questions and short answers.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I remember the Macpherson report, in which I was tangentially involved, and I would say that we have come a very long way since then. With that in mind, will the Secretary of State confirm that he will give a date soon for the compensation scheme?

Sajid Javid: I can confirm that we will be saying something about the compensation scheme very shortly.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Home Secretary said that he would supply monthly updates to the Home Affairs Committee, but we have not received an update since December, and that referred to the circumstances up to 31 October. Since then a very damning report on the Windrush situation has been published by the National Audit Office, raising a series of concerns about ongoing immigration casework and policies and the impact that they might have. The Home Office has not issued a proper response to that report either. When will we receive a substantial response to its recommendations that recognises the serious anxiety about the possibility that many of the failings relating to the Windrush situation are continuing today?

Sajid Javid: Let me first thank the right hon. Lady and her Committee for their scrutiny of this important issue. She knows that we are absolutely committed to providing her and the Committee with regular updates, and we will continue to do so. We always endeavour to include as much information as we can, and I hope she agrees that we have tried to make those updates as detailed as possible. She mentioned the NAO report, and I welcome that scrutiny as well. We looking into the report carefully in order to establish whether more needs to be done.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for the constructive, honest and compassionate way in which he and his Ministers have dealt with a very difficult situation. However, the treatment of members of the Windrush generation highlighted a number of deep-seated concerns about the manner in which the Home Office operated. Can the Home Secretary reassure the House that all the lessons that can be learned from the situation—not just specifically in relation to the Windrush generation, but in the wider context of the culture of the Home Office—will be learned? In particular, can he reassure us that there will be a greater emphasis on the fact that we are dealing with people, and that this is not just about policy?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am acutely aware that almost every decision that the Home Office makes has an impact on someone’s life, and we must ensure that every single one of those decisions is fair and made appropriately. That is the reason for the lessons learned review and a further, deeper review of some of the operations of the Home Office.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): As the Home Secretary will know, I have encountered dozens of Windrush cases, and the taskforce has dealt with many of them well. However, one of my constituents, Owen Hainsley, will be on the plane that has been discussed. He came here, aged four, in 1977. He has left the country only twice since then, and on neither occasion did he go to Jamaica. He has no family there, but he has three children in this country, all of whom have British citizenship. He is well known on the music scene in Manchester, where he works with disadvantaged young people. He served two years in 2015. His British citizenship should have been regularised, but owing to an administrative error on the part of the Home Office, that did not happen. He is now being deported to a place to which he has not been for more than 40 years.

This is a grey area. Owen Hainsley is not a foreign national in any terms, and we are effectively making him stateless. I dealt with a very similar case—a Windrush
case—in which the Home Office did not deport someone but granted that person, who had a criminal record, indefinite leave to remain. So the Home Secretary does have that discretion. Can he use it in this case, because this is a scandal?

Sajid Javid: The deportations to which the hon. Lady refers took place under the UK Borders Act 2007, which I mentioned earlier and which was debated in the House as a Bill. It gives little if any discretion to the Home Secretary, but every single person who is being deported is a foreign national who has committed a serious offence.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Is not a significant issue in all this the decision made in 2009, by the Labour Government of which the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) was a member, to destroy the landing cards and registry slips that constituted the only official documentation of some people’s arrival in Britain? Was not a mistake made then?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend has highlighted an important point, and it is worth emphasising. Members of the Windrush generation were affected by decisions made by a number of Governments, including the last Government.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Is not one of the lessons of the Windrush that when people have lived in our country for 20, 30 or 40 years, the idea that they should be deported if they do not have precisely the correct documentation is inhumane, and is not supported by the wider public? In the light of the Windrush scandal, will the Home Secretary review the unrealistic and draconian documentation requirements imposed on such people by the Home Office?

Sajid Javid: If the right hon. Gentleman is referring to cases in which someone does not have—to use his own words—precisely the right documentation, of course that should be looked at very carefully. The whole purpose of the taskforce is to work with such individuals to make the process as easy as possible, and to ensure that issues such as incorrect documentation are sorted out.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): As we have already heard, it was a Labour Government who started destroying the landing cards of the Windrush generation. It was also a Labour Government who, under the Harold Wilson regime, forcibly exiled the Chagos islanders from the British Indian Ocean territory. As a result, members of the second and subsequent generations of the Chagos community do not have British citizenship. Will my right hon. Friend commit himself to looking into that as well?

Sajid Javid: I commend my hon. Friend for taking up this issue so energetically on behalf of the Chagos islanders, and I should be happy to discuss it with him further.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): In December last year, the Home Office agreed to support members of the Windrush generation who had been mistreated by the Government with up to £5,000, but four of my constituents have found the arrangements for access to the fund overly stringent. Victims require immediate and ongoing assistance. Does the Home Secretary not agree that we should be ensuring that the people who were affected by the Windrush situation can re-establish themselves in the community? Moreover, there has been no cohesion between central and local government in this regard. I ask the Home Secretary to look at the system and make sure that it works for the most vulnerable people.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady has made an important point about joined-up government and the need to ensure that that approach is taken when we respond to the most difficult cases in particular. I can assure her that the Home Office has been working carefully with a number of other Departments, including the Department for Work and Pensions, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and the Treasury.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that if he did not authorise this latest flight carrying foreign national offenders, he would be failing in his duty of care, and he would be breaking the law?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is correct. It would be breaking the law, and it would mean that we were not putting the safety of our people first.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): In compelling evidence given to the Public Accounts Committee, we heard how difficult it was for Windrush victims to obtain housing. The Home Secretary listed the people whom he was helping, but the fact is that local authorities will need to allocate that housing, and given the squeeze that they are experiencing and the current housing demand, that is just not happening. Will he think again about what central Government can do to ensure that these people are not in the general housing queue, and that local authorities do not have to provide them with much-needed homes?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady makes an important point. As I said at the start, some people may have lost housing or been affected in other ways in their housing, and they are being helped. We are working closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which is speaking to local authorities. Where possible, we are trying to prioritise those cases.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I am grateful for the speedy resolution of individual cases, but will my right hon. Friend say something about the role that those who have been affected are playing in helping to shape the compensation so that we get this right?

Sajid Javid: Yes. When we started work on the compensation scheme, it was right to appoint an independent person, and that is exactly what we did. Martin Forde, QC, travelled across the country and spoke to as many members of the Windrush generation who were affected as possible. He asked for an extension to speak to even more, and we granted that.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I cannot respond to constituents who contact me about deportations tomorrow. They and I want to know whether any of my constituents are on those flights. I have phoned the Immigration
Minister and been stonewalled again and again. The flights need to be suspended so that all individual circumstances can be properly examined. I am sure the Home Secretary agrees that this is an issue of trust and that, at the very least, the Department should engage in good faith with MPs on the matter.

Sajid Javid: I agree with the hon. Lady. I know that she has asked our Department a question, and we are looking into that. I hope she knows that, because I believe that we have communicated to her that we are looking into it. She is right that if any Member of Parliament has a question about any constituent, we will of course help in any way we can.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): All of us who have Jamaican and other Afro-Caribbean communities will have apologised deeply, as I did, for the shameful, inadvertent mistreatment by successive Governments of some of the Windrush generation. I thank the Home Office’s Windrush help desk for its work in quickly resolving the immigration status of my two affected constituents. One has a strong case for compensation. Will my right hon. Friend confirm whether my constituent can file his application before the end of this financial year?

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments, which I welcome. He was right to put things the way that he did. We will issue more details on compensation shortly, but we want to ensure, in the case of his constituent and others who are affected, that it is as generous as it can be.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): In the light of the Sims case, which we heard about a few moments ago, and Sir Martin Forde’s comments, will the Home Secretary commit to further training for the Windrush taskforce in handling cases correctly, particularly complex cases?

Sajid Javid: I have asked for more information on the case of Miss Willow Sims, to which I referred earlier. When I heard her on the radio this morning, I was very concerned and determined to find out more. I do not want to prejudge that—I am waiting for further information—but I can make a commitment that if that information shows that more training is required or something needs to be done to ensure that such a case does not arise again, it will happen.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I know that the Home Secretary recognises that the Windrush generation have made a huge, positive contribution to the life of this country. It has therefore been strange to see Opposition Members defining them by the very small minority who have committed serious criminal offences. However, does my right hon. Friend agree that ensuring that compensation is available for those who have been unduly affected is important and should not be conflated with some of the issues we have heard about from Opposition Members?

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with my hon. Friend.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penzance) (Lab): My constituent Willow Sims came to the UK in the early 1980s and spent part of her childhood in the UK care system. She went on to have a career as a teaching assistant in local primary schools, where I first met her. In October, Willow came to see me. She had failed some immigration checks at work, so she lost her job and her recourse to public funds. My constituent is fully entitled to assistance under the Windrush taskforce scheme, yet due to mistakes at every level of government, and despite numerous representations to the Home Office by Willow, her solicitors and me, going as far back as October, her status has wrongly been brought into question. She now risks eviction from her home. Will the Home Secretary urgently rectify that chaos, apologise to Willow and meet me to discuss her case and what has gone so badly wrong?

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Lady for raising the case, not just today but in October. Had she not done so, Miss Willow Sims might not be getting the support she now gets. I am happy to apologise to Miss Sims for the Home Office’s mistakes in not recognising the importance of her case from the first moment she contacted the Home Office. I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss it further.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Anybody listening would be horrified at some of the cases, and they are not interested in which Government introduced schemes under what Act in what year. Unfairness and injustice must be rooted out wherever they lie, and I trust the Home Secretary to get on and do that. I have considerable sympathy with the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), who raised the matter, and I agree with him that the Windrush scandal is a result of the dog-whistle politics that has plagued immigration. Does my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) made about the tone of the debate. If
she is trying to suggest that there is institutional racism, she must accept that that was what existed under the previous Labour Government.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): According to Movement for Justice, 18 people on the chartered flight are connected to the Windrush generation. One is a grandfather who served in the British Army; another one’s grandfather died as a serving British soldier, and two others are former British servicemen. I therefore do not understand how the Home Secretary can say that they are foreign nationals. I find his tone most disturbing. I am half Jamaican and very proud of it, but I feel that what he says is unhelpful to the Jamaican community in this country. Like him, I am second generation, but I feel that he sounds like a reincarnation of Enoch Powell.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady chooses to lower the tone of the debate when she could try to help her constituents. The whole House is proud of immigrants who have come to this country, whether they are first or second generation, and whether they came from Jamaica, Pakistan or anywhere else. The hon. Lady does herself no service by lowering the tone of the debate.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on securing the urgent question. Will the Home Secretary confirm that 13 of the detainees who are scheduled to be deported this week came to this country as children? We know that there is a grey area in the definition of “British citizen” and “foreign national”; does not the right hon. Gentleman believe that it is time to review it?

Sajid Javid: The law is very clear on this. It focuses on the crime and on the nationality of the individual, as in whether they are British or not. When someone has committed a serious crime such as rape or murder, the law requires that, as a foreign national offender, they should be deported.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I should just point out that the two debates to follow are very heavily subscribed. I am happy to try to accommodate remaining would-be questioners on the understanding that each of them will put a single-sentence question. We will be led in this important matter by Ruth Cadbury.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The Home Office said last year that Windrush applications would be turned round within two weeks, but my constituent, who has retired after many years working as an NHS midwife, is still waiting, six months later. When will the Secretary of State admit that the overstretched immigration system cannot cope with Windrush generation cases and apologise to those who are living in limbo?

Sajid Javid: Most applications are being turned round within a matter of weeks, but if the hon. Lady sends me the details of that case, I will take a closer look at it.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): The Home Secretary says, “The law is very clear on this,” but when I held a Windrush surgery, all the people who came to it had been told by the Home Office that they were not British citizens. They have all now been told that they are British citizens, so I suggest that the law is not very clear and that there are grey areas. I have also been told that someone from my constituency is on that flight. Will he commit to looking into whether there is someone from my constituency on that flight and whether they should be there?

Sajid Javid: If the hon. Lady sends me more information about the individual she has in mind, I will of course look into that case.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State please estimate how many people have had their access to healthcare affected? Also, if an individual has passed away due to being a Windrush victim, is the scheme open to a claim by their family members?

Sajid Javid: We plan to ensure that the scheme is open to family members in such cases.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): My constituent has been waiting since 26 December for a decision on his Windrush application. The process has taken nine times the length of the two-week turnaround period that was promised. That is unacceptable when people cannot work, cannot claim benefits and are struggling to live, even though they are from this country.

Sajid Javid: If the hon. Lady sends me more details, I will take a closer look at that case.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Before the Windrush scandal became the Windrush scandal, many cases took years to resolve and victims disappeared because they feared deportation. To avoid future injustice, will the Secretary of State guarantee that all Windrush-style cases, including those involving people not from the Caribbean or Commonwealth countries, will be dealt with in a similar fashion?

Sajid Javid: The work of the taskforce is open not just to members of the Commonwealth who have come to Britain, but to anyone who came to the UK before 1988.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): Last year, I helped a family in my constituency to get the passports to which they were entitled but were scandalously being denied. The family now find themselves in dire financial straits due to a family member’s terminal illness. When will they be paid the compensation that they are due, and when will they get a decision from the exceptional circumstances fund?

Sajid Javid: The exceptional payments scheme has started to pay out, and decisions are being made. We will be announcing more details of the compensation scheme shortly.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Home Secretary will have heard Members expressing their very real concern about the status of those who are due to be deported this week. Will he therefore personally review the documentation and circumstances of each of those individuals before any deportation takes place?
Sajid Javid: Every one of those cases already has to be reviewed by a Minister.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I have written extensively to the Immigration Minister and to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions about my constituent, a Windrush citizen, who has been denied attendance allowance because she was not in the country during the assessment period. The only reason why she was not in the country was the illegal action of the British Government. Will the Home Secretary now accept that a lack of joined-up working between Government Departments on the Windrush scheme is compounding, increasing and prolonging the injustice that the Windrush citizens are suffering?

Sajid Javid: We work closely with the Department for Work and Pensions, and the hon. Lady gives an example of why that is absolutely necessary. If she wants to give me further details of her constituent’s case, we will look into it as a matter of priority.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Given what the Home Secretary has heard, does he really believe that my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) was inappropriate in his tone? Does he really think that someone is going to take him to court for exercising appropriate discretion, or does he in fact believe that it is right to deport first and ask questions later?

Sajid Javid: When it comes to the deportation of foreign national offenders, a lot of questions are asked first, including on the right of appeal, and we carry out deportations only if they are absolutely correct under the law. Ultimately, it is worth remembering that they are there to protect members of the public.

Mr Speaker: In conclusion to this important series of exchanges, I want to make two points. First, as colleagues will recall, I said nothing whatsoever about the tone of the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). I referred simply to a minor breach of normal procedure in terms of the debate going through the third person, but I made no other comment about tone. This is an extraordinarily important matter affecting people’s lives. People can comment on each other’s tone, but for my part, from the Chair, I do not underestimate the intensity of feeling and the sense of real anger about this subject, which was extremely eloquently voiced by the right hon. Gentleman and many other Members.

Secondly, I have a sense, on the basis of some experience of sitting in the Chair over the past nine and a half years, that this matter will be raised again and again. It affects very vulnerable people, as Members on both sides of the House with any sensitivity will acknowledge, and it will not go away. Quite a lot of activity—I am not saying it is nefarious activity; I am not criticising the Home Secretary—is taking place under the radar, but the purpose of this House is to give voice to grievances and to seek redress for them, and there is nothing to stop Members raising this matter over and over again in the Chamber, day after day, if that is their inclination.

Anna Soubry: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I should like to thank you for your comments, with which I am sure we all agree.

On the matter of tone, I know that the Home Secretary is robust, but he gets a great deal of abuse, even though he might not like to talk about it. I do think that the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) likening the Home Secretary, or indeed any Member of this place, to Enoch Powell is profoundly offensive. Would you agree, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: I note what the right hon. Lady has said, and I sense that the Home Secretary might well feel greatly offended by that comment. He might feel that it does violence to his values, his record or his intentions, but nothing disorderly has happened, and I therefore do not feel that I can intercede. I would just say that we should all weigh our words carefully and remember the precept of “Erskine May” that moderation and—in so far as it can be deployed in matters as serious is this—good humour in the conduct of parliamentary debate tend to conduce to better outcomes. I will leave it there for today.
Leaving the EU: No Deal

Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

Mr Speaker: I now call Tom Brake to make an application for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24. The right hon. Gentleman has up to three minutes in which to make his application.

1.28 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Thank you for granting this request, Mr Speaker. I rise to propose that the House should debate a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration: the consequences of leaving the European Union without a withdrawal agreement or future political agreement. I have been pleased to receive support for this application from Plaid Cymru, which is well represented here today, as well as from the Scottish National party, the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), my Liberal Democrat colleagues and others who are here in the Chamber today.

On Thursday, the Prime Minister will board the latest shuttle to Brussels to attempt to recast the backstop she had painstakingly negotiated over a two-year period. This is the backstop that she described as a necessary guarantee for the people of Northern Ireland, adding that there is no deal available that does not have a backstop in it. Frankly, I doubt very much whether she expects to return from Brussels with anything more than her duty-free. The EU has made it clear for months that the backstop that the Prime Minister secured for the UK is the backstop that is on offer. This is just another round of kicking the can down the road, bringing us two weeks closer to crashing out of the EU. This reckless game is costing jobs, business investment—Nissan being the latest example—and damaging our international standing and credibility.

Airbus said that if the UK left the EU without a deal it would "lead to severe disruption and interruption of UK production." Airbus employs 14,000 people in the UK. Ford warned that a no-deal Brexit would cost the company an estimated £612 million this year. Sainsbury’s, Asda, McDonald’s and others have warned that stockpiling fresh food is impossible and that the UK is reliant on the EU for produce, particularly in March. Standard & Poor’s warned that UK unemployment would rise from 4% to 7% by 2020 in the event of no deal. In the face of mounting evidence of the damage that no deal would cause, leading Brexeters still maintain the pretence that it would do no harm, with some saying that "We want to be out and we know it will work just fine", and that a free trade deal could be "done in an afternoon."

Yesterday, we debated sport in the UK, and we will debate beer and pubs later this week. I do not want to minimise the importance of those debates, but with an uncontrolled departure from the EU just 50 days away, I ask you, Mr Speaker, to allow an urgent debate in this House to consider the Government’s unwillingness to rule out crashing out of the EU without a deal, with all the associated harmful consequences.

Mr Speaker: Let me respond to the right hon. Gentleman, to whom I granted the opportunity of a three-minute application. I have listened carefully to his application. At this time, I am not persuaded that the matter is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24, but I have a little more to say. The right hon. Gentleman is a former deputy Leader of the House, and he will doubtless know that the Standing Order does not allow me to give the reasons for my decision or, at any rate, does not exhort or compel me to do so. However, the House will be aware that the Standing Order states: "In determining whether a matter is urgent the Speaker shall have regard to the probability of the matter being brought before the House in time by other means."

There have of course previously been SO24 debates appertaining to Brexit, and it is perfectly possible and readily imaginable that there may be others in due course.

I do not skit at the right hon. Gentleman. I am conscious of the pressing timescale. I am also conscious that we have been promised a statement on, if memory serves me, Wednesday of next week and a debate and likely votes on Thursday of next week. I genuinely believe that there is something to be said for observing processes taking place outside of this Chamber and coming to a view about what further consideration of this subject will be required.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about the growing proximity to the intended departure day of 29 March, and I have that in my mind. He may rest assured that this matter will not be allowed simply to rest or to linger, nor is it the case that only the Government can choose when it is debated. I think I have demonstrated several times that I do not accept for one moment that only the Government can determine when the matter is debated or, indeed, the terms and amendability or otherwise of any motion. The Chair is rightly the custodian of some of those powers, which I exercise for the benefit of the House. I say no for now, but I have the matter under review, and I feel sure that the right hon. Gentleman and a great many other Members on both sides of the House will be doing the same.

BILL PRESENTED

Kitchens in Rented Accommodation (Benefit Claimants) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Frank Field presented a Bill to require landlords to meet standards for the hygienic storage and preparation of food and the provision of cooking appliances and equipment in accommodation provided for tenants in receipt of Universal Credit or Housing Benefit; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 March, and to be printed (Bill 329).
Crime (Impact Statements)

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

1.34 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for statements made by persons adversely affected by a crime to be used in sentencing proceedings in court; and for connected purposes.

This Bill follows on from the great work by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) with the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018, which allows for judges to charge those who assault our emergency workers under a new offence that doubles the maximum tariff that can be handed out in court.

The Act was a crucial step towards giving prosecutors the ability to ask for a sentence that is proportionate to the injuries caused by attacks to frontline workers in our emergency services. However, my Bill is about ensuring that judges are able to consider the full impact of the cost to communities, as well as to individuals, of losing staff time, which has an impact on public service delivery, as a result of attacks on police officers, firefighters, ambulance workers and many others who put themselves on the frontline to help the public.

The inspiration for this Bill comes from an incident that occurred in my constituency last May, when Humberside police officers attended after early morning reports of a man with a knife wound and evidence of drug use. When they moved to arrest 27-year-old Josse Jackson, he spat at them while telling them that he had hepatitis C and AIDS. Repeatedly threatening to bite them, he told one officer that he would “find out where you live and you will be dead before the end of the week.”

When he was sentenced in October, he received just 13 weeks and was released almost immediately. That left officers with a sense that, no matter the impact of abuse against them, and the demotivation and reluctance to continue on the frontline that it could encourage, it was not relevant and such abuse was therefore acceptable as it had little consequence.

Any of us would find being on the end of such an attack both emotionally and physically taxing but, for those on the frontline, facing conflict on a daily basis, the cumulative strain is immense, and that strain does not lie with one individual, but permeates beyond to teams, departments and organisations. Many of us would be able to take measures to ensure that we do not end up in such a situation again, but that ability is not afforded to frontline workers, who will be expected to run towards situations that could bring them into contact with dangerous individuals and to deal with them professionally and confidently.

Emergency workers often have to take time off to recover following the worst attacks, taking up important staff time and stretching budgets, or be kept off the frontline, reducing levels of other available staff. From April to December 2017 in the west midlands, the local police force lost 356 days—nearly a whole year—while officers recovered from their injuries. The sick pay alone could have provided for another full-time officer or call handlers or PCSOs, but it still does not quantify the additional stress burden on the remaining colleagues who are required to pick up the workload. Nor does it consider the work not done as a result of absence.

Our communities are missing out on an important community presence and resources as a direct result of the actions of criminals towards public sector workers. The professional impact of crimes can be severe and wide reaching, yet there is no national standard for how such impacts are considered in sentencing. We need to change that and to make our justice system more responsive to the effects that crime has on our public servants and our public services.

My Bill would introduce a professional impact statement, to be considered as part of the sentencing process, ensuring that the impact of a crime on public sector workers’ ability to do their jobs is considered when sentences are being handed down. A number of police forces produce professional impact statements when officers and staff are injured in the line of duty. My hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) mentioned on Report during the passage of the 2018 Act that the local Crown prosecutor in Bedfordshire advises officers and staff to give personal impact statements to the court so that they are given the same attention as those of victims. In the west midlands, police chief Dave Thompson outlines the impact on his force and the wider community during sentencing in his area.

There should be a national standard for how such statements are produced and considered. By making professional impact statements part of national sentencing guidance, my Bill would enhance the support to public service workers who have come to harm through their work and send an even stronger message that assault and abuse should never be part of the job for any worker in the UK. My Bill would take the 2018 Act further by acting on calls from the likes of Humberside police for the broader consequence—the impact on the force’s ability to continue its core function—to be considered at sentencing. Professional impact statements would help to ensure that those who attack frontline workers have to pay their full debt to society, by taking into account the impact on our communities of the lost presence of emergency workers on the street, or the criminal damage to equipment, such as ambulances, that means members of the public have to wait longer to get the care they need.

If the justice system is partly intended to reflect the payment required to society, we must recognise the full impact, the full cost, in all its guises to bring about a sense of fairness in justice. We must make it clear that those who rush into dangerous situations to keep us all safe will be given the strongest possible protection should they come to any harm, and my Bill would help to do just that.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Melanie Onn, Chris Bryant, Sir Graham Brady, Gareth Snell, Ruth Smeeth, Ms Harriet Harman, Martin Vickers and Nic Dakin present the Bill.

Melanie Onn accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March, and to be printed (Bill 330).
Police Grant Report

1.41 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): I beg to move.

That the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) for 2019/20 (HC 1896), which was laid before this House on 24 January, be approved.

I start by paying tribute to the police. Coming from a policing family, I have seen their bravery, their dedication and their professionalism. They take extraordinary risks to protect the public day in, day out. I am in awe of what they do to protect us all. They undoubtedly deserve this House’s gratitude and support.

As Home Secretary, my mission is to keep the public safe and, of course, the police have an absolutely crucial part to play. When I took this role, I vowed to stand with them, to support them and to listen to them. I have met police leaders, and I have heard what they have to say. My right hon. Friend, the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, has done the same.

We know the demands the police are facing, how those demands are increasing and how crime is changing and becoming more complex. Previously hidden crimes such as child sexual exploitation are increasingly being reported, which we encourage and welcome. More criminals are moving online, which is bringing fresh challenges.

We are battling the worst spike in violent crime for a decade, and we are giving the police more of the powers they need, such as those in the Offensive Weapons Bill. I vow to ensure they have the tools and resources they need to help keep our communities safe.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I welcome what the Home Secretary says about supporting the police. Can he therefore explain why, since 2010, the Government have cut Merseyside police’s funding by over £90 million?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady is clearly arguing for more police funding, so I hope she welcomes the settlement, including the extra £18 million for her own force.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am sorry that I do not have much voice.

One of the new tools we have given to the police is the ability to take people to court for assaults on emergency workers, including police officers, but it would be a terrible problem if, after bringing in this new law, the police have no time or facilities to implement it. Will the Home Secretary make sure the police are taking this on board seriously and have the time and financial resources to ensure that we protect all our emergency workers?

Some of the violent crime he talks about affects ambulance workers, mental health nurses and nurses in accident and emergency.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and I thank him for his work in introducing the Assaul ts on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018, which the Government were pleased to support. The Act will make an important difference to the police. He is right to raise the importance of making sure there are proper resources behind the Act to help it to make that difference, and I therefore hope that he will welcome the settlement today.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): The Home Secretary has already alluded to how policing has changed considerably over the past x number of years. Does he support the national campaign, which has over a quarter of a million supporters, demanding a police royal commission? We have not had one for almost 60 years and policing has changed considerably during the intervening period. We hear so many different stories about resource, or the lack of it, and about what modern policing is. Does he agree that the most effective way to deal with this so that the public, and even the Government, understand exactly what policing is today would be to have a police royal commission?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Because of the change in demand caused by the rising demand of certain crimes and by the complexity of certain crimes, it is important to make sure that the Home Office, the National Police Chiefs Council and others are continually looking at this. I am not convinced that a royal commission is the answer, because it may lead to decisions being delayed or not being made, but he makes an important general point about making sure we are on top of what is needed by considering the changes and the complexity of crime.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): My right hon. Friend has rightly drawn attention to the challenges facing the police. Is it fair that, in facing those challenges, so much of their time is taken up by dealing with mental health emergencies that, frankly, are properly the concern of another Department of State?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. It is not fair if police time is taken up by issues that should be dealt with by, in this case, health professionals. This has been recognised by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, who has committed to using some of the extra resources the Government are now putting into the NHS to help to relieve the police and to work with them more closely.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sajid Javid: I will give way one more time, and then I want to make some progress.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): May I make the Home Secretary aware that in parts of Coventry, both in affluent parts and in less well-off parts, there has been an increase in burglaries and knife crime? The police used a dispersal order in the centre of Coventry on Saturday after a young man was badly stabbed. Will the Home Secretary increase police numbers in the west midlands, particularly in Coventry, where I am told by the police that they operate at only 75%?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman raises the very important issue of knife crime, and I am sorry to hear about that incident in Coventry. This is about powers, which is why the Offensive Weapons Bill is bringing new powers for the police, but it is also about resources. I therefore hope that he will support the Government’s settlement today because of the extra £34 million it will provide to his local force.

Several hon. Members rose—
Sajid Javid: I must make some more progress. I will give way later.

The settlement provides the biggest increase in police funding since 2010, up to an extra £970 million in 2019-20. This will boost capacity and help forces recruit the extra officers they have told me they need. This is a significant increase. Last year, the House approved an additional £460 million for policing, including from the council tax increase. The latest workforce figures show that, by September 2018, this was starting to pay off, with officer numbers up by 466 in that year. At the time, the Policing Minister, who has shown steadfast support for the police, indicated that our intention was to provide a similar settlement this year, subject to improved efficiency, productivity and financial transparency. The police have met those conditions.

The police are on track to deliver £120 million in commercial savings by 2020-21. They are adopting more digital technology, including mobile working. All police and crime commissioners have published strategies demonstrating how they plan to use their financial reserves. They have kept their side of the bargain, and I am keeping mine. I am going further than we promised last year to provide the support they really need.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): People in Corby and east Northamptonshire want to see more police out on the beat, catching criminals and deterring crime. Will my right hon. Friend be impressing on police and crime commissioners that a good chunk of the additional funding being made available should be directed towards that priority?

Sajid Javid: Yes, my hon. Friend’s point is an important one. He knows that with PCCs there is a lot of independence in setting priorities, but we work carefully and closely with police forces, including his, which will benefit by an additional £9 million through this settlement, to make sure that those strategies are the right ones.

Mr Clive Bets (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I thank the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service for the supportive comments he has made about the improvements that South Yorkshire police force has made in the past year. However, it has the legacy issues of Hillsborough and child sexual exploitation in Rotherham to deal with, and each year it has to come to the Government with an application for a special grant. It has been given that, but the grant has to be top-sliced, putting an additional burden on police funding. Will the Home Secretary agree to a meeting with the South Yorkshire PCC and local MPs, involving either him or the Policing Minister, to see whether we can find a better way to deal with these issues in the future?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman highlights that there are sometimes special situations, and special grants are needed to deal with exactly what he has mentioned. I am happy to make sure that Home Office Ministers meet him to discuss that further, as it is a very important point.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for understanding the need and coming up with a much better settlement for us. Does he agree that Thames Valley, which contains fast-growing areas of the country such as mine, where a lot of extra housing is going in, needs some extra money just to keep pace with the extra number of people who require a police service?

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with my right hon. Friend on that, and I thank him for his support. He highlights the need for this extra funding, and I know that he will welcome the support that will be provided—I believe it is almost £34 million—to his force.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Does the Home Secretary agree that as a result of having 21,000 fewer police officers on our streets, our intelligence-gathering capabilities have been severely restricted? Does he also agree that the proposal he is putting forward today is just nowhere near enough?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will know that, when it comes to evidence gathering, a lot is needed by the police; it is not just about resources, although they play an important role. She will know that today’s settlement gives a significant increase for her local force. I know that she supports that, so I look forward to seeing her in the Lobby.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sajid Javid: I am going to make progress, but I will give way later on.

I want to be clear with the House on how this increase of almost £1 billion breaks down. Government grants to PCCs will rise by £161 million, which will protect their grant funding in real terms. This package includes an additional £12 million for the Met, to recognise the extra costs and challenges of policing in London. We will allocate more than £153 million to help forces manage increases in pensions costs. We are investing £90 million in much-needed capabilities to combat serious and organised crime at national, regional and local levels. Funding for counter-terrorism policing will increase by £59 million next year, to £816 million—that is £160 million more than we planned at the last spending review. We will support forces through a continued investment of £175 million in the police transformation fund and £495 million to replace and upgrade critical police technology infrastructure.

We are giving PCCs the flexibility they need to use their precept to raise more public money where it is needed most. We have listened to requests from PCCs and empowered them to increase the amount they can raise through council tax precepts. This will allow them to ask for an additional £2 a month per household without the need for a local referendum. The extra cost to a typical household will be up to £24 a year. We know that money is tight, and we did not take this decision lightly. The decision to use this flexibility is up to locally elected PCCs—they must make the case to their electorates. Providing this additional flexibility will allow them to raise up to £509 million in total. Many PCCs have welcomed the funding settlement we set out in December.

Almost all PCCs in England have chosen to use this new council tax flexibility in full, and local people have shown their support. For example, 6,500 people responded to the PCC’s precept consultation in Hampshire, with 76% indicating that they support the proposed increase. In Suffolk, nearly 70% voted for the full £24 rise. PCCs
have been explaining what they want to use this extra funding for, and I am delighted that many of them plan to use it to strengthen frontline policing. They are consulting on plans to use the money to recruit more than 2,800 extra officers, potentially leading to the biggest annual increase in numbers for more than 10 years. If all PCCs use their full precept next year, overall police funding will have increased by £2 billion in just four years.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Police recorded crime figures for the last full year showed that police areas with the highest number of crimes per 1,000 people have received the smallest increase in funding. Cleveland has the highest crime figures yet it has the lowest increase. The Minister has ignored the letter from Cleveland MPs about our budget, so will he explain this bizarre outcome or, better still, recognise that he has got the Cleveland settlement very wrong?

Sajid Javid: First, the hon. Gentleman will be all too aware, given his closeness to this, that there are some other issues in Cleveland as well. He talks about resources and funding, and there is a £7 million increase for Cleveland in this settlement. If he means what he says, I am sure he will be joining me in the Lobby tonight.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Let me ask the Home Secretary the question that Ministers seem reluctant to answer. Police numbers have fallen by 21,000, and by 2,000 in the west midlands, and crime is soaring. Are the Government seriously suggesting that there is no link between falling police numbers and increasing crime?

Sajid Javid: Where the hon. Gentleman is right is that there have been increases in certain types of crime. For example, as I said earlier, there have been increases in serious violence, cyber-crime, and the reporting of sexual offences, especially historical sexual offences. We welcome such reporting, including of historical offences; we want to see more of those being reported so that we can investigate more. It does require more resource and, in some cases, with some forces, it also requires changes in practices. He has raised his concern for the West Midlands police force and making sure there are enough resources. I believe that there is about £34 million more for his force, which represents a significant increase. It is fair to say that it is more than would have been expected by the force this time last year. If he supports his local force and wants to see those resources going to it, I am sure he will vote with the Government later this afternoon.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): May I press the Home Secretary a little more on these figures? I am talking about the support that local forces get from his Department, not what is being passed on to local council tax payers. The West Midlands PCC has estimated that simply to stand still West Midlands police force needs an increase in excess of £24 million. As the additional amount the Home Secretary is putting forward is just over £15 million, how is that anything other than a real-terms cut?

Sajid Javid: Again, the hon. Gentleman, like so many other Opposition Members, has raised the issue of resources. That is why I am sure he will welcome the biggest cash increase collectively since 2010. He talks about the West Midlands force, as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) did. That force is receiving an increase of more than £34 million. I gently point out that the force has £85 million in reserves, which is one of the highest levels of reserves in the country, so the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) should have a chat with his PCC to ask whether he can do a better job.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It may have slipped the Home Secretary’s mind, but he did not actually answer a very important question. Is he seriously suggesting that there is no link between falling police numbers and rising crime?

Sajid Javid: I have been clear that in recent years we have seen an increase in certain types of crime, but it would be lazy of any of us to attribute that to just one factor. I recognise that resources are an important issue, which is why we are giving this record settlement today.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sajid Javid: I will make some progress, then take some further interventions in a moment.

Supporting policing is not just about money; the police chiefs I have met have also consistently raised concerns about, for example, their officers’ welfare. That is why there will be more support for frontline officers, with a new national wellbeing centre of excellence. We will also help forces to identify mental health issues earlier with psychological screening, so that officers can access support and, where appropriate, stay in work.

The impact of next year’s funding increase will be immense. Forces will be able to continue to recruit and fill crucial capability gaps. They will be able to prevent more crime and deliver better outcomes for victims. We will work with PCCs and chief constables to make the most of this funding settlement. We are asking them to use the extra investment to address four priority areas next year. First, they should continue efficiency savings. Forces must see beyond their own boundaries and continue to join up to get better procurement deals and drive more benefits from shared services. Secondly, they should resolve the shortfall in detective numbers identified by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services. We will work with the College of Policing and the National Police Chairs’ Council to support forces in meeting this challenge. Thirdly, they should continue improvements in productivity, with a view to delivering £50 million of productivity savings in 2019-20. That will include the smarter use of data and improved digital capabilities, including mobile working, where appropriate. Finally, I expect all forces to respond effectively to the threat from serious and organised crime. This is an area that cannot and must not be ignored by anyone. I have delivered on my own promise to the police, and I now expect them to respond to the challenge that we have set them, as they did so well last year.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Home Secretary accept that the real lived experience of many people in Greater Manchester is that many crimes do not even get investigated, and are simply recorded? In many communities, police stations
have been closed altogether, and in my own town we do not have a single custody cell left open for a population of quarter of a million.

Sajid Javid: Like so many Members, the hon. Gentleman makes an issue of the need for more resources. I have met his local chief constable and other police officers from his force, and they are doing some excellent work in difficult circumstances, with some particular challenges in Manchester. I hope the hon. Gentleman will join me in welcoming today’s settlement, which contains an additional £35 million for his local force. If he wishes to discuss the needs of his local force further, I would be happy to meet him, as would the Policing Minister, to listen more.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I welcome the biggest rise in police funds since 2010, which is excellent news for Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. However, will my right hon. Friend concede that, as a force, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight has been historically underfunded relative to its size? When he considers future funding formulae, will he therefore take into account the historical underfunding of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight and seek to rectify it?

Sajid Javid: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that commitment. He makes an important point and I am glad he has raised it. We have been clear in the Home Office that when the upcoming spending review, on which I will say more in a moment, comes around, it is important that we also look at the national funding formula for policing.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman seems to be saying that the increases he is talking about will lead to better crime-fighting results, but he is denying that the cuts that led to 1,000 fewer officers in the Merseyside police force have affected the rise in crime. Will he now answer the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey)? There is actually a link between police funding and crime levels, and he should come clean about it. The right hon. Gentleman cannot claim that if money is going up, crime rates will get better, but deny there is a link the other way around.

Sajid Javid: I thought the hon. Lady was taking over my speech for me, but she raises an important point. On fighting crime, as I mentioned earlier, there has been a particular rise in certain types of crime, especially those that are more complex and so by definition require more resource. That is what the settlement recognises—that where crime, especially more complex crime, has risen, more resources should be provided. This is a record settlement—the largest since 2010—and contains £18 million for the hon. Lady’s local force.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Will the Home Secretary confirm that the question before the House on the police report is about national support for police forces and has nothing to do with council tax rises, which may or may not happen? Furthermore, will he admit to the House that if one looks at where the rise in knife crime has been greatest, one will see that it is in those areas that are more dependent on national support?

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Gentleman is wrong in saying that this debate is just about national support. The report also includes the Government’s decision, subject to the will of the House, to allow an increase in the precept of up to £24 without a referendum, as I mentioned earlier. That is part of the total funding package, to which I have referred, of £970 million.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sajid Javid: I need to make some progress. The police will continue to face pressures, and my commitment to them is ongoing. The Policing Minister has also shown unwavering support and will of course continue to do so. This is the last settlement before the next spending review, which will set out the resources available to the police in future years. I will continue to make police resourcing a priority in that spending review. Once again, though, it is of course a two-way street. The police must continue to improve efficiency, productivity and effectiveness, to provide value for money, and to give the public the top-class service they deserve. I will back them in the spending review, but any increased support must come with an important condition: the police must commit to a long-term action plan to further improve effectiveness and productivity. I am determined to give them the investment that they need, but it must be used efficiently. We have the best police force in the world, but they must also be as effective as they can be.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): In Warwickshire, we have one of the smallest police forces in the country, but this year’s and last year’s settlements are enabling the police and crime commissioner to put in a further 150 police officers and staff. Will my right hon. Friend look carefully at the funding for county areas, which are under great pressure from a lot of criminality and problems coming from the city areas, which have traditionally been funded a lot more significantly than the county areas?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and it draws me back to my earlier comment in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) about the national funding formula for policing. We are committed to looking at that when we consider longer term funding through the spending review process.

The Government are determined to respond to the threat from terrorism, organised crime and serious violence, and the police are of course a vital partner in that work. We must give them the resources they need to get the job done, which is why we are proposing the largest increase in police funding since 2010.

Sir Edward Davey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for the Home Secretary to tell me, in answer to my question, that the £24 that the Government are allowing local police authorities to raise is in the report, when I have checked the report and cannot find any mention of the £24 to which he drew the House’s attention? That report is the subject of tonight’s vote.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): In fairness, I think you have clarified the record in the way you have read the report.
Sajid Javid: Today, every Member of this House can show their support for this increase, for public safety and for our police. I commend the motion to the House.

2.9 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): There can be no question but that the biggest indictment of this Government’s record on law and order is their long-standing failure to fund the police properly. Sadly, that is as true of this year’s funding allocation as it is of any other year’s. I have to say to the Home Secretary, in the kindest possible manner, that he is brazen in expecting Opposition Members to follow him into the Lobby on this funding settlement. We would be less than responsible if we voted for one that is patently inadequate. It is not just Members on the Opposition Benches who are saying that but ordinary police officers. The chair of the Police Federation, John Apter, said:

“This appears to be a quick fix. A sticking plaster solution that injects extra money in the short-term, but one which sees the burden falling unfairly on local council tax payers.”

Senior police officers think that this settlement is inadequate. The president of the Police Superintendents Association, Gavín Thomas, has said:

“Whilst I welcome this injection of funding, it is still far short of what the service requires to effectively meet the challenges of 21st century policing.”

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. In Derbyshire, my own area, the Government’s increase in the grant does not even meet the increase in the police pension costs. There is a shortfall of £400,000, which has to be met by council tax payers before they even start to contribute towards the extra policing that we so desperately need, government-set pay increases and rising fuel costs, government-set pay increases and rising fuel costs, government-set pay increases and rising fuel costs.

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend makes an important point on behalf of her constituents in Derbyshire.

The West Midlands police and crime commissioner says publicly what many PCCs say privately—that this Government funding does not come anywhere near to covering what the force requires just to stand still.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): On that point, does my right hon. Friend think that it is the outspoken nature of the police and crime commissioner’s comments that has led to the Home Secretary trying to abolish his job?

Ms Abbott: I would never accuse the Home Secretary of being so petty. This is what the West Midlands police and crime commissioner said:

“This government funding does not come anywhere near to covering what the force requires...£25.6m is needed to cover extra pension costs, government-set pay increases and rising fuel costs this year.”

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): I strongly endorse what my right hon. Friend is saying. People in my constituency will have listened with incredulity to the Home Secretary talking about extra resources when, yesterday, they were told that Newton-le-Willows police station will close, except for a few hours on a Friday, precisely because there is a lack of resources. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, on this Government’s watch, there are fewer police officers and they are further away from the communities that they seek to serve?

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend makes a very important point.

Having spoken about what policing professionals think about this settlement, I have to stress that it does not take policing professionals to make the public aware of the consequences of the failure to provide resources and therefore police capacity. All over the country, the public are aware of issues such as the delays in responding to 999 calls. The inspectorate of constabulary, in its annual review, found instances of the police taking days to respond to calls that should have been acted on within an hour. At a recent meeting in Wolverhampton to discuss public safety, I found many people saying that they had reported instances of open drug dealing, for instance, but that no police officers had turned up—nothing was done. This all points to a lack of capacity.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, on this Government’s funding as a capital city, which means that resources come from elsewhere. Could that perhaps be reflected in any settlement?

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Later in my remarks, I will come to how the Home Office manages resources in general.

Ministers seem to remain in denial about the consequences of their actions. At least the Home Secretary was able to admit on the BBC that the Government have cut 21,000 police officers, but, as my hon. Friends have elicited in questioning, Ministers continue to insist, almost alone in the country, that lower police numbers have had no negative effect in the fight against crime. That is an absurd idea.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend recognise that, apart from Leicestershire, where there has been a very small increase in the number of police community support officers, the only part of the country where there has been such a rise is Wales, where there has been an increase of 217 PCSOs since 2010? Will she join me in praising the Welsh Labour Government for funding 500 PCSOs across Wales and standing up for the people of Wales when this Government are failing them?

Ms Abbott: I certainly join my hon. Friend in congratulating the Government of Wales, particularly on their emphasis on community policing.

The real record of the UK Government is this: police officer numbers have not been this low in decades, chief constables up and down the country are warning about the consequences of the cuts in their areas and in their forces, and police-recorded violent crime is now at its highest level on record. Earlier, the Home Secretary tried to ascribe that increase to better recording of crime, but he is not supported on that by the Office for National Statistics, which says:

“Over the last year we’ve seen rises in vehicle offences, robbery, and some lower-volume but higher-harm types of violence.”
Recorded knife crime offences are at their highest level since records began. We know that the effectiveness of the police has been compromised, as arrests have halved in a decade and the sanction detection rate of charges and cautions has plummeted. Tory cuts have consequences.

Tom Pursglove: I well recall the right hon. Lady's predecessor arguing from the Dispatch Box, back in 2015-16, that the Government should cut police spending by 10%. Does she regret her party's former Front-Bench team making that case, because if we extrapolate her argument out, would not that mean that we would have even fewer officers today?

Ms Abbott: I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the fact that the Labour party is under new management now.

This may be, as Ministers say, the largest funding increase since 2010, but it is still inadequate, as ordinary police officers, senior police officers and PCCs say.

Ms Angela Eagle: My right hon. Friend is recognising the truth that resources are connected to results when it comes to dealing with crime. Does she agree that the cuts that have seen 1,000 officers disappear from the Merseyside force have created a situation where those who are committing crimes see less evidence of the police being able to follow them up, which creates a view on the street that lawlessness can be got away with? That actually encourages criminality while making it much harder for the law-abiding to report it to the police.

Ms Abbott: I agree with my hon. Friend. Of course, on Merseyside we have also seen an alarming rise in knife crime.

Part of the problem is the new demands on policing to which the Home Secretary referred. However, an increasing problem is that, with the collapse of public sector funding elsewhere, the police have become the public service of last resort, particularly in relation to issues such as mental health. We will be debating this later this afternoon, but central Government have taken 60%—£16 billion—out of local government funding since 2010. Cuts to youth services, housing and schools must have a bearing on levels of crime, particularly youth crime.

Let me touch on something that is often not discussed—the problem with having annual funding reviews. Ministers will be aware of the long-standing concern about annual funding. City of London police has said:

"Annualised funding allocations result in short term strategies that deliver short term impact", and that they are a constraint. The PCC for Northamptonshire, Stephen Mold, said that that the "imposition of one year funding settlements...hamper effective long term financial planning".

And the PCC for Dorset, Martyn Underhill, said that the "absence of any indication of funding beyond 12 months" compromises the ability to formulate "a realistic medium term financial plan".

Jack Dromey: My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, standing up for our police service. The Government may be in denial about the clear link between falling numbers and rising crime, but will my right hon. Friend join me in saying that what is also wrong is the grotesque unfairness on the part of the Government? Why is it that the high-need West Midlands police service gets cut by 25%, while Surrey police service—with much lower need and lower crime levels—gets cut by 11%? It is not just about cutting the police service; it is about the grotesque unfairness that goes with it.

Ms Abbott: I agree with my hon. Friend on the question of unfairness, particularly in relation to the precept, but I will come to that issue in a few minutes.

The Home Secretary needs to face up to the fact that there is an issue regarding the poor overall financial management of the police by the Home Office. Let me remind him what the National Audit Office had to say last year about the Home Office's overall management of police finances:

"We concluded that there were significant gaps in the Department's understanding of demand and of pressures on the service, and it needed to be better informed to discharge its duties of overseeing the police and distributing funding."

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I completely agree with my right hon. Friend. Does she agree that the knife crime prevention orders that were announced this week as a late addition to the Offensive Weapons Bill have had no cost impact assessment whatever, that there is no evidential basis for them and no assessment of the impact on equalities, and that introducing them is therefore very short-sighted and probably expensive and ineffective?

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of knife crime prevention orders. One problem is that the issue is not the state of the law, but policing capacity. The National Audit Office also said:

"The Home Office's light touch approach to overseeing police forces means it does not know if the police system is financially sustainable. It lacks a long-term plan for policing and significant gaps remain in its understanding of demand for police services and their costs."

And this brazen Home Secretary expects us to join him in the Lobby tonight.

Let me move on to the precept, because I cannot leave any discussion about the funding of the police without mentioning how Ministers insist on talking as if allowing PCCs to raise more money through the precept is somehow new central Government funding. I would have thought that Home Office Ministers might have learnt from the admonition of the chair of UK Statistics Authority, Sir David Norgrove, who recommended that

"the Home Office's Head of Profession for Statistics speak to communications colleagues about the importance of clear public statements about police funding and ensure they understand the structure of police funding."

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Ms Abbott: I am trying to make some progress.
Maybe the chair of the UK Statistics Authority should have spoken to Ministers. Ministers want to claim that allowing an increase in the precept to fund the police somehow counts as a loosening of the purse strings. It really is not. The precept is not some magic money tree.

Vicky Ford: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Ms Abbott: I am afraid that I have to make progress.

The precept is a tax; it is paid for by increasing charges on residents.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the powerful speech that she is making. Does she agree that areas such as Barnsley will be able to raise significantly less money than wealthier areas? This is absolutely outrageous. Crime is going up, police numbers are going down and this Government are in complete denial.

Ms Abbott: I agree. The precept is a tax, and Ministers know perfectly well that urban forces tend to be able to raise less per head from council tax than those in more rural areas. Urban forces such as the Metropolitan police and the West Midlands, Greater Manchester and West Yorkshire forces rely more on central Government grants for their funding than rural forces.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): There is also a direct shift of spending to local forces on pension liabilities, which the Government are deliberately moving. The pension costs are going to be £330 million, yet the grant to local police forces is less than half that, at £153 million. In the case of Durham, that means that the police force’s pension allocation and core funding allocation will all be wiped out by this single pension liabilities debt, which has been moved on to it.

Ms Abbott: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. The precept is not a progressive tax.

Vicky Ford: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Ms Abbott: The precept is a regressive tax that bears down disproportionately—[Interruption. ] Had the hon. Lady waited, I might have given way.

The precept is a regressive tax that bears down disproportionately on poorer people and poorer regions. It is unfair on the population within a given region and it is unfair between regions. As the Police Federation said:

“They are passing the buck of funding the police service to the public by doubling the council tax precept that police and crime commissioners are allowed to charge.”

This is no way to fund a cohesive police force.

We see a rise in violent crime, cuts to police numbers and increasing concern about public safety. This Government have let down ordinary police officers and the public. Their overall management of police funding is demonstrably poor. And no, we will not be joining the Home Secretary in the Lobby tonight.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Lots of Members wish to speak and I want to get everybody in, because this issue is important to every Member of Parliament. My suggestion is that we have a six-minute time limit, but those who can speak for less than six minutes will be very welcome.

2.28 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I am pleased that the total resources for Bedfordshire police will receive a welcome increase next year to £112.7 million from the current £104.6 million. However, even between rural forces, there is a difference in the ability to raise revenue from band D properties. For example Hertfordshire, which is a neighbouring force, has many more band D properties than Bedfordshire, and that is something of which the Home Office needs to be aware.

It is often said in the House that the Government’s first duty is to defend this country. I would agree with that regarding our wonderful armed services, but I think we would also all agree that that duty to defend also relates to our constituents as they go about their everyday business in their homes and at their places of work.

Because of the way in which Bedfordshire is configured, there are significant issues about how the Bedfordshire police force works for my constituents and for Central Bedfordshire Council—the local authority in the middle of Bedfordshire. There is significant demand on police resourcing in Bedford and in Luton, in particular, which means that the middle part of the county is often extremely challenged. We are also one of 19 police forces to suffer from damping, which was introduced by Labour in 2004. In 2015, this Government had the courage to state that that was unfair. They tried to look at revising the national police funding formula to reverse the unfair impact of damping, which affects 18 forces along with Bedfordshire. In Bedfordshire’s case, that means a loss of about 90 officers a year—about £3.3 million of funding that we have lost every year since 2004. I would expect that issue to be dealt with as we look forward to next year’s comprehensive spending review, which the Home Secretary quite rightly pointed to. There is good news on this year’s funding, but still more work to do regarding next year’s very important comprehensive spending review.

I am struck by the fact that the police are less local than they used to be. Many years ago, there would be police officers living in individual villages in my constituency. Up until 1 October 2012, there were fully-functioning, 24/7 first responder police stations in Leighton Buzzard and in Dunstable. I want to restore that state of affairs. We have had incidences of shoplifting in our supermarkets, handbags being stolen from ladies outside nightclubs and bicycles being stolen from children, and when my constituents have rung the police, no one has been available. We also have issues with county lines operations—drug gangs coming up from London or down from Birmingham—which have had a significant impact on Bedfordshire police.

As has been said, we ask the police to do too much, particularly with regard to mental health. A failure to regulate children’s homes properly puts significant extra burdens on police resources when the police have to find children who have run away. The owners of those homes should be doing much more and should be far more responsible. I will shortly be taking that issue up.
with a Minister in the Department for Education. Significant challenges to policing and to law and order arise from the prevalence of Traveller sites in my constituency. We have had three major incidences of modern slavery—this is all a matter of public record and fact—and considerable extra demands are placed on Bedfordshire police as a result.

The chief constable wrote to me recently to say that on Sunday 16 September last year, the force literally ran out of officers as it had to deal with seven teenagers being stabbed in Luton, four rapes, five prison officers being assaulted in Bedford prison, a fatality in a road traffic incident, a 16-year-old being murdered in Bedford, and people with gunshot wounds coming into the accident and emergency department of Luton and Dunstable Hospital. That was a particularly demanding Sunday, but such demand is not unusual in Bedfordshire.

We should look at what the previous Mayor of London did through the Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime when he identified the MOPAC 7, which were the seven crimes of most concern to the public: burglary, vandalism, criminal damage, theft from motor vehicles, theft of motor vehicles, violence with injury, and theft from the person. He focused on driving down those seven areas of crime, and that was successful. If we could relieve the police of some additional duties—perhaps regarding mental health and children’s homes—that are not properly their responsibility, they could go back to those seven really important areas.

We need to think about what builds law-abiding communities. Cicero said in 52 BC: “We have a natural propensity to love our fellow men, and that, after all, is the foundation of all law.”

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous). I agree with him on one specific point: we really do need a better understanding of why mental health is a problem within crime and of how it should be dealt with more appropriately than is currently the case.

I do at least agree with the Home Secretary on two points. First, he was right to pay tribute to the work that the police do on behalf of us and our communities. It is only the police who take the risk of trying their best to protect us. Secondly, I agree that it is his job to keep the people of this country and our communities safe. However, the sad fact is that although he acknowledges that that is the case, he does not seem to do much about trying to turn it into reality.

Much of what I say will be about facts and figures, but it is important to say that behind those facts and figures lie some incredibly terrible human tragedies. I will talk about knife crime in a moment. That is about a young life lost needlessly and, more than that, about a family who, for the rest of their lives, will be left asking, “What if?” We must always be mindful that while facts and figures tell one story, the effect on people’s lives is often much more pronounced and vivid than the figures alone show.

First, inevitably, I want to talk about funding for Merseyside police. My hon. Friends the Members for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) and for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) both referred, in slightly different ways, to the way in which the loss of central Government funding has affected policing in our constituencies. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) made a similar point about the closure of a police station in his constituency as an example of how things play out on the ground. My hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood rightly pointed out that since 2010-11, the Merseyside police force has lost £90,396,258 of central Government funding. That is a lot of money, and it has consequences. It means that we have lost over 1,000 police officers, which must have an impact on crime. We have lost over 200 PCSOs, and that in itself must have an impact on crime, at least in the sense of how the police get information about what is going on in communities. We cannot hide from the fact that there has to be a direct relationship between police on the ground and the ability to deal with crime.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) was right when he pointed out in an intervention on the Home Secretary that the additional money that the Government have provided will mostly cover only the additional cost of pensions. On Merseyside, of the £8.8 million of additional money that will be provided through the central Government grant, which is of course welcome, £7.8 million will go directly to plugging the gap in pensions.

At the same time, we are experiencing steep rises in very serious crimes. On Merseyside, over the past 12 months, knife crime has increased by 32%. I have talked about the impact of that on young lives. My hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood and I, along with others, want to get into a discussion with the Government about how the problem can be better dealt with by giving young people alternatives to a life of crime and by providing the police with the ability to intervene more effectively. After many attempts, we have not even been able to get a meeting with the Policing Minister. I have asked him in previous debates to meet me to discuss this, but answer comes there none. There has also been a massive 47% rise in domestic abuse, which means that whole families are in terrible crisis, with terrible problems.

There is so much more to say, but to keep within the limits you have set, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will conclude by simply saying this. The Government have done too little too late to resolve the problem that our communities and police forces face. Frankly, if the first job of the Government and the Home Secretary is to deal with community safety, I am afraid that this settlement goes nowhere near assuring people that they will be able to carry out that duty.

2.40 pm

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): It is good to see my right hon. Friend the Policing Minister on the Front Bench. I have pursued him with vigour for some months on the issue of police funding, including for Warwickshire. I thank him for the efforts he has made, the case he has put to the Treasury and what has been achieved so far, with additional police funding this year of up to £970 million. My constituents will be pleased because we face some significant issues in my constituency at the moment. We suffer a lot of cross-border crime that comes from the larger cities in the west midlands—
particularly crimes such as car key burglary, car jacking and burglary—and that has weighed heavily on my constituency in the last two years or so. I am therefore extremely grateful that extra resources will go to Warwickshire police, which it can use to bolster not only its response, but the prevention of those crimes.

Before I talk more about funding, I want to thank the police officers of Warwickshire for their determination and for the hard work they do for the police. We have a neighbourhood watch Facebook group made up of 15,000 residents, who provide the police with information about issues across my constituency.

For example, around Christmas time, there was a massive spate of car crime, including car key burglaries. Because of the work of the community and the police together, the person committing those crimes was apprehended. Unfortunately only admitted to 15 of those crimes and, despite perpetrating a spate of crimes across the area and being a repeat offender, they received a mealy three-month sentence. That is not a matter for my right hon. Friend the Minister, but it is certainly one for the Justice Secretary. We must support police in our communities, but our courts and judicial system must also support our police to ensure that when they do their job, they are backed up.

Warwickshire is one of the smallest forces in the country, as the Minister knows. Our police and crime commissioner has been very happy with the last two settlements. He ran a significant consultation with local people on the precept to which 2,400 people responded, the vast majority of whom confirmed that they would be willing to spend an extra £2 per month—£24 a year—to see more police on the streets. As a result of last year’s changes, we see 50 more officers on the streets in Warwickshire. As a result of this year’s changes, we will see another 85 officers and another 15 police staff, including a number of investigators, who are extremely important in bringing offenders to book.

There is a balance to be struck with council tax. The public in my area have been quite content to pay some extra on their council tax in the last two years, but I am not sure that that is a good long-term strategy. Opposition Front Benchers seem to say that council tax takes money from local taxpayers and Government money is not taxpayers’ money, but of course it is all taxpayers’ money, so we need to strike a balance. Any money that the Government or police forces spend is taxpayers’ money.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Marcus Jones: I will not give way because of the time limit that Mr Deputy Speaker said we should observe. We have to get the balance right between the money we collect in national taxes and give to our police service and the money we collect locally.

Finally, I want to mention another local issue that I hope will be picked up in the spending review, which is what I call “Warwexit”. Unfortunately, as the Minister will be aware, the strategic alliance between West Mercia police and Warwickshire police, through which each force has saved £35 million, has been abruptly brought to an end by West Mercia. I hope that in the spending review, the Minister and the Treasury will look carefully at the impact on Warwickshire, bearing in mind that it was not part of bringing the arrangement to an end.

I welcome the settlement. It is a good step in the right direction, but we still need to do more to make sure that our police have the right resources to keep our local population safe.

2.46 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): As my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) made clear, central Government funding for Merseyside police has been cut by more than £90 million since 2010. As a consequence, we have lost almost a quarter of our police officers. There has been a commensurate loss in civilian staff, who are down by a third. We have also lost 43% of our PCSOs, who are the eyes and ears of the police on our streets, the cornerstone of neighbourhood policing and an early warning system of incipient street and gang problems. The loss of those PCSOs will cause problems.

That lamentable decline in policing capacity has been the deliberate choice of the Lib Dem-Tory coalition Government from 2010 and the Tory Governments since 2015. They have all chosen to undermine public service provision in our great northern cities, including Liverpool, in the name of economic necessity, but this “austerity” has actually been a political project in pursuit of the ideology of a smaller state. It has affected Merseyside police severely. As a direct consequence of our police force being weakened, crime has been increasing in the last five years, and it is up overall by 162.5% on Merseyside. The argument peddled by Ministers that that has nothing to do with the £90 million cut in resource, and the loss of a quarter of our police and 43% of our PCSOs is laughably unconvincing. My constituents are not fooled; they know there is a link.

Just in the last year on Merseyside, overall crime is up by 12%, but that figure hides worrying trends that are developing: violent crime is up by 26% in one year; burglary is up by 23% in one year; drug crime is up by 25% in one year; and possession of weapons is up by a staggering 46% in one year. The Minister will know—my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley reminded him—that Merseyside colleagues and I have met Ministers over the last three years to discuss the increasing incidence of firearms discharges and shootings on Merseyside due to increasing and worrying gang-related serious and organised crime. Another meeting seems to be off the agenda, based on the response we have received. We have repeatedly received what have unfortunately turned out to be empty promises of assistance, but not one penny piece extra for tackling this increasing level of serious and organised violence.

The Secretary of State has today proclaimed that resources are being increased in real terms, but the extra £161 million is an increase in cash terms for all local police forces, in addition to the one-off pension grant of £142 million, amounts to less than the Government-imposed changes on pension liabilities. That means that, for the ninth year in a row, central Government funding to local forces will in fact be cut in real terms.

The Secretary of State proclaims that he has generously allowed local police and crime commissioners to increase their council tax precept from £12 per household a year
to £24. He then tries to claim that he has himself provided the extra resources that this allows to be raised, if it is imposed in full and everybody pays it. In fact, it is of course hard-pressed council tax payers, many of whom in Liverpool are already at breaking point to pay their bills, who have to find this money.

What does this settlement mean for Merseyside? First, the extra £8.4 million of Government grant is less than 10% of the cuts that Merseyside police have sustained since 2010. Crime is now rising strongly and more police resources are needed effectively to get to grips with it. Secondly, as the Merseyside police and crime commissioner has made very clear, the extra £8.4 million will be entirely consumed by the pension black hole caused by the Government. Talk about giving with one hand and taking away with the other. The Secretary of State’s sleight of hand in providing a real-terms cut while proclaiming he has done the opposite is disappointing. In fact, there is no new money for running police services on Merseyside in this settlement whatsoever. How characteristic of this Tory Government that they then try to claim that there is. They have left increasing the precept on already hard-pressed council tax payers on Merseyside as the only way of practically supporting our police with new resources.

It is fundamentally unfair to use council tax to fund increased resource for local police because it takes no account of the policing challenges in each area, and it allows better-off areas with a higher council tax base and lower levels of crime to raise the same, if not more, than areas such as Merseyside that have greater challenges but less ability to raise funds. It makes public safety a postcode lottery, with better-off areas that have lower levels of crime able to do better. Even with this rise in the precept, the money recouped across the country will be a drop in the ocean compared with the £2.7 billion real-terms cut in policing budgets since 2010, as the National Audit Office found when it looked at this.

Is it any wonder that police-recorded violent crime is now at the highest level on record, that the number of knife offences is at the highest level since records began, that arrests have halved in a decade and that there are 2 million unsolved crimes? While we are afflicted with a postcode lottery, with better-off areas that have lower levels of crime able to do better. Even with this rise in the precept, the money recouped across the country will be a drop in the ocean compared with the £2.7 billion real-terms cut in policing budgets since 2010, as the National Audit Office found when it looked at this.

I cannot stress enough my gratitude and that of my constituents to Dorset police, whose officers and PCSOs do their level best to keep us safe in our homes and on our streets. Secondly, I am grateful to our chief constable, James Vaughan, and the Dorset police and crime commissioner, Martyn Underhill—they both do an outstanding job—who will be providing the information I am giving to the House today to the police and crime panel on Thursday.

May I praise the Policing Minister, who I know has inherited a very difficult job? He is extremely accessible and helpful to me whenever I want to see him, and I am very grateful to him and those on the Front Bench for all the help they try to give us.

Dorset police face three problems—I must raise them on the Floor of the House because I believe it is my duty to do so: the continued reduction in Government funding, the increased demand in volume and complexity, and the continued financial pressures. First, on the reduction in Government funding, the general grant is designed to support the force in its core requirements, but the funding mechanism was frozen over 10 years ago and attempts to correct errors in calculations were abandoned, although they would have resulted in substantial funding increases. Unhelpfully so far as Dorset is concerned, the security grant was reduced by £400,000 this year after the policing budget was set.

Secondly, on volume and complexity, this cannot be overstated and Members on both sides of the House have commented on it already. There are new crimes, such as crimes across county lines that we are all aware of, cyber-crime and paedophilia online—tackling that places a huge demand on resources—quite apart from banking fraud and all other frauds online. There are new resources, such as drones, which save money on helicopters, but need training and expertise. There is the online non-emergency directory and the universal roll-out of body-worn cameras. The biggest single cost to police resources has been welfare-related calls, with more repeat calls from the vulnerable, including those with mental health issues. That was mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne). Also, there has been a 100% increase in demand for resources to investigate missing persons over the past eight years. Dorset’s population has increased by 20,000—by about 3%—this year, with changes to demographics and diversity, but there is absolutely no national recognition of this financially. Finally, airports and ports are busier, but the specific small grant has been reduced.

Thirdly, on the continued financial pressures, there is inflation, pay awards and pensions, which are all unavoidable. The police work for longer, retire older and no longer have a final salary scheme, which reduces pensions bills, but the Treasury is still attempting to pass pension costs on to police budgets. Dorset police are grateful for the £3 million to pay for that, but it still leaves Dorset to meet costs of £500,000 to meet that problem. There is no such grant funding for future years and that is of concern. Paying for pensions alone would require a precept of £10.70. There are also the costs of officer recruitment, capital requirements and national requirements, which all continue to rise.

Dorset’s revenue and capital grant for 2019-20 has been set at £67.3 million. That represents £87.30 per person and is the second lowest nationally. Eight years
ago, the equivalent figure was £91.70. This settlement from central Government, which amounts to 2.1%, does not keep up with unavoidable cost pressures such as inflation, pay awards and pensions. Raising the precept to the maximum allowed of £12 per household this year has resulted in additional income of £3.4 million. That desperately needed money was spent in four main areas: protecting people at risk of harm, working with communities, supporting victims and reducing reoffending, and transforming for the future.

While we are grateful for this increase, the pressures for the next year are even greater. The bottom line, even with a continued and relentless drive on efficiencies, is that there will still be a need to increase the precept for 2019-20. The Secretary of State has given permission for PCCs to raise the precept by £24 in 2019-20, but this is a delicate matter, as my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) has mentioned, and household budgets are already under strain.

The worrying fact is that, unless there is more money for the police in Dorset in the mid-term, more frontline officers might have to go, and this is unacceptable to me and my constituents. It may be of interest to the Minister and certainly to other Conservative Members that in Dorset, overnight, we have no more than 50 officers on duty at any one time. In my view, the police force is a force, not a service. Its job is to prevent crime and catch criminals. Let us cut out all the waffle, give it the assets and money to get on with the job and keep our people safe.

2.58 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax). Like him, I praise the work of my PCC, Barry Coppinger.

In November 2018, I wrote a letter to the Home Secretary highlighting the effects of underfunding in Cleveland police. This followed an alarming report on the national BBC News exposing a lack of police numbers in Hartlepool. My letter was co-signed by every Labour MP in the Cleveland police area, yet to date I have had no response.

Since 2010, this small force has lost 500 serving police officers and 50 PCSOs. That is a 37% reduction in staffing, alongside a budget cut of £39 million. The title of the BBC News documentary was “Hartlepool: The town where ‘police don’t come out’”. It revealed that on an average Saturday night the town, which has a population of some 96,000, had only 10 officers on shift. The film exposed the severity of Government cuts to policing and struck fear into our communities. It was seen as an open advert to criminals and has left citizens feeling under threat. The awareness of a lack of visible policing has led to increased reports from constituents of their concerns, including a noticeable trend in failure to attend reported crimes, despite the fact that Cleveland police records 163 crimes a day on average.

We all know that police forces face increased and complex challenges such as cyber-crimes. Cleveland police are no different and have successfully adapted to meet such demands. Working with partner agencies, they have created a strong focus on crime prevention, tackling drug dealing and human trafficking. But they too recognise the need to invest more in visible policing across the force area. They readily admit that “things in policing are not ok” and that the service is “nowhere near where it needs to be.”

Last month, the custody suite at Hartlepool police station was mothballed, meaning that officers now have to make a 30-mile round trip to Middlesbrough, just to take people into custody—a ludicrous situation given staffing numbers and the already existing fear about safety on our streets. While I do not agree with that decision, the reality is that underfunding to the tune of £39 million, or 26% in real terms, from Government grants over the last seven years is taking its toll. In order to help Cleveland police keep the streets of Hartlepool safe, the Government need to make urgent improvements to the funding formula, and not just allow for increases in police precepts, which both penalise local taxpayers and push the perception of blame on to local forces.

The current situation is simply not good enough and our hardworking officers and PCSOs deserve better.

3.2 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill).

In the short term, the settlement enables the police and crime commissioner for Suffolk to deliver his immediate plans for the local police service and in that respect it is to be welcomed. I shall vote for it. The settlement this year, including the council tax increase, provides a cash increase of £9.2 million compared with £3.5 million last year. That will help to meet the additional pension liability, will fund a 2% pay increase and will lead to the recruitment of more frontline police officers. That said, difficult choices have had to be made, including a significant reduction in PCSOs, who provide an important link with local communities.

Suffolk police does a great job, but if it is to continue to do so into the long term its funding settlement needs a radical shake-up and additional Government resources need to be provided. Today, policing in Suffolk presents significant challenges. There have always been additional costs associated with policing of rural areas. Some 42% of Suffolk’s population is rural, which makes Suffolk one of the most rural counties in the country. But today there are additional 21st-century challenges to meet, including county lines, predominantly in Ipswich; an increasingly elderly population, with the number of citizens with dementia predicted to rise to more than 18,000 by 2025; and significant areas of deprivation, not just in towns such as Lowestoft but often hidden in rural areas.

Suffolk police is meeting these increasing challenges, often with one arm tied behind its back. The cost of a police officer in Suffolk is £78 per head compared with a £98 average for England and Wales. The workload of an officer in Suffolk is 150 cases per year, compared with 132 for an officer in neighbouring Norfolk and 122 in the west midlands. Suffolk has one of the lowest costs of policing per person per day—44p compared with a national average of 55p in 2017-18. If Suffolk received the national average funding, our budget would be increased by nearly £30 million. If Suffolk police received the same level of Home Office funding as Norfolk police, with which we collaborate very closely and effectively, our grant would be £3.5 million higher.

The worrying fact is that, unless there is more money for the police in Dorset in the mid-term, more frontline officers might have to go, and this is unacceptable to me and my constituents. It may be of interest to the Minister and certainly to other Conservative Members that in Dorset, overnight, we have no more than 50 officers on duty at any one time. In my view, the police force is a force, not a service. Its job is to prevent crime and catch criminals. Let us cut out all the waffle, give it the assets and money to get on with the job and keep our people safe.
Those disparities have been around for a very long time, but if they are not addressed Suffolk police will not be able to continue to meet the increase in demand for its services and to combat the increasingly complex nature of crime. As you well know, Madam Deputy Speaker, Suffolk is a great place to live, but from a crime perspective I am afraid that it is no longer a rural idyll. We have a wide variety of policing challenges to meet, and a new, sustainable, long-term system of funding needs to be put in place through the comprehensive spending review.

Feedback from residents shows that they are increasingly dissatisfied with the status quo, and we need to respond to their concerns. I urge the Minister, who has listened sympathetically over the past year, to work with the Police and Crime Commissioner for Suffolk, other Suffolk Members of Parliament and me to deliver this and to put the funding of policing in Suffolk on a secure long-term footing.

3.6 pm

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): It is a genuine pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous).

Norfolk constabulary has been forced to endure eight consecutive years of inadequate funding settlements, adding up to £40 million in cuts by 2020. In that time, more than 100 officers have been lost from our streets, all of our PCSOs have been abolished—we are the first force in the country to do that—10 police stations have been shut and the last one open in Norwich does not even open for a full week. This has left Norfolk with one of the lowest per capita number of police in the country.

The consequences in our area and nationwide have been stark. Never since records began has police-recorded violent crime been as high as it is today. Never since records began has knife crime been as high as it is today. Arrests have halved in a decade. Unsolved crimes stand at an almost unthinkable 2 million cases. Police and Home Office violent crime figures show that Norfolk has experienced the largest four-year surge in knife and gun crime anywhere in the country. That is topped off by serious crime being predicted to increase by up to 29%.

The Home Secretary, in presenting this statement, was looking to position himself as the man to clear up this mess, but he has voted for every single police cut since 2010. He is as much responsible for the crisis in Norfolk as the Prime Minister. It is a consequence of their political choices.

The Minister will no doubt claim that this year Norfolk will get an extra £3.2 million from central Government, but that will be totally wiped out by the £3.4 million cost of pension contributions imposed by the Treasury. Norfolk constabulary will be left with a cut in cash terms, never mind real terms. As is so often the case with the Government, they offer you a penny with one hand, while the other is in your pocket taking a pound.

Today, I want to reveal the latest twist in this tale of cuts and underfunding. As I told the House earlier, Norfolk constabulary has already taken the unprecedented decision to entirely abolish police and community support officers. At the time, both I and my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), the shadow police Minister, warned that that set a dangerous precedent. Now, we have discovered the next step. The constabulary has advertised for civilians, on £10 an hour and zero-hours contracts, to fulfil the role of guarding crime scenes. It describes the role as an “alternative reserve style model”. According to the job advertisement, the main activities of the role include “preserving crime scene integrity” and dealing with “enquiries from public and media”.

Guards will also be expected to perform duties such as running the scene log and recording details of any witnesses who come forward. Criteria such as “experience of working with confidential and sensitive information...dealing with confrontation” and “working in a police environment or similar” were listed as desirable but not essential skills for applicants. As the chairman of the Norfolk Police Federation stated:

“with austerity, standing at a cordon is a luxury we cannot afford.”

These employees will save the force money, of course, but as we have warned the Government time and again, policing on the cheap will only put public safety at risk. Not only will it mean that there is no job security or guarantees for those employees, but our local police force will be hugely vulnerable to employees simply saying, “No thanks,” when they are called to ask for help. They are not and cannot be expected to be obligated to be there at every beck and call if they are not going to be given the respect of a real working contract that works in their interest.

In reality, where does this leave our police force? Who will be responsible if there is nobody to cover the vital role of protecting a crime scene? Who will be liable if a crime scene is breached, a witness lost, or any other eventuality where a civilian contractor is responsible? How do we avoid the risk that an ever-expanding civilian workforce is an easy target for criminal exploitation, infiltration or corruption? How long can it be before this becomes a path to the full privatisation of entire roles that are currently the responsibility of the police? Perhaps the Minister could answer that in his summing up.

The next step will inevitably be either an erosion of the status of the police, no doubt including their pay and conditions as public sector workers, or a slow shrinking of their role, downgrading it one function at a time. This is the first move of its kind in the country, but I fear it will not be the last. Responsibility lies squarely with the Government, not just in their political choices but in the ideology that underlies them. Here we can see all the elements of that approach in one disturbing example: never-ending austerity and cuts to every public service, forcing them into permanent retreat; the attacks on those public services and public servants, and the creeping privatisation of their functions for corporate profit; the burden of taxation and priority for spending gradually shifting in favour of the more affluent and against the poorest; and the driving down of terms and conditions and pay for ordinary workers to save money for their employers—all at the expense of the public good.
We have seen it before and we have seen it elsewhere, of course, but even in the 1980s Thatcher did not touch the police. Under this Government, no public service is safe, and the sequence is that the public are less safe. I will not stand by and watch. I reject the Minister’s mantra that the cuts and their consequences are inevitable and unavoidable. I urge the House to do the same.

3.12 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I begin by paying tribute to Marc Jones, Lincolnshire’s fantastic police and crime commissioner, Chief Constable Bill Skelly and the many officers who work so very hard to keep all my constituents safe. I do that because, as the Minister well knows from hearing my Lincolnshire colleagues talk at great length, Lincolnshire is and has long been the worst-funded constabulary per head in the country. We get about £157 per capita. In comparison, Merseyside and North Wales get about £220 per capita.

The police funding formula, which I think all Members have mentioned or will mention, is at the root of a fundamental problem for Lincolnshire’s police force.

With that in mind, I welcome the funding settlement because it does address some of the most pressing concerns we face. It lays the groundwork for a long-term solution that I hope will allow Lincolnshire police to address the challenges that come with being a large rural county with an incredibly sparse population, as well as genuine deprivation. Some of the worst deprivation in the country is in my constituency and to the north of it in our coastal communities in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins). We have real challenges that need to be addressed and the funding settlement will do that.

The £3.3 million extra for a police force that does not have significant reserves on which it can draw will make a real difference, and we should welcome it. It is an absurd position for anyone to take that they will not vote for more money because they want even more money. [Interruption.] It is indisputably an increase for Lincolnshire. [Interruption.] Lincolnshire police will be getting £3.3 million more than they would otherwise be getting. That is more money. If the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) wants to vote against the settlement, she is welcome to do so, but it is still more money. She will be voting against an increase in funding for the police. I would defend, to a certain extent, raising council tax locally. As others have said, however, that is not a sustainable way forward. I hope the Minister will accept that many of us are voting for it because in future we want to see root-and-branch improvement across police funding. That is what we need, even though today’s settlement is to be welcomed.

3.18 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): Violent crime is rising after years of cuts to the police. The latest figures, published last month by the Office for National Statistics, show that there were 65,914 violent crimes in the area served by West Midlands police between September 2017 and September 2018. That figure is 26% higher than the previous year, which saw stalking and harassment rise by 54%. I ask the Minister to take a moment to let those statistics sink in. Violent crime rose by more than a quarter in one year. The Secretary of State assures us that the number of police and the depth of the cuts do not directly cause crime to rise. Will he come to my constituency and tell residents that? Will he come and look my constituents in the eye and tell them that under the Conservatives the 25% drop in the west midlands has played no role in the rise of violent crime?

On the frontline in the west midlands, we have lost more than 2,000 officers over the last eight years. That means 2,000 fewer officers serving the people of the west midlands and keeping us safe; 2,000 fewer officers to respond to reports; and 2,000 fewer officers to catch those responsible for committing crimes. Victims are being let down. Crimes are being reported but not responded to because there are not enough officers to deal with them.

Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services found that 22% of violent crimes were reported by the public but not recorded. The huge cuts to our police forces have affected not only police officer numbers but the number of community support
officers, which has fallen a staggering 40% under the Conservatives. How much longer can this go on? West Midlands police has been forced to make hard choices since 2010. Some £175 million of central Government cuts have hit not only police officer numbers but other essential resources, and the proposal before us leaves those levels static.

I have constituents calling my office and coming to my surgeries who feel unsafe and scared. They are appalled that this Government has consistently and savagely refused adequately to support our police force and protect our communities, so I call on the Home Secretary to listen to the concerns of the police and our residents, and to reconsider this new settlement so that we support the police in reversing the unacceptable rise in crime. It is not right that my constituents have had to set up street watch groups due to the lack of police officers.

3.21 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Despite warm words from the Government about protecting the frontline, the funding provided in this year’s police settlement falls way short of what is needed to reverse nine years of central Government funding cuts. As others have said, the total increase in central Government funding for local forces, including the pension grant, amounts to £303 million, yet the Government-imposed increase in pension contributions will amount to £311 million, meaning a ninth consecutive year of real-terms cuts in local forces. That forces police and crime commissioners in Wales to make tough choices in setting the level of their council tax precept. As others have said, the Government are passing the buck on to the local council tax payer, but they wrap the two things up as good news.

Police budgets have been cut by £2.7 billion in real terms between 2010 and 2018, with central Government funding slashed by over £400 million since 2015. Figures for 2018 show police numbers across England and Wales at their lowest level in 30 years. Since 2010, more than 21,000 police officers and more than 16,000 police staff have been lost. My local force, Gwent, has seen its police numbers fall below 1,000 for the first time. The force has had to make deep cuts to its ranks, which has only been possible, however, because the chief constable and his team have done what they can to prioritise the areas that cause the biggest harm and because our local PCC, Jeff Cuthbert, has taken action and increased the precept. The precept increase this April will be the equivalent of 40 new police officers for Gwent, but the whole thing is unfair and he should not have had to do that.

Cuts to policing become all the more critical when we consider that crime rates are rising across the UK. The most recent available stats show a 20% rise in the overall crime rate in Gwent, a 32% spike in violent crime, a 40% increase in the number of robberies, a 31% increase in drug-related crime and so on. The link between rising crime and cuts to policing has been well made in this debate.

Gwent police has also had to divert resources towards tackling serious and organised crime. I would like to pay tribute to its Operation Jigsaw, launched last November to dismantle criminal gangs involved in child exploitation, violence, weapons and drugs. The work of Gwent officers on that is much appreciated in my community. We need a significant funding boost to help, and we need Ministers to review the Government’s long-term police funding strategy as a matter of urgency, particularly at a time when crime is becoming increasingly complex.

On pensions, although the Government belatedly agreed to offset the pension costs that they forced on police for 2019-20, they have still not committed to tackling the £417 million UK-wide pension black hole in 2020-21. In Gwent, the pensions shortfall will add another £5 million in extra costs to the force’s budget in 2020-21, equating to the cost of maintaining 100 police officers. It is vital that Ministers provide clarity on the future funding of police pensions as soon as possible.

Finally, the police are often reluctant to outline the effect that cuts have on the service, for absolutely understandable reasons, but morale in the service is low and we rely on the goodwill and dedication of officers and staff to keep things going. I thank the officers and staff of Gwent police for all they do—often at considerable risk and in extraordinary circumstances—to help to keep us safe, given the growing and changing nature of crime. I say to Ministers that they deserve more than warm words; they deserve to be resourced properly and given the tools to do the job.

3.25 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Crime, antisocial behaviour and the lack of visible policing is the biggest issue that I face when I am out on the doorsteps talking to my constituents. With the indulgence of the House, I will quickly read out an email that I received from one of my constituents; it exactly epitomises what I hear day in, day out.

My constituent says:

“I have lost count of the amount of times I have rang both the police and fire brigade because of youths trying to and succeeding in lighting fires on the playing field and also to the rear of my property. They are stealing wheelie bins, people’s fences and various items from the back of the shops to set on fire. There is also large groups of youths hanging around in the area. There are motor bikes and quads flying around like they are untouchable”—I can vouch for that because I nearly got knocked flying myself by one the other week—“both on the roads, the paths and the children’s playing field. There is drug dealing (that is very clear to see) that has been reported countless times, regular vehicles back and forth that the police would catch in the act if there was enough of them in wait. In the 6 years I have lived here the last 18 months have been the worst and getting even worse. Why? Because they know they are getting away with whatever they please because we have no policing. Things are going from bad to worse and people are starting to take matters into their own hands. I hope and pray you get the funding that is needed.”

That is not an unusual plea for me to get from my constituents.
I know that the police officers of Cleveland police are doing a fantastic job against all the odds, and I want to pay tribute to all of them today for the sacrifice and service they give to us, but they have been struggling with nearly a decade of year on year real-terms cuts. We have lost 500 police officers and 50 police community support officers—that is nearly 40% of our staff in Cleveland police. How on earth do the Government think we can have a functioning service that protects the public when they wipe out 40% of the resources—the members of staff—that are there to protect the public? That is why crime is rising. We have seen a rise of 12% in all crime in the Cleveland police area in the last year, and a shocking 95% increase in violent crime in the last five years. Those figures are appalling and are a direct consequence of the cuts to police numbers.

I do not understand how this funding settlement can have been set out with such clear inequality and such a lack of needs-based resourcing as we are seeing today. Cleveland has the fourth highest crime rate in the country, yet today it is receiving the lowest settlement in the country—just 5.77%. That is 1.42% lower than the average increase across the rest of the service. How can it be that the area with the fourth highest crime rate gets the lowest settlement? There is something fundamentally wrong with the way the Government are calculating the funding formula.

I would have liked to have put this question to the Home Secretary, but I cannot—I am sorry he cannot spare three hours of his life to listen to the entirety of this debate and hear from constituents around the country—so I will put it to the Minister instead. What on earth is the Government’s funding formula based on, given that every single force area that received a lower than average increase, bar one, was among those with the highest levels of recorded crime per head? It is just not right or equitable. In line with all the other cuts, this appears to be politically motivated, not based on need, which is unacceptable.

I am shocked that my constituents are being asked again to pay through the nose for higher local precepts. Not only has the Home Secretary hidden the local collection figure in his national funding announcement today, but—this is the most important point—my constituents are paying twice. They are already paying for their police service through their taxes and are now being asked to pay again through the precept.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that this is nothing but a Tory police tax—no ifs, no buts—on top of the £2.7 billion of cuts? That is from the National Audit Office, not the Labour party. Those are the facts.

Anna Turley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that is what we should call it: a Tory police tax. Not only are people paying twice, but this is a regressive tax that hits the poorest the hardest, and once again it is the poorest who are seeing the highest levels of crime. People are paying twice and getting fewer police officers and a lower standard of service. It is not acceptable.

The poorest are being made to pick up the Government’s tab. It is no wonder that in my constituency there are private security firms being set up to reassure people who are desperately worried about their properties and businesses. That should not be happening in our society. This is what a broken society looks like. People are having to set up companies just to maintain the peace and safety of the streets.

It is no wonder people are taking to public meetings and writing to me in desperation and despair. The funding formula is a disgrace. Cleveland police are yet again at the bottom of the pile. My constituents are angry and desperate and they want to know what the Government are going to do about it. In the meantime, I will not be voting for this funding formula tonight.

3.30 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the fantastic speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley).

Police funding is a major issue in my constituency, as it is across London, and has become a major issue because of nine years of devastating Government cuts. In the name of austerity, central Government funding for the Metropolitan police has been cut by more than £650 million since 2011, and the Government are enforcing a further £263 million of savings by 2023.

Those cuts have consequences, including for police numbers. More than 3,000 police community support officers have been taken off London’s streets since 2010, which is a decrease of nearly 75%, and nearly 3,000 police officers have been taken off our streets, including hundreds from my streets in Battersea. Nearly one in six police officers in Wandsworth have been lost in the last three years alone. One result of these cuts has been the decimation of community policing, which used to ensure that police officers were embedded within communities, were trusted and knowledgeable, and had relationships with the local community.

As I said, funding cuts have consequences for the police and police cuts have consequences for crime, community safety and the wellbeing of my constituents. Just as the Government are slashing police funding, violent crime is rising dramatically. I wish the Home Secretary was in his place, because he refuses to acknowledge that the reduction in policing will lead to a rise in violent crime. It is a fact; the evidence is there. We on the Opposition Benches can acknowledge that, because we witness it daily.

Since 2013, violent crime has increased by 57%. In the first six months of last year in Wandsworth, it increased by more than 15%. Moped crime has been soaring.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd) indicated dissent.

Marsha De Cordova: I ask that the Minister show me some respect when I am making my speech. I did not interrupt him, and he should not interrupt me. In 2014, there were 1,000 incidents of moped crime. By 2017, that had shot up to 17,500. That is an increase, in my opinion.

I am regularly contacted by constituents who are understandably fearful and shocked, be they parents who fear their children will be caught up in crime or those who have been victims of crime themselves. They are being failed by this Government, and too often in Battersea, as across the country, we see the tragic consequences of those failures. Last year, my constituency had two fatalities from knife crime—two lives lost too soon as a result of a reduction in policing.
The police funding grant is just a drop in the ocean. It means a ninth consecutive year of Government funding cuts. It means police numbers falling to the lowest levels in three decades. It is even forcing Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary to warn that the police are so stretched that “the lives of vulnerable people could be at risk.” Just as police cuts have consequences, cuts in public services across the board are also leading to a rise in crime. When public services are cut, that means that youth centres and services are cut; when school funds are cut, that means that there are not enough resources to enable our children to be taught and educated. Those are the results of this Government’s funding cuts.

If evidence were needed, the last nine years have shown that communities cannot be safe on the cheap. Austerity for the police and public services means misery, fear and crime for the people. My constituency is suffering from the Government’s failure to learn those lessons. Before more lives are lost, I call on them to invest in our services and invest in our communities.

3.35 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I shall be voting against inadequate Government funding tonight. It is as simple as that, no matter how Conservative Members try to spin or twist it.

Let me give the House a snapshot of the events dealt with by West Midlands police in the 72 hours leading up to New Year’s eve. There was a ram raid at the Santander bank in Kings Heath, where the security guard was attacked with an axe. A pedestrian was killed in Highgate by a drunk driver. There was a shooting in Bristol Street, and an extremely serious and vicious assault on a woman in Halesowen. A 34-year-old man was stabbed to death. There was a carjacking in Handsworth, with the stabbed victim left in the road, and a 16-year-old boy was stabbed in Kingstanding. All those major events occurred alongside the normal everyday demands of policing. Our police are at breaking point.

Birmingham is the largest and most populated city outside London. Our crime figures have risen by more than 30% in the last three years, while charging is down by 26%. The level of violent crime in Birmingham is 40% higher than the national average, and the level of vehicle crime is the fourth highest in the country. No wonder people are fearful.

When Labour was last in power, we delivered a neighbourhood policing team in every area. Such an approach not only delivers visible policing, but provides a network of intelligence and fosters better community relations. When Labour left office, there were 143,000 police officers and nearly 80,000 police community support officers. Now neighbourhood policing is almost a nostalgia item. The teams that remain are stretched over areas three or four times the size of their original patch, and the West Midlands chief constable has warned that criminals know just how stretched his force is. The Home Affairs Committee warned that without extra funding, the police will be unable to fulfil their basic duties.

The chief constable blames a shortage of resources when his 999 response times are criticised. The reality is that 70% of 101 calls are now responded to by telephone rather than a visit. Suspects who could be picked up are not, and jobs that are graded as not immediately important are delayed, sometimes for days or weeks. If someone is assaulted and manages to call the police during the assault, an immediate response is required, but if the person gets away and instantly gives a description of the thief who still has their bag or wallet, the odds are that the call will be downgraded. As the chief constable puts it,

“How can a force that’s rated one of the most efficient in the country not get to 30% of emergency calls on time if it’s not a resource problem?”

He has lost 24% of his officers since 2010, so I think he has a point.

West Midlands police relies on central Government for 83% of its funding. That is why the unfair application of the formula, the extent of the cuts and an over-reliance on the council tax precept has such a pernicious effect on us. This settlement is based on council tax rising by up to £24 a year. I suppose that that is marginally better than the £50 increase that the Government originally planned, but it still means that people pay more, and that £24 only just covers inflation, resulting in a standstill budget.

We heard earlier from the Home Secretary that this is the first above-inflation increase in nine years. However, Ministers are not so keen to talk about where the grant goes: £7 million is pension grant; and the other £8.9 million has to cover pay rises from this year and last year, and existing pension arrangements. The increased contributions to the police pension scheme for West Midlands are now £15.4 million a year. I defy anyone to make those figures add up to extra money for policing.

Recently the Home Secretary, and even the Tory Mayor of the west midlands, admitted that our police are underfunded. After eight years of denial, the Home Secretary told “Birmingham Live” in September that “resources are an issue” and that he would push the Chancellor for more. It is a pity he did not push a bit harder. The Mayor acknowledged that “the settlement for the West Midlands has been less favourable than for other areas.”

The reality is that the funding package is simply not enough to compensate for the damage that has been done, and our police will continue to struggle. They face changes in the nature and pattern of crime, and are expected to cope with falling numbers, outdated technology and fragmented leadership.

To compound it all, the Government now plan to impose another upheaval on the second largest force in the country by abolishing the post of police and crime commissioner just as it has begun to bed in, and replacing it with our hapless Mayor, who already has his hands full with rough sleepers, unemployment, skills shortages and transport issues. The last thing we need is a part-time commissioner borrowing from the police budget to finance his other pet schemes.

3.41 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I start by paying tribute to the police throughout our country. When we hear about violent crime, let us remember that the police are on the frontline of dealing with it. When we hear about the reduction in the number of police officers, let us remember that the
remaining police officers have to work even more overtime to make do. We should think about those police officers—the men and women who put their lives on the line for us day in, day out.

The Policing Minister needs to realise that people in our communities recognise the damage done by police cuts. My constituency has experienced one of the sharpest rises in violent crime in London and we have the slowest 999 response times in London. Antisocial behaviour in my constituency is higher than for some time, and there has been an increase in burglaries, particularly aggravated burglaries. People in places such as Chessington and New Malden are experiencing the reality of the police cuts, and they blame the Government. The Minister may say that that is the fault of the Mayor of London or someone else, but my constituents know where the fault lies. The £1 billion of real-terms cuts and the loss of 5,000 police officers since 2015 mean that they know where to pin the blame.

My constituency has lost more than 10% of our police force since 2015. We are being asked to support an “increase in spending”, but there is no increase in spending in the police grant report. The Government are not even funding the pension rise properly. The rise in the various allocations is just a freeze in real terms—it does not even manage to get above inflation. This is therefore a cut in national support for police funding throughout the country; there is nowhere hide from that.

The Home Secretary said, “We’re allowing council tax payers to pay the bill,” but that is not in the report. He was wrong when he answered me on that point. We are being asked to vote on the national support for our police forces in the report, but it is utterly inadequate and represents a real-terms cut.

When the Government talk about council tax, let us bear several points in mind. First, council tax is the most unfair tax in Britain today. The Government ask the most vulnerable and the poorest to pay a higher share than would normally be the case under national taxation, so their approach is unfair.

The situation is worse than that, however, as Labour Members have said. Many areas in the country have a low council tax base, so in order to make good the gap in national funds, people in poorer areas must be asked to pay even more. That cannot be right. If we relate council tax bases to the areas in which crime—particularly violent crime—is going up, we see some interesting findings. For example, the top five areas experiencing an increase in knife crime are all in the top seven areas where the police authorities rely on national Government funding—in other words, those areas where council tax rises will not do the job. If the Government are serious about knife crime, as they claim to be, they must realise that their over-reliance on council tax just will not do the job.

The situation is actually even worse than that. The Government want us to believe that, through these council tax rises that may or may not happen, police and crime commissioners will be able to recruit more police officers. Let us hope that that can happen, but I have talked to people in the Met police and to our local senior police commanders, and they say that they are having a real problem spending any money to recruit police officers. This is not just because of the lag effect of having to recruit new officers, but because the job is no longer attractive, as police pay has been held down and people are aware that violent crime is on the rise. In all seriousness, the method that the Government are using might not deliver the police officers our communities need. We need a rise in police pay above what is currently proposed. We need a real package to be offered to existing police officers, and to the extra ones we will need if we are going to get on top of violent crime, knife crime and all the other things that are hitting our constituents.

The Government talk about the cost of spending more money on the police, but let us talk about the cost of crime. I am not even going to talk about the emotional cost, including the impact on people’s families, which we all know about. I am talking about the actual cost to the taxpayer. The cost of dealing with a knife fatality is £1.2 million. If we had more police officers and youth services working towards crime prevention, surely that would not only provide better value for the taxpayer, but prevent crime far better than the Government are currently doing. My colleagues and I will vote against the police grant motion because it is absolutely unacceptable in the face of rising crime in our communities.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We obviously have to get all our colleagues in before the wind-ups start, so after the next speaker, I shall reduce the time limit to five minutes.

3.47 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I want to begin by thanking the men and women of Durham constabulary, including the civilian support staff who work for the authority and do a fantastic job. Durham is a high-performing, efficient force, and it is not me saying that, but Her Majesty’s inspector of constabulary. Since 2010—under the Liberal Democrat-Tory coalition and under this Government—Durham has lost 370 officers and 22% of its budget. According to the National Audit Office, that means that it has lost more than any other provincial force, yet it has been rightly pointed out that the demands on our police are increasing. It is ironic that very few Tory Members have spoken in the debate. I noticed that there was not a single person on the Tory Benches a few moments ago; the Whips have obviously been ringing round to get them in. What world do they live in? My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) hit the nail on the head when she said that the Government cannot cut mental health services and local authority services without expecting the effects to land on the police, and it is naive to ignore that fact.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the thin blue line is getting thinner? On top of cuts to police funding, our police face extra demands on their resources because of cuts to other services. Her Majesty’s inspector of constabulary has stated that the police are distracted from dealing with crime because they are too busy dealing with the tens of thousands of cases resulting from a mental health service in crisis.

Mr Jones: I totally agree. The police should be the last resort, not the first, as they are in many cases. The Government cannot cut services and expect the people who use them just to go away.
Mr Kevan Jones

The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) is right. The motion refers to the “Police Grant Report (England and Wales)”; it does not say “Police Grant Report (England and Wales) and the ability to raise council tax”. The Government are spinning this as an increase in funding, but it is not. The hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) said that we must get the right balance between national and local funding, so I hope that his leaflets will include the fact that he is going to vote for an increase in taxes locally, but I am unsure that they will.

Mr Marcus Jones: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Kevan Jones: I will not.

Let me turn to what the motion is actually about. Durham police’s budget will not change. In extra core funding and the contribution towards pensions, which has already been mentioned, the force will receive £2.9 million, but all that money will be used to cover pensions, which were until recently the Government’s responsibility. The precept will raise £4 million, but after taking account of inflation, pay increases and increases in fees levied by the Government, there is no extra cash at all.

Somebody referred to the precept as a magic money tree, but that is not the case for forces such as Durham, which gets 75% of its funding from core funding and 25% from the precept. Surrey, for example, receives 55% from the precept and 45% from core funding. The Home Secretary said that police and crime commissioners’ flexibility to increase costs for band D properties will generate £24 per household, but the average in Durham will be £16. Some 55% of properties in Durham are in band A, and only 9% are in band D. We have fewer than 200 band H properties, which the PCC told me raised the great sum of £68,000 last year. That puts authorities such as Durham’s at a disadvantage.

The move away from national funding to an increased reliance on the precept, putting the onus on local tax payers, is not only unfair, but will not raise the same amount of money. Whereas Surrey will benefit from a large increase, deprived communities such as Durham will not be able to raise the same amount. Chief Constable Mike Barton and Police and Crime Commissioner Ron Hogg have raised the matter with the Policing Minister, but we have seen no movement, and it needs to be addressed, particularly if this movement away from national funding for our police forces happens next year as well. As we will see in the following debate on local government funding, under this Government the trend has been to move money away from the most deprived communities to some of the most affluent areas.

We are being asked to vote for an increase in taxation, and I hope that every Conservative Member who votes for the motion will tell their local electorate that. It is not down to the PCCs to make the decision, because they frankly have no choice but to increase the precept. The Home Secretary used the word “flexibility”; but that is complete nonsense, because if PCCs do not raise the precept, they will, in most cases, have to make even deeper cuts, leading to parts of certain areas not being policed at all, which is unacceptable.

As I said, we are being asked to vote for a tax this afternoon, so I will not be supporting the motion. It is unfair regarding how core funding is being distributed under the same formula. If the Government continues, forces such as Durham, which is high-performing, will be hampered in their ability to deliver such performance, because of the reliance on the council tax precept. The Minister must address that if it is how we are to fund policing in this country. The consensus over many years has been that policing is a national responsibility, and that needs to continue, not be eroded, although that is what the motion will do.

3.54 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who gave a passionate speech about this being a tax on our constituents.

In West Yorkshire, our communities have suffered immeasurably from an almost decade-long assault on our police force’s budget. We have lost almost 1,000 police officers and PCSOs in West Yorkshire since 2010, yet we are repeatedly told by this Government that the cuts are having no impact at all on our communities.

Well, the people of Batley and Spen would beg to differ. They are kept awake all hours of the night by nuisance bikes and antisocial behaviour. The livelihoods of independent businesses are under threat due to persistent burglaries. Fatalities are being caused by speeding cars. There is open drug dealing on our estates and, while we have been sitting in the Chamber, an elderly man was attacked on the greenway in Liversedge.

In addition, plummeting charge rates make for extremely worrying reading. The charge rate for sexual offences in West Yorkshire is among the lowest in the country, falling over 60% since 2015. The charge rate for violence against the person has dropped by 40%. People feel let down. They feel that justice is not something that is available to them. People have lost faith in the institutions that exist to protect them and their family. That is a sad indictment of this Government’s systematic dismantling of public services, with year after year of cuts to our councils.

Where do we go from here? Do the Government listen to the desperate pleas to back those who keep us safe, or do they simply put the burden on the taxpayer? Sadly, it is the latter. The very people who have witnessed police officers disappear from their neighbourhoods will be made to fork out more. Communities will be made to chip in to fill the gaping hole left by years of austerity.

Hard-pressed communities such as Batley and Spen should not be forced to bear this burden. Indeed, the Government’s proposed funding settlement will recoup barely a fraction of what has already been slashed from budgets over the past nine years. In West Yorkshire, the precept increase will raise a further £1.5 million, which sounds like good news, yet we have lost £140 million in central Government funding since 2010 alone.

Communities such as mine with a low council tax base will lose out disproportionately. Surrey, for example, with half the population and a quarter of the violent crime of West Yorkshire, will be able to raise almost exactly the same amount as Kirklees. How on earth can this be fair? Everyone should have access to the same
level of policing. For that to happen, the settlement should be equitable. This funding settlement is too little, too late and goes nowhere near addressing the many complex issues our police forces face.

Recently in Kirklees, there have been 55 arrests in relation to non-recent child sex abuse. This crucial investigation put an extra strain on my police force and the local authority, which is already pushed to the brink after years of cuts. The victims of these crimes have shown incredible bravery in coming forward and they deserve justice. They are courageous women who have shown massive dignity and they need full confidence in this process, which demands resources. Such investigations are complex and take time. I know the police are working hard to tackle these crimes, but they need resources.

I had the privilege of spending a day with our local police and I know the enormous pressure they are under—it is an uphill struggle. It is obvious to us, and I hope it is obvious to the Government, that we need more officers on the beat. That desire is shared by our incredibly hard-working police officers, PCSOs and staff, but they need the Government’s backing and they need someone to listen. This funding settlement is not the product of listening. It is unfair, it is unjust and it is not the answer. It amounts to another real-terms cut, another insult to our communities. It is simply not good enough.

I ask the Secretary of State, who is no longer in his place, to meet me and West Yorkshire police to discuss the funding opportunities and difficulties that Kirklees is currently under while it investigates these complex cases of child sexual exploitation. I will not be voting for the motion, and I encourage the Government to understand that communities such as Batley and Spen need to see fairness when it comes to the allocation of resources.

3.59 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Unlike Scotland or Northern Ireland, Wales is subject to having its policing policy set by Westminster, in the capital city of another country, far away from where the police forces are carrying out their duties. Our underpowered Welsh Parliament has been consistently denied the powers necessary to deliver the policing our communities need. As a result of having had our hands tied by the Home Office, Wales has lost more than 500 police officers since 2010. That is an incredible statistic. We have not only lost police officers; in Dyfed Powys, we lost our dedicated police helicopter to a pooled England and Wales service. The performance of the new centralised service, as far as the communities I serve are concerned, is woeful.

If Welsh policing were funded on the basis of population, as is the case with other devolved services, police forces in Wales would be better off by £25 million per year. Instead, we are tied to England and Wales funding criteria that penalise our police forces in Wales. I say this as a constant critic of the Barnett formula. If Barnett were reformed on the basis of need, or even if the funding settlement between Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland were equalised upwards, the windfall for Wales would be even greater.

There is little excuse for keeping these powers in Westminster, given that the British Government are actively considering devolving swathes of the criminal justice system to English cities such as Manchester. In Wales, not only do we have to suffer the humiliation of being treated as a second-class nation by Westminster, but we are not even given the same status and respect as English cities. Rather than being in control of our own destiny in Wales, we face a situation whereby the British Government make PCCs the scapegoats and abdicate their duty to properly fund policing, instead relying on PCCs to raise the local tax precept, with 63% of the increase in funding for local police coming from an increase in local taxation. This is Westminster creative accounting at its best. As many colleagues have said today, this local taxation is extremely regressive.

The British Government boast about increasing the personal allowance and freezing income tax rises, but these things are largely eroded by the increased council tax bills. PCCs are given the stark choice between either increasing the precept or cutting services. Police forces are given no certainty about when the comprehensive spending review and review of the funding formula will conclude—whether it will be in 2019-20 or 2020-21—further hindering their ability to plan.

Rural Welsh forces are uniquely handicapped by the gearing—the proportion of total funding that comes from the police grant and local taxation. Welsh forces have an approximately even split of Home Office and local government funding, with local taxpayers in rural Wales contributing considerably more to policing than local taxpayers in English cities. For example, Northumbria police receive 81% of their funding from the Home Office, whereas the figure for North Wales police is 47.5%. Due to the lack of devolution, and the England and Wales funding framework, the people of my country are being asked to disproportionally pay far more for their policing than other parts of the British state. Once again, the British Government are placing the burden on rural Wales to pay for urban England; this is truly a partnership of unequals. As public awareness rises in Wales, the position of the Unionist parties will become untenable, as they are once again putting their own narrow ideological British nationalist dogma before the interests of their constituents.

I would be grateful if the Minister answered a few questions in his wind-up. First, will he confirm when the comprehensive spending review and funding formula will be finalised? If that is to be in 2020-21 rather than in 2019-20, as is looking likely, will he give an assurance that his Department will allow the same flexibility with the grant uplift next year as this year, and give PCCs the flexibility to increase the precept once again? Finally, when his Government do finally agree the comprehensive spending review and funding formula, what is he going to do to ensure that Welsh taxpayers are treated fairly?

4.4 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): There was a time when the Conservative party claimed to be the party of law and order; yet we do not see a single Conservative MP still standing in this debate to defend this police grant. And who can blame them, given their record? We have seen £1 billion cut from the Metropolitan police over the course of a decade; and police numbers at their lowest level in three decades, with the loss of 21,000 police officers, 16,000 police staff and 6,000 PCSOs since 2010. There has never been a better time to be a criminal in this country.
Police-recorded violent crime is at the highest level on record; knife offences are at their highest levels since records began; arrests have halved in the space of a decade; and unsolved crimes stand at 2 million. That is a record that any Minister ought to be ashamed of, yet instead of reversals to central Government cuts to police funding, all we get from this Government, aside from a few scraps from the Treasury table, is the insistence that police and crime commissioners—and people such as the Mayor of London and others—should increase the burden on ordinary council tax payers. The wool has been pulled from the people’s eyes. With this debate, as with the next one, the penny has dropped with the public, and they know that they are being asked to pay more in council tax for poorer services; more in council tax to fund local council services that are being cut by central Government; and more in council tax to pay for police numbers, because central Government are cutting the numbers available.

It is no good blaming police and crime commissioners or people like the Mayor of London. In London, Sadiq Khan has put £138 million into the police from London’s resources, investing in the violent crime taskforce and the violent crime reduction unit. In my community, the London Borough of Redbridge does not have responsibility for policing, but it has invested £1.5 million in CCTV for automatic number-plate recognition and repurposed local authority enforcement officers to beef up the uniformed presence on our streets. The council knows, as do my constituents who gathered in Gearies School at the weekend and those who gathered in my office to meet the borough commander, that our community has been left less safe under the Conservatives. We have been left less safe as a direct result of central Government cuts to policing.

The Home Secretary left himself looking like a complete idiot earlier by refusing to acknowledge, plainly and on the record, what everyone else in the country knows, which is that if we cut police, crime goes up. There is a direct link between the number of police and the incidence of crime in our community.

I never want to attend another funeral like the one I attended late last year: a funeral for a young man who was murdered on the streets of my constituency. I have never attended a funeral with so many young people present. Looking around that room, I knew there was something inherently wrong in so many people having to come together to mourn the loss of a young life. It is not just police cuts that lead to violent crime and deaths on our streets, but I say plainly and honestly to the Minister, who must surely understand this, that we cannot cut crime while cutting police and we cannot prevent crime while cutting public services to the extent that this Government are. Those services include public health services, mental health services, school budgets, and education and youth services to get young people off our streets and into services that give them opportunities to expand their horizons, improve their life chances and help them to find a better way to fund their future than a life of crime.

In a week in which it became clear that three men in their 30s and 40s have been released without prison detention for running county lines that affect my community, all I say to the Minister is that we have to be tougher on criminals, we need more police on the streets and we have to provide a better future for young people in my constituency and throughout the country than the £400 a week that young people in our country are being offered by drug dealers to run drugs. Until we solve these problems, I will continue to see in my surgeries and in my community people crying out for more bobbies on the beat in Redbridge, which is exactly what I will continue to campaign for.

4.9 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The first duty of every Government is to ensure the safety and security of citizens. Labour took that duty very seriously in government. We built up neighbourhood policing, with 17,000 extra police officers and 16,000 police community support officers. We introduced crime and safety partnerships and brought crime down by 43%. It was about not only detecting crime but diverting people from crime and preventing people from committing crime. It was a model celebrated worldwide.

In eight years of this Government, we have seen unprecedented cuts to our police service—21,000 nationwide and 2,000 in the west midlands. Those cuts are characterised by grotesque unfairness: the west midlands has suffered a 25% cut to police budgets compared with an average of 19% nationwide and 11% in Surrey. That is completely wrong. As a consequence, we have seen soaring crime, which puts our communities at risk. In particular, we have seen soaring knife crime, which is up by 19%.

I am the first to recognise that the problems that we face are not about numbers alone. My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) was absolutely right when he talked about the social fabric of our society being increasingly stretched and degraded. That can be seen, for example, in youth services, which seek to divert young people away from crime. The simple truth is that cuts have consequences. If 21,000 police officers are cut, crime will rise, people will die, people will suffer serious injuries, burglaries and thefts, and justice will be denied to them. The Government cannot go on in a state of denial—they cannot go on denying the consequences of their actions. One day, I hope that a Minister—any Minister—will give a straight answer to this straight question: is there a link between falling police numbers and rising crime? Perhaps the Minister would like to address that in his response to this debate.

Every day in my constituency, I see fear stalking the streets. We had powerful contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) and for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill). In the Perry Common area, we have seen knife crime, gun crime, a shop attacked by people waving 30 machetes, the newsagent Jo Dhesi robbed at knifepoint, and the Castle Vale area beset by the growth in antisocial behaviour. Only last Friday in Slade Road—the Frances Road area—some 100 people turned up at a meeting to pour out their hearts. They talked about the consequences of bad local landlords putting vulnerable people into houses in multiple occupation and of not looking after those people. They also talked about the growth in drug crime and how their area was becoming the centre of county lines operations, leading to the exploitation of young people and to criminals making a fortune out of the most pernicious of crimes.
A woman said to me, “My great-great-grandad bought the house that we live in. We have lived in it for successive generations ever since. We loved this area.” Now, she says, people fear to go out at night. A young girl said to me, “Every time I want to go down to Slade Road to get a bus, I have to ask my Mum to come with me because I am afraid to walk down the streets.” The fact that, in Birmingham in 2019, we have such fear of our streets should make the Government feel utterly ashamed of themselves.

The Government say, “We have listened.” I say, “Oh, no, you have not.” The simple truth is that not enough money is being invested in our police service and that the burden is increasingly being put on the council tax payer. The increase in grant in the west midlands will just cover pension costs. The increase in the precept will just cover inflationary pressures. Our PCC David Jamieson does an outstanding job standing up for the police service. He says that we need at least 500 police officers. There is no chance of recruiting those badly needed officers to restore peace on our streets. This is a standstill budget in the west midlands that goes nowhere near meeting the demand of the people.

In conclusion, the first duty is to keep our community safe. This Government are letting down the public that we serve. We stand behind the thin blue line. We stand behind those excellent men and women in the police service and the communities that they serve. That is why we say to them that, tonight, we will vote against a measure that goes nowhere near supporting you in the way that you deserve.

4.14 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey).

I have spoken about the problems of antisocial behaviour in my constituency a number of times before, and I agree with so many right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken today, but this debate is about more than just police funding; it is also about the cuts to local government. Youth services have been mentioned frequently and, given my role on the Select Committee on Education, I have often mentioned the problem of exclusions contributing to children being involved in crime.

I fear that we are missing a fundamental point. What does not seem to be mentioned is that the general public are losing faith in our police service. That is more than an issue for just the Government or the Opposition; it should concern every single one of us. I am quite sure that every Member here will know of a constituent who has told them about crime and then followed it with, “I didn’t see the point in telling the police,” or “I tried to phone the police and I couldn’t get through,” or “My friend phoned the police, got through and no one came around, so why should I bother reporting it?” In some of the more wealthy areas of my constituency, residents are even talking about providing their own security services to check their streets. This is starting to sound increasingly worrying, when people no longer have the faith that our public services and our police will keep them safe, to the point where they are talking about funding their own.

My children went to South Africa in the summer, and they told me that everybody there pays for their own security services because they have no faith in the Government. Surely this is not what we want in Britain; we do not want people to lose their faith in the police service. I say this not because I have any problems with the police service—I think the police do an incredible job—but because year on year of underfunding and of the police being stretched to a capacity that they cannot possibly sustain mean that crimes are not being dealt with.

When I talk to the police about an area where there is additional crime, they say, “We know it’s a problem, Emma, but the people there never report it.” I go and talk to people in certain tower blocks in my constituency, and what they are facing is horrific, but the figures give a really poor impression of where the crime is. If hon. Members were to look at the statistics for my constituency, they might say, “Oh, the crime seems to be worse in the wealthier areas.” No—the people in those areas are more likely to report it. Crime is actually much, much worse in the tower blocks. The people there are having a horrendous time.

What I am saying to the Minister is that this is not just about asking for more money. Yes, we do want some more money, and we need a hell of a lot more than the Government are offering us, but we also want to know how the Government will restore people’s faith that something is going to happen—that there is going to be an outcome when they make that phone call to the police.

The Home Secretary talked about the problem with mental health services, and I am sure that the Minister is aware of a wonderful police officer who, very sadly, committed suicide because she was not getting the support she needed. I say again to the Minister that this is not a criticism of any of our hard-working officers. I should especially mention Inspector Craig Mattinson, who I spent the day with and who does an incredible job locally. This is about me saying that, unless the Government take the problem of increasing crime more seriously, it will come back to bite each and every one of us. The last thing we want is people taking the law into their own hands, but I fear that that is what too many are being forced to do.

4.18 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) for speaking about her experience, and others across this House who have been out with their police and have seen what they are having to go through. I also pay tribute to my local officers. I have done shifts at both Buxton and Glossop police stations and seen the amazing work that the police do.

When I turned up in the morning at Buxton, the officers there had spent the previous night clearing up after a horrific road accident in which three young men lost their lives. It was an absolute tragedy that no one would want to see. Those officers were deeply affected, but they turned up the next morning, did their shift, and helped to deal with the families and with the repercussions of that incident. I absolutely pay tribute to them. Our officers do this because they know that there is no one else. The police are incredibly short-staffed in our rural area, covering almost 900 sq km from two police offices.

We in Derbyshire have had a 26% reduction in our funding, which means £38 million less for our police. Our police and crime commissioners have tried to protect the frontline, so the reduction has translated into 18% fewer officers, but that is still 337 in number. Police stations have been closed in Chapel-en-le-Frith and in New Mills,
The hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) (Mr Jones) said that it was not a long-term approach.

This police funding settlement represents £8 million less from the Government than just the costs of pensioning off so many of the 21,000 fewer officers that there now are. In Derbyshire, the police will receive £400,000 less from the Government than they will have in pension fund costs. That means that our hard-pressed council tax payers are having to pay for the cost of police pension fund, which has increased due to getting rid of police. How is that fair or equitable? We have already had council tax rises of 5% last year and 4% this year, plus the police precepts, and more and more people are struggling to pay their council tax. In High Peak alone, 2,700 households have been referred to court in the past 18 months—that is 7% of all households. Increasing council tax is not an easy option. It affects the people who are poorest, who have to pay more as a proportion of their budget and who are also often those most affected by crime.

These people know that our police are suffering too. The police in High Peak are now having to look at closing the custody cells in Buxton. That means that to take arrested people to a custody cell, our police would have to take them an hour’s drive over bleak moorland to Chesterfield or over the county border into Manchester, leaving our thin blue line even thinner than before. There has been a 43% rise in violent crime in Derbyshire, and there have been some absolutely terrible incidents in High Peak. Our officers have to deal with these incidents day in and day out, often working on their own, turning up to the most horrific scenes single-handed and having to wait until they can get cover from other staff who can join them, which can take far too long.

I absolutely pay tribute to our officers across Derbyshire and to the police staff who do the very best they can to deal with the rising levels of violent crime, murders and suicides. There are mental health incidents that take them hours to deal with, when they take people into hospital and have to wait for mental health services to assist. They go above and beyond the call of duty, day in and day out. No wonder it is more difficult to recruit to our police.

The Government should stop taking our police for granted. They should start by funding them properly and helping them to deal with crime. That is what people across the country want, and it is what I hope the Minister will respond with today.

4.23 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): This has been a fantastic debate with moving contributions from Members in all parts of the House. However, given that the Government announced this funding settlement with such fanfare and as if it was such good news, it is quite perplexing that only five Conservative Members have spoken on its behalf—all of them, as the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) put it, with mixed feelings. They all referenced the Government’s failure to revise the funding formula as a cause for concern for their own force areas. The hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) said that it was not a long-term approach.

The hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) said that without more Government funding we will continue to lose officers, which is unacceptable both to him and to his constituents. They all said that to keep asking for more council tax was not a sustainable way forward. Those are hardly ringing endorsements from those sitting behind the Home Secretary.

On the other hand, we have heard impassioned speeches from Labour Members on exactly why we will be voting against this completely inadequate settlement today. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) said, cuts have consequences. He and my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), as Merseyside MPs, spoke about losing 1,000 officers and 200 PCSOs, which has undoubtedly had an impact on rising crime.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) spoke about the shocking documentary showing that only 10 police officers were available for the entire town on a given night, which seemed like an open advert to criminals and left local people feeling under threat and much less likely to report crime.

My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) spoke about the consequences of his force’s decision to abolish all PCSOs, leading to the inevitable downgrading of staff and creeping privatisation, with people on zero-hours contracts now covering crime scenes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) spoke about the loss of thousands of officers and staff in Wales, cushioned only by the intervention of the Welsh Labour Government, who, faced with the same budgetary choices as the UK Government, have recognised the importance of community policing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) said that Cleveland police force shows the clear inequality that exists and the lack of needs-based resourcing. Despite having the fourth highest crime rate in the country, it will receive the lowest rise out of this settlement. As she said, this is a completely regressive settlement that fails her constituents and those of many Members.

My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha de Cordova) spoke about the loss of community policing, which means the loss not just of officers embedded in communities but of their crucial intelligence gathering and, even more crucially, the trust in the police that community policing brings.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) and for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) spoke about how fewer people are reporting crimes at all and about reported violent crimes not being recorded, despite the Home Secretary saying earlier that increasing crime is a result of better recording. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle said that the very legitimacy of policing is at threat, as people are losing faith in the police.

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The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) is right that the vote tonight is on the Home Office’s police grant, which equates to a
real-terms cut. That is why we will be voting against it, and we will be pleased to see the Lib Dems in the Lobby with us.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) spoke about the wider demands on the police from austerity and, in particular, mental health. My hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) described a huge rise in all types of crime, yet the settlement she is being asked to vote for could hardly be less adequate for the challenges faced in West Yorkshire, not least child sexual exploitation.

My hon. Friends the Members for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), who are steadfast supporters of and consistent campaigners for the police, spoke of the prevalence of violent crime and burglaries in their constituencies—constituencies left less safe by this Government. Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) spoke movingly of the impact on officers of the job we ask them to do day in, day out, despite cutting their numbers and their pay.

There is no precedent in post-war history for a Government undermining the police in the way that this Government have. Never, since records began, has police-recorded violent crime been as high as it is today. Never has knife crime been as high as it is today. Arrests have halved in a decade. Unsolved crimes stand at more than 2 million, and 93% of domestic violence offences go unprosecuted. That is the shameful legacy of this Government, and they remain the only people in this country who continue to deny the link between violent crime and falling officer numbers. Today’s settlement has to stand in that context and in the context of eight consecutive years of real-terms reductions in central Government funding.

It is hardly something to boast about that this is the biggest rise since 2010, when this Government have cut the police every year since 2010. It is staggering that for the ninth consecutive year, we are being asked to vote for a reduction in central Government funding. The £161 million in the central Government grant and the pension grant combined do not meet the additional £311 million cost this year of Government-imposed changes to pension contributions. That means that 31 out of the 43 forces will lose out this year in not only real terms but cash terms. In real terms, almost every single police force will. Barry Coppinger, the PCC in Cleveland—one of the poorest-funded police forces in the country—estimates that he will see his real-terms funding fall by £2.1 million as a result of this settlement. When the Policing Minister promised the House during the settlement statement: “Every police and crime commissioner will have their Government grant funding protected in real terms.”—[Official Report, 13 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 432.]—did he somehow inadvertently mislead the House?

As my hon. Friends have said, this Government are giving with one hand and taking with the other, but we should not be surprised, because they have form. Since 2015 they have promised to protect police funding, yet we have seen police numbers fall by 5,900. The truth, Madam Deputy Speaker, is that when it comes to police funding you cannot believe a word they say.

Who is paying the price for these Tory failures to fund the police? This settlement asks hard-pressed local tax payers to bear that burden once again. Using council tax to pay for increased funding for the police is perverse and unfair. It fails to meet need and it fails to meet demand, especially alongside the continued failure to reform the funding formula and the continued cuts to the Home Office grant. Merseyside will raise almost the same as rural North Yorkshire, despite having double the population and triple the level of violent crime. West Yorkshire has double the population and four times the level of violent crime of Surrey, yet it will be able to raise only about the same amount of funding this year.

What exactly was the point in the Policing Minister going from force to force to assess demand if he then fails to produce a funding settlement for forces that matches that demand? Nobody, as my hon. Friends have said, could think that an appropriate way to assess how much a police force needs is how big the houses are in that area. How can the Minister justify a postcode lottery that means the communities already seeing higher crime will receive so much less funding?

This Government have an abominable record on law and order, and no political will to redress it. By passing the burden of their political failure on to local taxpayers, they are storing up problems for the future, which will see the forces with the largest increases in crime, especially violent crime, hit time and again. The public know this Government have failed and will continue to fail in their first and most solemn duty, to keep their citizens safe, and today’s settlement confirms that failure once again.

4.31 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): During this vigorous debate, I have clung to the message from Her Majesty the Queen about the need, in these divided times, to try to seek the common ground. That is relevant because when the Home Secretary and I spoke recently with a group of senior police leaders, billed as the leaders of tomorrow, one of the questions from the floor was, “Do you see common ground between the political parties about the future of policing?” The question was asked hoping for the answer yes. Listening to this debate, I asked myself what that police officer, who may end up leading a force, would have thought of this debate if she had had the time to watch it, which of course she does not.

She would have heard a common voice across the House with MPs going out of their way to express their personal admiration and thanks to their forces. That was the case with my hon. Friends the Members for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) and for South Dorset (Richard Drax), the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth), my hon. Friends the Members for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), the hon. Members for Newport East (Jessica Morden) and for Redcar (Anna Turley), the right hon. Members for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) and for North Durham (Mr Jones), and the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George).

She would have heard a recognition across the House of changing demand on the police, with cyber-crime, county lines, child sexual exploitation and the critical issue of the increasing amount of time that our police officers are spending with people in crisis and suffering from mental health problems. Again, that was recognised
by Members from across the House. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire, my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayan), my hon. Friends the Members for Nuneaton and for South Dorset, the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill), my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness and the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) all talked about that.

She would have heard a determination across the House to bear down on this horrendous increase in knife crime. The right hon. Member for Knowsley and the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) again did the House a service by reminding us that beneath the statistics are terrible human stories of shattered families. The hon. Members for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) and for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) reminded us that this is not a London issue but a national challenge.

She would also have heard a recognition from across the House that a lot needs fixing in the CSR in how funding is allocated across the police system. We heard that from MPs from many different places across the country, such as my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire, the right hon. Members for North Durham and for Knowsley, my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) in relation to Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, my hon. Friends the Members for Nuneaton, for Waveney, for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) from a sedentary position, and for Boston and Skegness, the hon. Members for Newport East and for Batley and Spen, and most of the west midlands MPs.

That is where the common ground lies. Of course, there are also divisions. There are irreconcilable divisions on decisions taken in 2010 in response to the crisis in the public finances.

Vicky Ford: Will my right hon. Friend add Essex police to the list of those that need praise? A new cohort of Essex police officers will be passing out on Friday. They are in addition to the 150 new officers last year, and are part of the 240 new officers planned for this year, funded proudly by Essex people thanks to the precept.

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I congratulate—

Mr Kevan Jones: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. We have had a good debate, but it was undersubscribed on the Conservative Benches. Is it in order for the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), who stormed off early in the debate when her intervention was not taken and has not been present, to use an intervention to make a mini speech?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Nothing disorderly has occurred. The right hon. Gentleman has put on the record his concerns about people not being present for the debate and then intervening.

Mr Hurd: Divisions do exist. Labour is desperate to assert its narrative that cuts have consequences. On this side of the House, we know that the cuts were the consequence of a Labour Government yet again running out of public money so that tough decisions had to be taken. There is an artificial debate about the balance between the contribution from central and local taxpayers. If we want more money in policing, we have to pay, and the hypocrisy of this—from a Labour party that doubled council tax when it was in power—is overwhelming.

The common ground is that Members on both sides of the House recognise the increased pressure on the police and want to provide additional support to them. That is exactly what the settlement does.

Mr Howarth: The Minister offers us the tempting prospect of finding common ground, but does he not realise that the common ground he asks us to step on to is actually sinking sand?

Mr Hurd: As I have said, I am more than happy to meet the Merseyside MPs, but this settlement is set up to increase public investment in our police service by up to £970 million. If it is voted through tonight, it means that we will invest more than £2 billion more next year than we did three years ago. How that can be presented as a cut is beyond me. What the public will note is that the Labour party has fought us every step of the way—it voted against the settlement last year and it intends to vote against it tonight. Labour is apparently blind to the fact that while we are committing to almost £2 billion of investment in the police service next year, its commitment is for £780 million over the life of this Parliament.

Jack Dromey: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hurd: I am not going to give way.

I am delighted that police and crime commissioners up and down the country intend to use the settlement to do what the public want, which is to recruit additional police officers—300 more in London, 320 more in Manchester, 160 more in Bedfordshire, 58 more in Derbyshire, 270 more in Sussex, and 132 more in Yorkshire. Across the system, more than 2,500 more police officers are planned, plus 479 staff. That is the result of the police settlement that the Labour party intends to vote against.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): Thank you for establishing the ground rules, Madam Deputy Speaker, and allowing Members to speak, against the wishes of the Opposition. May I use this opportunity to wish Francis Habgood, the excellent chief constable of Thames Valley, a happy retirement next month?

Does the Minister agree that, while we always want more funding, smarter procurement can help? The Oxfordshire fire service saved £1 million, but we have a more efficient fire service through tendering and procuring fire engines with other authorities.

Mr Hurd: I could not agree more with my right hon. Friend, and of course the Labour party has no interest in how our money is spent. After eight years of austerity, we can still find agreement with the police to fund—

Mr Kevan Jones: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker—

Madam Deputy Speaker: It had better be good. It is not fair not to let the Minister respond.
Mr Jones: It is good. We have another example of a Member who has not been present for the debate. He is being lazy and could not be bothered to turn up—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Sit down. Nothing disorderly has happened and the Minister has the right to respond.

Mr Hurd: This settlement demonstrates our recognition that our police system needs additional support. We have one of the best police systems in the world and we are determined to keep it that way. The settlement provides the opportunity to increase public investment by almost £1 billion. It allows PCCs to manage the cost pressures on them, which are real, and to recruit local police officers to bear down on local crime. It also provides additional money for national priorities, such as counter-terrorism and serious organised crime, which costs this country £37 billion a year and on which the Labour party is absolutely silent.

The settlement is another stepping stone—I have been candid on this—on the journey towards the comprehensive spending review and the opportunity to structure long-term funding for the police and to address the issue of fair funding, which exercises minds across the House. The Home Secretary has made it clear that police funding is an issue. That is exactly what the settlement provides. We have one of the best police systems in the world and we need to invest to keep it that way.

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Local Government Finance

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** We come now to the three motions on local government finance, which will be debated together. All three motions are subject to double-majority voting: voting by the whole House, and voting by those representing constituents in England.

4.59 pm

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire):** I beg to move,

That the Local Government Finance Report (England) 2019–20 (HC 1916), which was laid before this House on 29 January, be approved.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** With this it will be convenient to discuss the following motions:

That the Report on Referendums Relating to Council Tax Increases (Alternative Notional Amounts) (England) 2019–20 (HC 1917), which was laid before this House on 29 January, be approved.

That the Report on Referendums Relating to Council Tax Increases (Principles) (England) 2019–20 (HC 1918), which was laid before this House on 29 January, be approved.

**James Brokenshire:** Strong, vibrant, resilient communities are, more than ever, key to unlocking a brighter future for our country. We must therefore celebrate them and help them to succeed, and, in turn, support councils and the many people who serve them every day in delivering essential services and changing lives. I hold those dedicated public servants in the highest regard and have faith in them to rise to the challenges that lie ahead, seeing their people and places flourish with no one left behind. To achieve that, they must have the necessary tools and resources to do their job and I am determined to ensure that they get them. That was why I published the provisional settlement on funding for local authorities in England late last year and invited contributions as part of our formal consultation on that.

We received around 170 responses and I am grateful to those who engaged so constructively with me and my Ministers. My particular thanks throughout the process go to the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), for all his work and immense efforts.

That important work has helped to shape the final settlement, which recognises the pressures that councils face and acknowledges their impressive efforts to drive efficiencies and strengthen our public finances. That paves the way for more confident, self-sufficient and reinvigorated local government.

I am pleased to confirm on behalf of the Government that, importantly, core spending power is forecast to increase from £45.1 billion in 2018-19 to £46.4 billion in 2019-20. That amounts to a cash increase of 2.8% and a real-terms increase in resources available to local authorities, which is good news for the many communities that will benefit.

**Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State recognise that children's services are now at crisis point and that there will be a £2 billion—£2 billion!—shortfall by 2020?

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*Question accordingly agreed to.*

That the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) for 2019/20 (HC1996), which was laid before this House on 24 January, be approved.
James Brokenshire: We are spending around £1 billion more than at the start of this Parliament. Some £84 million is added into the settlement to ensure that we drive quality and support in the knowledge that, yes, there are pressures. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will recognise the additional £410 million that has been committed to children’s and adult social care in response to the good work that is going on and some of the pressures.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I welcome the £2.7 million extra for the Isle of Wight. More than that, I am delighted that, for the first time ever, the fair funding review mentions English islands and refers to the Isle of Wight by name as somewhere that requires extra study to analyse additional costs. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that that results in concrete extra support for English islands and the Isle of Wight in recognition of the needs of islands?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend is a fine champion of the interests of the Isle of Wight and I commend him for his work. He has made representations to the Local Government Minister and seen a recognition that different communities are affected in different ways as we look at the review of relative needs and resources. Obviously, we will listen carefully to representations we receive from hon. Members of all parties as we move forward with the review.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): The Secretary of State talks about the additional cash for local authorities. I spoke to a colleague who was at East Sussex County Council’s budget meeting today, and I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that the situation is a catastrophe. The situation with core funding means that meals on wheels are being cut. Unless additional money comes next year, services for vulnerable children will be savaged. Will the Secretary of State today commit to giving East Sussex County Council fairer funding? Even though this is a Tory-led county, the council is on its knees. It needs the money urgently.

James Brokenshire: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will recognise that East Sussex is part of the business rates pilots and gets the benefits that attach to those involved in that process through the additional resources that are garnered from it. Councils across the south-east will get an extra £226 million in their core spend in the settlement if the House approves it today, which will mean around £7.1 billion of funding.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Ian Hudspeth and Oxfordshire County Council on the excellent way in which they have managed their resources? Does he agree that capital funding is equally important? I hope that he will look kindly on our housing infrastructure funding bid, because that funding would provide vital infrastructure for Didcot in my constituency, which is one of the economic engines of the United Kingdom.

James Brokenshire: I pay tribute to Oxfordshire and to all councils that have been working hard to provide services for their local communities. I am sure that my right hon. Friend will recognise the increase of about £16.9 million that will come through the settlement for Oxfordshire. I am looking carefully at the housing infrastructure bids in respect of Didcot and elsewhere, and I note his lobbying in that regard.

Several hon. Members rose—

James Brokenshire: I will take one more intervention and then I will seek to make some progress.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Harrow Council is not unique in having had most of its revenue support grant axed over the past seven years. What conversations is the Secretary of State having with the Chancellor of the Exchequer so that we can, as we hope, see a significant increase in that revenue support grant in the comprehensive spending review?

James Brokenshire: I am looking carefully at sustainability and issues relating to local government finance more broadly. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will recognise the change that is happening in the structure of local government finance and the move away from revenue support to the retention of business rates. In London, we have a 75% business rate retention pilot. We want to move away from the merry-go-round of money being collected so that it comes into central Government and then going back by way of a grant. We want to simplify the process.

Several hon. Members rose—

James Brokenshire: I will take one final intervention, but then I will make some progress, because I know that a lot of Members want to speak and I am conscious that interventions will eat into their time.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the measures he is outlining will help Leicestershire County Council, which is involved in the business rate retention pilot scheme, as well as Harborough District Council and Blaby District Council? Those three local authorities are led by excellent Conservative administrations.

James Brokenshire: I commend the Conservative authorities in my hon. Friend’s area for their work, and I commend him for his recognition of the benefit that accrues from the business rate retention pilots and of how funding from the growth in business rates can be invested into local services. That is why we want to move to this new system throughout the next financial year.

These proposals will amount to a real-terms increase, but I know that we face a number of challenges. Among the most serious is the responsibility that councils—and, indeed, all of us—have towards the most vulnerable in our society. It is therefore right that out of the more than £1 billion of extra funding committed at last year’s Budget, £650 million will go towards adult and children’s social care in 2019-20. This will help to meet the pressures resulting from an ageing population. Some £240 million of that amount has been allocated to ease pressures on the NHS, and that is on top of the £240 million announced in October to address current winter pressures. The remaining £410 million can be spent on either adult or children’s social care and, where necessary, to take pressure off the NHS. I know that local authorities will value that flexibility greatly.
We are investing a further £84 million over the next five years to expand three of our most successful children's social care innovation programme projects in up to 20 local authorities to keep more children at home safely. We are supporting local authorities to make the best use of available resources and to increase efficiency, as well as to innovate and improve the way in which they deliver services. Better integration of the health and care systems with other local services is essential, particularly in regard to social care. The long-term NHS plan, with its welcome shift from acute to community healthcare services, together with the upcoming social care Green Paper, will make a big difference.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I welcome the extra funding that is going into social care, notwithstanding reductions over the past several years. Will my right hon. Friend do all that he can to ensure that that money is not just pumped into the acute sector? Integration far too often seems to mean bailing out hospitals that are struggling because of increased demand from an ageing population and people with multiple co-morbidities, so will he ensure that more of that money is directed into preventive care in the community? This would take pressure off the NHS and keep people well and properly supported in their own homes.

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend will recognise the work of the better care fund and some of the positive outcomes that it has driven for acute hospitals and social care, such as preventing people from having to go to hospital, as he highlights. Ensuring that the social care system works effectively to deal with some of the pressures is a core component of the NHS long-term plan.

Several hon. Members rose—

James Brokenshire: I will give way to the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) and then take a couple more interventions.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. A new study by the Centre for Cities shows that Slough has been the hardest-hit town in the south-east. In fact, it has been the 10th worst hit nationally by this Government's austerity measures. Slough's local government spending has been cut by 23% since 2009-10, while the UK average figure is 14%. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is unfair to mete out the deepest cuts in those areas that are most affected by issues such as childhood obesity, childhood poverty and homelessness?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman will remember the need for us to look carefully at relative needs and resources. I encourage him to engage constructively and positively with our review so that we get the right formula to ensure that need is recognised. He makes an important point, but we are putting more funding into the system, and I hope that he will recognise the benefit.

Anna Soubré (Brixton) (Con): Nottinghamshire County Council, which is run by an exceptional Conservative group, has had its funding cut by 52% since 2013—from £238 million to £118 million for 2019-20. Despite its excellent budget management and real-terms cuts to services, the council's deficit is projected to be £34.1 million. I say to my right hon. Friend, who is a very good Secretary of State, that the cuts have been going on for too long, and county councils such as Nottinghamshire will now have to cut through the muscle and into the bone. They simply need more money. On that basis, I will be abstaining this evening.

James Brokenshire: I pay tribute to the work that councils such as Nottinghamshire have done over the past few years in making hard calls and difficult decisions as a consequence of the financial position that the Government have had to deal with. I encourage my right hon. Friend to look at core spending power, which combines all sources of local government income, because she will see that Nottinghamshire will have an additional £16.3 million between 2018-19 and 2019-20, which is an increase of 3.2%.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I am terribly grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. West Sussex is thankful for the additional money and for the business rates retention pilots, but the truth is that we have had to make savings of £200 million over the past eight years and face a gross gap of £145 million over the next four years. We have one of the oldest populations in the country, with the consequent social care requirements, and we are in the bottom decile for schools funding. In addition to all that, we have “Think Family”—one of the best troubled families programmes—and it would be a catastrophe if its funding were not renewed next year, because it offers really good preventive early intervention work, the effects of which are great and save money later on.

James Brokenshire: I am a strong supporter in the troubled families programme, and I have been a strong believer in preventive work for young people, including through family units, for many years. My hon. Friend makes an important point based on his experience about the value of such services and interventions. I assure him that I will continue to focus on that as we look to the months ahead and the spending review.

Several hon. Members rose—

James Brokenshire: I need to make some progress due to the time available for this debate.

To do more, it is crucial that we listen and respond to what local authorities are telling us, not just on the NHS and social care, but on all issues. It is in that spirit that we are increasing the rural services delivery grant by £16 million in 2019-20 to maintain it at last year’s level. In addition, after consulting widely, we have decided directly to eliminate negative revenue support grant—where changes in revenue support grant have led to a downward adjustment of some local authorities’ business rates top-up or tariff—in 2019-20. I recognise the strength of feeling about that, and I believe this is the most straightforward and cost-effective approach for the next year.

We also want to continue rewarding councils for delivering the homes we need. I therefore confirm that the new homes bonus baseline threshold will be maintained, at a cost of £18 million. The message about councils wanting certainty to help them plan also came across...
[James Brokenshire]

loud and clear in the consultation. To that end I can confirm that, in 2019-20, local authorities, with the exception of police and crime commissioners, will retain the same package of council tax referendum limits as in 2018-19. This will protect local taxpayers from excessive increases, in line with our manifesto commitment.

Every council has the freedom to set higher council taxes if it wishes, provided it gains the consent of local people in a referendum. I am also providing an additional 2% council tax flexibility to Northamptonshire County Council to assist with improvements to council governance and services after its serious issues.

With the end of the current multi-year deal in sight, it is clear that we need to take a longer view on how we fund councils as we move to a stronger, sustainable, smarter system of local government. Preparations this year for increased business rates retention, a new approach to distributing funding between local authorities and the upcoming spending review will be pivotal to this, as will the important work under way with local authorities and the wider sector to better understand service costs and pressures. Again, we are listening and responding.

For years, councils have asked for more control of the money they raise, and we are giving it to them through our plans to increase business rates retention to 75% from 2020, in the process providing local authorities with powerful incentives to grow their economies. Local authorities estimate they will retain around £2.4 billion in business rates growth in 2018-19 under the current system, a significant revenue stream, on top of the core settlement funding I am outlining today.

The pilots testing increased business rates retention have, unsurprisingly, proved very popular, and I am delighted there will be 15 new pilots for 2019-20 covering 122 local authorities. We will also be piloting 75% business rate retention in London and continuing our existing pilots in devolution deal areas.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for including West Sussex in the business rates retention scheme and for the 4.2% increase the county council is getting. Crawley Borough Council has reserves of over £21 million. What more can be done to make sure that councils use such large reserves more efficiently?

James Brokenshire: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the way in which he has championed his local area. As a former local government leader, he has shown what can be delivered through local authorities, and I commend him for that.

My hon. Friend highlights the increased spend that West Sussex will gain as a consequence of the settlement before the House, but obviously it is for local authorities to work smartly and thoughtfully in relation to their retained reserves. There is a clear need for reserves, which he will understand, but he rightly underlines the need to use those funds sustainably, appropriately and effectively.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Secretary of State rapidly skipped over the funding review. Will he confirm that the consultation proposed in December to take deprivation out of the foundation element of the funding review? That would transfer money from deprived areas to non-deprived areas. Is that fair?

James Brokenshire: Obviously we will look at all the representations that continue to be made during the review of relative needs and resources, but our analysis in the review demonstrates that, overall, population is by far the most important cost driver for both the upper-tier and lower-tier foundation formulae. Although in aggregate terms deprivation is not shown to be a major cost driver for the services included in the foundation formulae, I am of the view that relative levels of deprivation remain an important cost driver for some specific service areas such as social care. I welcome views as part of the current consultation, and I am sure the Select Committee will continue to focus on this important work.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Can it be right that prior to the new fairer funding formula central Government grants for inner London were £437 per person per year, whereas the grants for county areas were £153 per person per year? Do we not simply need a fairer funding formula?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes the case clearly for undertaking this review and looking at this properly. We need to look at the starting point and take the approach he highlights to ensure that fair distribution can be made.

Several hon. Members rose—

James Brokenshire: I will give way one last time but then I really must conclude.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): While mindful of the intervention from the Chairman of the Select Committee—of course it is right that we take into account deprivation—let me say that a range of other factors are involved. Rurality and sparsity in a county such as Lincolnshire make it hard to deliver public services, as the Secretary of State will know. He has mentioned rurality, so when he looks at the funding formula, while being mindful of that earlier intervention, will he look at that matter once again?

James Brokenshire: My right hon. Friend makes an important point about rurality, the impact it can have and the cost drivers it can generate. I assure him that we will be analysing it closely as the work continues.

Several hon. Members rose—

James Brokenshire: I must make some progress.

I know that local authorities were also pleased to hear that we plan to distribute £180 million of surplus in the business rates retention levy account in 2018-19, which was generated by strong growth in business rates income, to every authority in England, based on need. But as well as more control, councils want and need to see a clearer link between the allocation of resources and local circumstances.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have tried two or three times to draw the Secretary of State’s
attention to serious cuts in Coventry, and the people of Coventry want to know what the benefits are in relation to the £1 billion that he just announced—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The Secretary of State has the right to take as many or as few interventions as he wishes. He is aware that there is pressure on time. I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman has put in to speak, but he really does have to wait until the Secretary of State wants to give way. I do not like points of order getting in the way of speeches, because I do not think it is fair on others who are waiting to speak.

James Brokenshire: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I know that a number of Members wish to speak this afternoon. I hope I have been generous in taking interventions, but I am conscious of allowing sufficient time for right hon. and hon. Members to make their points for their individual communities. I did not mean any disrespect to the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), as I know he takes these issues extremely seriously. It was on that basis that I sought to be generous but I need to make progress now.

As well as more control, councils want and need to see a clearer link between the allocation of resources and local circumstances. That is why we are working with them to overhaul a funding formula that is currently far too complicated and badly out of date. We need to look at this afresh and do away with anomalies such as double weighting for urban roads compared with rural roads, which the Labour party was far too comfortable imposing. Let us not forget that local people paid the price for Labour: under the last Labour Government the average band D council tax bill went up by a staggering 109% between 1997 and 2010, costing families, on average, an extra £751 a year. Given that track record, one would think that the Opposition might have learned a lesson or two about excessive tax rises, but no. Labour’s manifesto set out plans for a new land tax on family homes, which would punish those with gardens. Labour’s garden tax would send tax bills soaring and house prices plummeting, and would pressure families to build over their back gardens. By contrast, our approach has been informed by a strong consensus on fairness, for local authorities and for local taxpayers. It is now critical that everyone takes a pragmatic approach, recognising the trade-offs that are necessary to ensure we get this right and deliver a new and fair formula on time, as agreed.

This important work—on the funding formula and on increased business rates retention—reboots our system of local government, creating the space for communities to re-imagine what they can do and can be in the 21st century, and helps to renew the bonds with communities. This is of the utmost importance as we strive to ensure every part of our society and country benefits from a modern, outward-looking Britain after Brexit. No one is better placed to deliver on that than local authorities. That is why last week I released £56.5 million, to be used across this year and next, to help councils to prepare for EU exit, and it is why we are backing them to deliver every day through this settlement and the extra funding announced in the Budget. In doing so, we are delivering on what they have asked for: a real-terms increase in spending in 2019-20; support for the vulnerable; a boost for housing, with the removal of the Government cap on how much councils can borrow to build, for quality public services and local economic growth; and help for our high streets. The Labour party may turn its face against this, but it is no less than our councils and communities deserve. I commend the settlement to the House.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): We expected better from this Secretary of State and wanted to see better from this Government. I thank our dedicated council staff and our local councillors of all political persuasions and none, because, frankly, over the past nine years they have all been hung out to dry by successive Secretaries of State.

This is an Alice “Through the Looking-Glass” settlement. Ministers present a cut as an increase, but back in the real world, what we saw in the provisional settlement, which was reaffirmed last week in the Secretary of State’s written statement to the House, is that there is no new money, no new ideas and no recognition of the dire situation facing councils. Between Christmas and last week the Secretary of State had the chance to change tack, but he has just confirmed to the House that the settlement is identical to the provisional settlement that failed so miserably before Christmas.

Local government is at the heart of our local communities. It looks after the most vulnerable in society and makes our local green spaces cleaner and safer, but under this Conservative Government we have seen unprecedented levels of cuts to our local councils. The fact is simple: between 2010 and 2020, local government in England will have lost more than 60p in every £1 that the Government provide to our communities for services.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): We just had a debate on the police settlement grant. Does my hon. Friend agree that local authorities are at the forefront of prevention work, so it is particularly tragic that my local authority, Westminster, has removed all funding from youth services, after-school services and holiday schemes and, like authorities all over the country, lost at least a third of early-intervention funding?

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The fact is that councils are the lynchpin of the provision of proper, cohesive, joined-up services with other agencies, whether housing associations, the police, leisure services or youth services. It is crucial that our councils and councillors are given the resources they need so that we do not cost-shunt from one area of the public sector on to the others. It is self-defeating to cut youth services, early intervention and police budgets at the same time, because we end up in the situation my hon. Friend describes.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. I was rather surprised that the Secretary of State did not give way to me; he is usually quite generous, so I am disappointed.

More importantly, it is vital to the people of Coventry that we represent them. Their budgets—if I can put it that way—through the city council have been cut by well over 50%. That has affected libraries, children’s services, care in the community—I could give a litany. It has
been a general attack on public services, whether we talk about local authorities, the health service or other services. It is vital that we know the breakdown of the £1 billion pounds that the Secretary of State just announced—I noticed that he tried to avoid that. My hon. Friend is right that central Government are shifting expenditure on to the local council tax payer, rather than facing up to their own responsibilities.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend, who is a doughty champion of the people of the city of Coventry, is absolutely right. What we have seen today from this Secretary of State is smoke and mirrors. He can talk about a spending power increase across local government, but that is predicated on every English local authority increasing council tax by the maximum level possible—an eye-watering, inflation-busting increase. We know that not every local authority can raise sufficient money by council tax alone, which is the reason behind the revenue support grant. A 50% cut to the revenue support grant of my hon. Friend’s city of Coventry is a big cut by monetary standards. Coventry’s council tax base does not allow the city council to raise anything like enough money to plug that gap.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman talks about the revenue support grant. How can it be right that a person in London gets £437 per year allocated to them from the central Government grant, a person in a metropolitan borough £319, and a person in a county £153? How can that be fair or right?

Andrew Gwynne: I will answer that: a third of the services are more expensive to deliver in urban areas. That is the fact. It is in the Government’s own report that was commissioned for the then Department for Communities and Local Government. Some Tories do not get the reality of this, but I imagine that those who represent urban areas probably—silently—do. The fact is that revenue support grant is there because Governments of all political persuasions recognise that not every area is the same. The baseline is not the same. In some urban areas, the council tax base is low.

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Gwynne: No, I am answering the hon. Gentleman. If he will do me the courtesy of listening, every local area has a different council tax base. I hazard a guess—I do not have the facts in front of me—that a 1% increase in council tax for Tameside Council, which I partly represent, will raise significantly less than a 1% increase in his area’s council tax, but the needs of Tameside are as great, if not greater, than some of the needs of his constituents.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con)

rose—

Andrew Gwynne: I will give way later if the hon. Gentleman will allow me.

According to the Local Government Association, the change in the revenue support grant has left local services today to face a huge funding gap of £3.2 billion. This is the Tory-led Local Government Association, so I hope that Tweedledum and Tweedledee sitting opposite will listen to this. It includes a £1.5 billion gap in adult social care funding, a £1.1 billion gap in children’s services, a £113 million gap in tackling homelessness and a £531 million gap in public health. By 2025, the gap facing local councils will rise to £7.8 billion, which is something that should shame us all.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech. On the issue of child poverty, we have high debt rates and nine food banks in Hartlepool. How can my local authority cope with a £6 million funding shortfall and 40% departmental cuts right across the patch?

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is what Government Members really need to get about some of the authorities that we represent—although, to be fair, a number of Conservative Members represent authorities with very similar deprivation statistics to those represented by my hon. Friends.

The fact is that if we want to tackle health inequalities, narrow the gap between the richest and the poorest, and actually do the things that the Conservative Prime Minister said were her main aim and ambition on the first day that she took office, we have to ensure that local authorities have the resources they need.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): When the Conservatives were in government in the early ’90s and they had to consign the community charge to the dustbin of history, they brought in the council tax and everyone breathed a sigh of relief. The trouble with the council tax is that it depends on there being a median band D council tax raising power in every part of the country. Just under 70% of the properties in my area are in band A; we cannot raise the revenue locally, so by taking away our revenue support grant, the Government are really crippling councils like mine in Gateshead.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Scandalously, council tax now equates to 70% of the income of a low-income family, compared with just 1% for a higher income family. That is unfair. Some people say that we can merely reform the council tax by adding extra bands to the end. Let me tell my hon. Friend—I imagine his area is very similar to mine—that we can add as many extra bands on the end as we like, but it will not raise a single penny more for my council because we do not have houses that would fall into those bands.

Daniel Kawczynski: The hon. Gentleman has spoken a great deal about pressures on urban areas, but in my constituency in rural Shropshire there are additional costs involved in providing services across a very large, remote, rural area, and we have a lot more senior citizens than the national average. Is he saying that under a future Labour Government, there will be more money for urban areas rather than rural ones?

Andrew Gwynne: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman has fallen into the trap that has been set by his own Ministers. We should not be talking about urban versus rural, or cities versus towns and villages. What is important is not how we cut an ever-diminishing cake differently,
which is the approach of Ministers; we need to grow the cake. Politics is a question of priorities and Labour has set out very clearly how we would put more money into local public services, meaning more money for the hon. Gentleman’s council as well as more money for mine.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for making the excellent point that this is not a dichotomy between rural areas, such as that which I represent, and urban areas. We cannot be robbing one area to give to another. The fact that this Government have cut and cut and cut means that costs are increasing in counties such as my county of Derbyshire. Local authorities have overspends on adult care purchased services and on children’s services because they have been cutting social services and early help. That is why councils are struggling all over the country.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and she is also right that it should not be about urban versus rural, but that is what the Government have made the situation with their approach to local government finance over the last nine years—this perverse reverse redistribution. The facts speak for themselves, and they should shame each and every one of us in this House.

We have seen a shift away from spending based on need and deprivation. The Secretary of State can shake his head, but nine out of the 10 areas seeing the biggest cuts to spending power per household, in pounds sterling, are all Labour controlled. Between 2010 and 2019, Hackney has seen a spending power cut of £1,406 per household, Newham a cut of £1,302 per household, Tower Hamlets a cut of £1,264 per household, and Knowsley a cut of £1,057.06 per household. It is worth noting that Knowsley is the second most deprived area in the country and has received the fourth biggest cut of any council. Nine of the 10 most deprived councils in the country have seen cuts of almost three times the national average. Blackpool, the most deprived area in the country, has seen a £7 increase, and Tonbridge and Malling a £4 increase. It is only when we get to places like Maidstone that we start to see spending power cuts over the past nine years—of just £6.78 per household.

Of the councils that are getting increases, not one of them is a Labour council. It is an unfair funding system peddled by a Secretary of State and Government who are recklessly gambling with our communities.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): It is even worse than that. This ever diminishing cake has now been subject to the Prime Minister—not the Secretary of State, the Prime Minister—offering bribes to people who are going to—[Interruption.] This is part of the system, and it can affect any area—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Mr Skinner. Just one second. We cannot use the word “bribes”.

Mr Skinner: This will come out of local government—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. One of us has to sit down, and unfortunately I just need to say this. We have to make our point—I totally agree—and you always make a point very well, but we cannot use the word “bribes”.

Mr Skinner: This money will come out of local government—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Skinner, please.

Mr Skinner: If you don’t understand, you shouldn’t be in the job.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry that we have got to that level. I said that Members cannot use the word “bribes”, because I do not believe—

Mr Skinner: That is what it is.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am explaining that that is not the case.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. Communities that need help and assistance after nine years of Tory austerity should not be offered help and assistance in return for getting the withdrawal...
agreement through this place; they should get it because it is the right thing to do for those communities. He is right to turn down such offers, as he has done.

If the statistics that I have mentioned were not bad enough, at a time when the Government should be reinvesting in our most deprived communities, helping them and lifting people out of poverty, they propose to cut even further. What we see in this perverse reverse redistribution is another cut to the revenue support grant of £1.3 billion, taking money away from the poorest communities in England. Yes, the Government have announced £1 billion of additional spending in the Budget, and they re-announced it in the provisional settlement and today. But the reality is that the way they propose to distribute that additional money, which does not offset the loss of revenue support grant in absolute terms anyway, is unfair.

For example, the Government are changing the way that the pothole money they announced is to be allocated. Tories who represent urban constituencies should be worried about that, because the Government are moving away from the type, width and usage of a road and merely using a simplified formula based on length of road. That is great for a constituency with lots of country lanes that are used by one tractor a day and 16,000 sheep, but try telling the people who live on potholed dual carriageways in urban areas that they are losing funding by the fiddle and sleight of hand that Ministers are adopting.

Children’s services are the biggest single cost pressure facing our local councils. That was one reason why Northamptonshire County Council—it gives me no pleasure to say that it is a Tory council—was the first council to declare bankruptcy not once but twice in the same year. Not only has that caused misery for families and children, but councils have had to squeeze the place-based services that people think they pay their council tax towards to be able to look after children. That is the right thing for councils to do, but the Secretary of State has to understand that £84 million divided by five divided by 20 councils will not resolve the problems facing children’s services in England. Adult social care has a massive £1.5 billion funding gap next year. Where is the Green Paper? It has been delayed and delayed. That can has been kicked so far down the road that it is probably on the country lane with 16,000 sheep.

In closing—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] Those on the Government Benches can cheer as much as they like, but they are cheering cuts to the poorest communities. I suspect that many Conservative Members have now forgotten why they came into politics. The Prime Minister was right when she entered Downing Street—it should be about narrowing health inequalities. It should be about caring for those who cannot care for themselves. It should be about dignity in old age and looking after our children. I want, and we on the Opposition side of the House want, to improve the lives of people in every part of the country. We have not forgotten how important it is to deliver for local communities when and where they need it most.

Not a day goes by but people claim that politicians are all alike, that we are all the same and that there is no difference between the lot of us. They need to look at this debate today, and by doing so they will see that there is a difference between the Secretary of State’s party and ours. Our party—the Labour party—would never hit the most vulnerable like this, and we have a record to prove it. Politicians are not all the same. Some of us remember why and how we got into politics in the first place. A Labour Government will stand up for local communities. After all, Labour councils are leading the way in standing up for the local services that people rely on. A Labour Government will share power with local areas. We need to make sure that they have a Government who will rebuild this country for the many, and not the few.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Depute Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I say that we have a lot of speakers to get in? I am going to put in a limit of six minutes, but could people use less than six minutes to try to ensure that those later on get the same time?

5.51 pm

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): Before I make my general comments, may I gently remind the House of the economic mess of 2010 and the financial difficulties that this country was in at that time? Opposition Members seem to forget that.

First, I congratulate the Government on the overall budget increase to local authorities, which I think helps councils to plan for the future and creates some stability for them. We often underestimate the importance of local authorities and the role that they play in providing leadership in their communities, helping to develop localities and, most importantly of all, providing services to their areas. I also welcome the Government’s various initiatives on social care, the new homes bonus and—this is of particular importance to me—business rates retention. That is a very important incentive to local authorities to be business-friendly, and I am just sorry that Cumbria is not part of one of the pilot schemes.

I want to touch on some wider issues, one of which is the relationship between central Government, local government and MPs. We often underestimate the importance of such relationships and the great change that can be made when people work together. I would like to put on record my thanks to the Secretary of State, the Minister for Housing and the Minister with responsibility for the northern powerhouse, my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), for their positive and proactive approach to dealings with me and my local authorities to improve our region.

These are exciting times for my city of Carlisle and for the region. Traditionally, we have in many respects punched below our weight. We are the regional capital and the only city in the area, yet for many years we appear not quite to have reached our potential. I genuinely believe that that is starting to change. We have had investment from Pirelli, the Edinburgh Woollen Mill, 2 Sisters, Pioneer and McVities—to name some very important companies in our area. That demonstrates that the Government are interested in rebalancing the economy and in the northern powerhouse, which is relevant to Carlisle and beyond.

There is further evidence of such support from central Government, and of the relationship between central Government, local government and MPs. We have an
enterprise zone, where businesses are now expanding and growing. We have the garden village with 10,000 new houses—a real vision for the future for Carlisle—and financial support from the Government is helping local authorities to make appropriate plans for that village. As the Secretary of State is well aware, we have made a housing infrastructure fund application that, if successful, will unlock the garden village. It will be the biggest significant infrastructure investment in Carlisle in a generation, and it will be a huge boost to the region, not just to the city. Of course, there is also the borderlands initiative, which goes beyond Carlisle to south-west Scotland and the rest of Cumbria and Northumbria. That really exciting opportunity for the area demonstrates that a positive relationship between councils, MPs and central Government can bring real benefits to a locality.

I give credit to the Labour leader of the city council in that he has been willing to be proactive, but an awful lot more can be done. We have all-out elections in Carlisle in May. If we achieve what I hope will happen—a Conservative council—I think that we will see even more happening when there is working between a Conservative council, a Conservative MP and a Conservative Government.

My final observation is about the devolution of powers and the reform of local government structures. As Ministers are well aware, Cumbria is in need of reform. We are over-governed and over-represented, and there is a real opportunity for rationalisation and savings. The way forward is unitary, but not with a single authority. Cumbria is too large a geographical area with a small population, so something else needs to be done, but clearly reform is required.

I support the Government’s direction of travel on local authorities. It is the right approach and I will support it. My real message today is that with proactive central Government, with a responsive local government and with MPs willing to work with local and national Government, an awful lot can be achieved. I therefore look forward to welcoming Ministers to Carlisle in the near future.

5.55 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I probably agree with most of the points about devolution made by the hon. Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson), but I strongly disagreed with his comments about the situation in 2010. It was clear that we had an international financial crisis, and Gordon Brown deserves a great deal of credit for mitigating its consequences on the scale that we would like. There are cuts to funding for road safety, with bus routes scrapped, and children’s centres and parks closed. That is happening in the constituencies and local authorities of Conservative Members, too. What worries me is that as most people do not have family members in care, they see the other council services: parks, libraries, road maintenance and refuse collection. Those are the services that matter to them, but they are the services that are subject to the biggest cuts of all.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a fabulous speech. I really appreciate what he says about culture and the role of libraries, leisure centres and parks. They are really important for physical and mental health, but people do not appreciate that.

Mr Betts: Absolutely right. We hear people start to say, “What is my council doing for me? What am I getting from it?” I’m paying a lot more as council tax rises by 6%, but I’m getting a lot less.” We should all worry about the impact on and support for local democracy, and local councils as a whole, if that continues and people think that they are paying money into the system but getting nothing out. There was something very wrong with the announcement of another cut to the public health grant of £50 million in the very week in which the Government promoted their new long-term funding plan for the NHS and said that prevention would be more important in the future. Those two things just do not fit together.

There have been two clear facts since 2010: first, local government has been subject to bigger funding cuts than any other sector of the public realm; and, secondly,
within those cuts to local government, the biggest have been in the poorest areas. Those two facts are absolutely clear. Looking ahead, how can we deal with that? First, there has to be a bigger pot of money for local councils in the spending review. The answer is very simple. The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee has welcomed 75% retention of business rates. It also said that that money should not be used to replace public health and other grants. The money needs to be kept in place and used to help to fund the gap in social care and to reverse some cuts to the other services I have just described. That money needs to be kept in local government, not used to mop up other grants that are going to be cancelled.

On the funding review, there is a question of not just the totality of the money, but how it is distributed. I accept that one area’s fairness will possibly be another area’s unfairness, and we will have different views, but taking money away from deprived areas and moving it to others—is very difficult to justify. I say to the Secretary of State that this is a serious exercise. I hope that in the end the Government do not get to a point where they use that mechanism as a way of financially manipulating money into Conservative areas, because that is the suspicion among Labour Members. I accept that this is a difficult and complicated job, but the Government need to be very careful that the process does not become an exercise in financial gerrymandering. That would be very sad for local government, as well as for the people we represent.

There are two challenges for the period ahead. Let us all stand up for local government and ensure that it does better in the next spending review and has a better allocation of resources. Let us then make sure that those resources are fairly delivered. I am sure that we will have a lot more to say about that in the future, but those are the two tests by which I will judge next year’s spending review.

6.3 pm

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): I have the utmost respect for the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and it was good to hear his comments. I did not agree with everything he said, but there is no doubt that he has a significant level of knowledge on this subject.

I welcome the real-terms increase in funding for local government in this settlement. I want to talk a little about the settlement in that context and then talk about the segue we have between this year’s local government finance settlement and a number of different events that are going to take place that will frame the funding for local government as we go to the following year.

There is no doubt that for a number of years it has been a challenging time for local government. Local government has done its share. It has worked extremely hard to do its part to help to sort out the absolute mess left behind by the Labour party in 2010. Many councils have worked extremely hard and coped extremely well in very difficult circumstances. Some have made far better decisions than others. I praise my local authority, Warwickshire County Council, for the sound financial management that it has shown while, at the same time, significantly increasing the funding going into adult and children’s social care. Clearly, it has had to make tough decisions, but it has set priorities and made sure that it is still providing many of its core functions.

That is in stark contrast to one of my district councils—Labour-run Nuneaton and Bedworth District Council—which, quite frankly, has done an absolutely appalling job of dealing with the challenges. It has tried to raise revenue by hiking car parking charges and has lost £500,000 in income. It has overspent on a council depot by £2 million and has purchased a climbing wall, which has so far cost the taxpayer nearly £200,000 and has hardly been used. The council has then proceeded to blame the Government for the financial position that it is in.

I welcome the £17.5 million extra that Warwickshire County Council will get for children’s and adult social care and I welcome the significant investment in roads. In Warwickshire, we are starting not just to fill potholes, but to patch roads properly and replace road surfaces, which is important if we are going to get long-term value for money. I am also pleased that the Secretary of State made his case and got the challenge of negative revenue support grant under control. That makes a difference of £300,000 for my Labour district council and it makes North Warwickshire Borough Council, two wards of which are in my constituency, better off to the tune of £100,000.

One area that I am extremely concerned about in my constituency is rough sleeping. Over and above the settlement, I know that a number of pots of funding are being allocated to dealing with the challenge of rough sleepers. I appeal to the Government Front Benchers, as we go through the various stages of funding on that: in Nuneaton, we desperately need to make sure that we have funding, so that we can get people off the streets and get the support around them to keep them off the streets and help them to sustain accommodation.

Various events are coming up, including the fair funding review, the business rates retention pilots and the spending review. Clearly, we do not know the quantum of funding. There is a lot of speculation over that, but we do not know that as yet. However, there is the distribution of funding to consider. Personally, I think that we need to pay deference to deprivation, but based on looking at how we can improve the potential of areas and let them fulfil their true potential, rather than getting into a race about how deprived every area is, and running and talking those areas down. We also need to look at the difference between county funding and funding for metropolitan areas. That needs to be fairer. We need to make sure that the business rates review seeks to support councils that do the right thing and drives growth and jobs in their areas.

I mention to the Secretary of State that it would be good to see the new settlement taking place over as long a period as possible. The four-year settlement this time has been very helpful. There are also challenges for the upper-tier authorities that have not received any additional money—so that, through the new settlement, we are not just making for those areas, but we are also making sure that we are using that money in a way that is good for all of the areas that we have a responsibility for. I am sure that, this side of the House, we will welcome the new settlement. Finally, there is car parking.
In times when many towns need to reduce car parking charges, we need to be very careful not to put too much importance on car parking in doing the settlement.

I welcome today’s settlement. I will support it, and it is a good segue into all the hard work that the Secretary of State and the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), will do.

6.9 pm

Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Liverpool has received yet another poor local government settlement, but that is no surprise; it is a continuation of the Government’s austerity policies. Liverpool has high concentrations of deprivation and this settlement simply fails to recognise the city’s needs.

Liverpool is now No. 4 on the national list of areas of deprivation, but that is a great improvement on being No. 1, and the praise for the change must go to Mayor Joe Anderson and the councillors in Liverpool who have worked so hard to protect people against a background of continuing cuts. They have worked with the private sector to boost the economy, because that is how to improve things and increase prosperity.

Let us look at what has been happening to local government spending. The Centre for Cities report shows that since 2009-10 Liverpool households have suffered the second deepest real-terms cuts in the country, having lost £816 per resident. Government support has reduced by 63% since 2010.

Government policy is very clear. It is to make the city and other areas more reliant on raising their own income, and Liverpool is involved in a pilot scheme looking at just this policy, but we must remember that raising council tax in Liverpool by 1% produces £1.4 million, while raising it by 1% in Surrey raises £6 million. If we are to have a local government system unduly dependent on areas being able to raise their own finances, areas suffering poverty and deprivation are bound to suffer more.

Under the settlement for 2019-20, if Liverpool had a tax base the same as the national average, with the same range of property values, the city would be receiving £102.3 million more to spend on public services. Is that fair? The answer has to be no.

What are the consequences of this long-term policy of reducing Government spending in real terms while need is actually growing? The council has done its best to protect the people of Liverpool and their services—it is an efficient council, it has shown a willingness to innovate, it has done its best to protect services for the under-5s; remarkably, it has protected Sure Start services—but there is now a new threat in the uncertainty around Government funding for maintained nursery schools. Abercromby Nursery School, in common with other such schools across Liverpool and the country, is fighting for funding so that it can continue its vital work and increasing achievement among underachieving pupils, who, at the start of every year, are often in a majority in areas of deprivation.

Liverpool has innovated in raising funding for schools. When the Government stopped funding, Liverpool went to the private sector and raised finance to build seven new schools. This is a council that wants to innovate and work with others. It has protected the arts as best it can, the arts being so vital to Liverpool’s economy, but none of these things can stop the reality of cuts, and neither the council’s innovation nor its determination to protect people can stop people suffering.

The council cannot stop destitution. Universal credit is causing massive problems in Liverpool. People are becoming destitute and more people are rough sleeping, although the council is making a valiant effort to address that and has had some success. People are suffering from Government cuts to social care. People in hospital cannot go home because adequate packages cannot be made available. Children need support, but vital preventive work cannot be undertaken as it should be.

The fact that cuts have continued year on year makes things harder. The council can try to protect people—and does to the best of its ability—but consecutive cuts year after year cannot protect the most vulnerable.

What should the Government do now? Looking ahead, they must recognise the needs of areas such as Liverpool which are high in deprivation but low in tax base. They must provide a fair council tax settlement for local services, protecting the poor, widening opportunities, and protecting and promoting the city of Liverpool. That is what the council wants to do and the Government should support it by enabling it to happen.

6.15 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman), for whom I have the greatest respect.

I welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement that councils’ core spending power will increase by 2.8%, and that following a real-terms increase they will have £46.6 billion to spend on services for local residents. I know that councillors, officers and staff will greatly appreciate what he said about their working together to provide value for money for residents in recent years.

I also welcome the key principles that lie behind the Government’s approach. They include the principle of encouraging growth by providing housing and the business premises that will create jobs, and hence providing funds in response to the needs of local residents. I hope to demonstrate to the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), who will visit Rugby later this week, that our council is doing a brilliant job. The council represented by my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) has been less effective.

In July last year, the all-party parliamentary group for district councils, which I chair, produced a report on district council finances. District councils provide 86 of the 137 essential local services in two-tier areas, and cover 40% of our population and 60% of the country by area. According to evidence that the APPG received from the representatives of 60 district councils who appeared before us during our Select Committee-type inquiry, there was real concern about the possibility that the majority would stop receiving revenue support grant by this year. We are delighted that the Secretary of State and the Minister have recognised the concerns about “negative grant”. It was feared that councils would give back to the Treasury more than they would receive from the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government. District councils throughout the country are greatly reassured to learn that that will not now happen, and we are grateful to the Secretary of State.
Our report also asked for no further changes in the new homes bonus baseline rate. The new homes bonus has been a great success during our party’s time in government. It has encouraged local authorities to provide new housing, to fund infrastructure, and to compensate communities for the disruption that occurs when development is taking place. I am very pleased that the Secretary of State has acknowledged that and retained the current baseline, although there is a strong case for the removal of that 0.4% level. It is important to recognise that district councils’ housing completions have increased by 45% since the introduction of the new homes bonus.

There are a couple of other asks in our report. One, which has already been discussed today, is recognition of the role of councils in prevention. District councils, through their housing and planning authorities, provide services that are critical to the health of communities, such as leisure and recreation facilities and home adaptations, and they also tackle homelessness. I am delighted that my local authority, Rugby Borough Council, has allocated an increased budget for that work, and is working closely with the charity Hope 4 to deal with an issue that was also mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton.

The local authority representatives from whom I have heard want more freedoms and incentives when it comes to raising revenue, but I should enter a word of caution on that regard. I have heard of too many local authorities that are turning themselves into property investors and property companies, often outbidding commercial organisations in the private sector, and I am worried about the level of expertise. Although it is entirely right that local authorities want to invest in their communities, I am worried that sometimes they are not sufficiently hard-headed.

The business rates retention reform is perfectly sensible. I ran a small business in Rugby between 1982 and 2008. I had always believed that what I paid in business rates went into my local community, but for much of that time, it did not. When I learned that, my question was, “What incentive is there for a local authority to do the right thing for growth and attract businesses?” We have turned that around and, like my hon. Friend Nuneaton, I am therefore disappointed that Warwickshire was not selected as one of the pilots.

We are considering a strong settlement today—it is a step in the right direction. Of course, there is always much more we can do, and I look forward to the Local Government Minister responding to the various points that have been raised in the debate.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We now have to go down to five minutes.

6.21 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey). It is a particular pleasure to follow my hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman), both of whom came to the House with long and distinguished careers in local government, and indeed having achieved positions of national prominence. We can learn from their experience.

It seems clear from the debate that the Government have a two-pronged approach. The first is cynically to try to divide rural and urban areas. It will not work in my constituency because there are both urban and rural areas in it. The second is the cynical modus operandi that I have mentioned previously of slashing support to public services, then blaming local authorities for failing to deliver them, or when they are forced to put up the council tax.

For example, it is slightly off topic, but we are campaigning to bring a second fire engine back to Chester, yet the fire authority’s funding will fall to zero next year. Local Conservatives have the nerve to support that campaign, even though their party introduced the cuts.

In the previous debate, hon. Members talked about the increase in knife crime. The Mayor of London is often blamed for a rise in knife crime in London, despite the fact that across the country 20,000 police have been cut. The problem intermeshes with the cuts to local government that we are discussing. Children’s services and money to schools have been slashed. It is no wonder that knife crime has increased, but apparently it is all the fault of the Mayor of London and others.

That brings me to the settlement for my council, Cheshire West and Chester. For the last four years, the Labour council, led by Samantha Dixon, has had to deal with a £57 million cut. Since 2010, the cash cut to my local authority has been £330 million. In the next round, which we are discussing, a further £20 million will be cut, despite the fact that that extremely efficient council, which is down to its bare bones, is already running on empty. If the Secretary of State had any courage or sense of responsibility, he would tell us where he thinks those cuts should fall. Should they be to support for vulnerable children, disabled adults, the homeless—homelessness has of course doubled nationally on the Conservatives’ watch—or rural bus services? Ministers will then of course attack our council leaders when we are forced to put up council tax.

My hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) pointed out that all the additional spending power is created only from increases in council tax, but the situation is worse than that. The rate support grant is largely being replaced by individual pots for which councils have to bid in a beauty contest: money for potholes; money for rapid rehousing; support for high streets; extra cash for children’s services. Councils have to go cap in hand to Ministers every time they want to fund anything, and Ministers can cherry-pick their favourite councils. We all know where that money will go.

The Government are centralising expenditure and taking away local democracy. They have announced extra money for 20 councils to support children’s social services. I can make a fair guess that the majority of those councils will be of a particular political complexion, and they will not be Labour. There will be another special deal for Surrey or, as we have heard tonight, for Tory Northamptonshire.

Meanwhile, locally, the Minister’s fellow Conservatives in Cheshire West and Chester want to spend more money supporting free parking and on mowing the grass while criticising Labour locally for having to put up the council tax. Those are both worthy aims, but those Conservatives need to do locally what the Conservatives have so far failed to do nationally—namely, to say
Robert Neill: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is really no fat left for it to cut, and because of the way the system works at the moment, there is no reward for efficiency. There is no reward in the formula for being a historically low-cost and efficient authority. If anything, perversely, we tend to get penalised for this, and that needs to be put right in the spending review.

We also need to recognise that there are more nuances, even in an outer-London Borough such as Bromley, than people might expect. Deprivation is now moving across London, and the old distinction between inner and outer London does not work any more. Bromley has the fourth lowest level of settlement funding in the whole of London, despite having the sixth highest population. It is the largest borough in terms of geography, and it has the highest proportion of older people, with all the cost pressures that that places on adult social care. It also has the largest road network, but it’s funding settlement is the second lowest per head of population.

That does not make sense to the members and officers of Bromley Council, who are working hard to deliver services for our residents. They have a limited ability to make further savings while maintaining statutory services, and the scope for discretionary spend is more and more squeezed. There are pressures not only on adult social care but on the temporary accommodation budgets, not least because the operation of benefit caps in London is pushing people in private rented accommodation out from inner London to the outer-London boroughs such as Bromley. That means that we, in turn, are having to accommodate people out in Kent. This is leading to real difficulties for many London boroughs.

There are also real pressures on children’s services and social care. Bromley has behaved magnificently in turning around its social services, which were rated poor two years ago, but are now rated good and outstanding in terms of leadership, with a Minister describing the speed of turnaround as unprecedented. The council achieved that despite funding pressures, but those pressures still exist. More children are diagnosed or recognised as having complex needs that must be dealt with, for example. Again, the current settlement mechanism is too blunt and opaque an instrument to deal with the situation adequately.

We must also consider the full implications of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. I warmly welcomed the Act, but the truth is that, in practice, not all the costs are being picked up for local authorities such as Bromley, so we need to consider a revised formula. The same goes for the deprivation of liberty social care arrangements, because their costs must also be picked up. Such things can be achieved through a sensible revision of the formula.

Turning to the need for business rates reform, Bromley has gone into the London business rates pool and wants to work collaboratively with its neighbours. However, Bromley wants to become self-sufficient and does not want to be dependent on Government grants in the long term. Its ambitious approach to supporting development in the borough, particularly in the town centre in my constituency, underlines that desire, but it needs a proper slice of devolution as a reward in a way that is not currently available given how the pool operates.

Finally, if we are to give local government genuine flexibility, we must look again at the amount of ring fencing within some of the remaining grants. I would
hope that we could move a situation whereby such a grant as there is simply comes as a block and then the local authority has the flexibility and leeway to move money around based on its priorities. A simple example from Bromley is that the council is unable to move money from the schools block into the higher-need blocks or into special educational needs transport. A suburban borough such as Bromley has larger distances compared with inner-London boroughs and so requires a greater level of flexibility than the formula currently permits.

While welcoming the settlement, which I shall support tonight, I hope that the Minister will take away my specific points and the broader cry for root-and-branch reform of local government funding.

6.32 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op):
It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), who made a thoughtful, reflective contribution to today’s debate.

The publication of the latest Centre for Cities report last week confirmed what my constituents in Liverpool already knew: the city has been hit hard by almost a decade of austerity, with massive cuts in central Government funding hitting not only the council but police and fire services. Benefit changes have also hit the poorest communities the hardest. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman) has already spoken about what the report says about Liverpool, but I will repeat one of the statistics she quoted because it is so powerful. Since 2010, Liverpool has lost £441 million in Government funding, which equates to a per-resident reduction of £816 a year. That is the largest per capita cut across the whole country. As she said, our directly elected Mayor Joe Anderson and the Labour city council have shown enormous leadership in taking the city through that period despite the cuts, and have been doing their utmost to protect services for some of the most vulnerable communities in our city.

To illustrate all that, the city council spent £222 million in 2010 supporting adults who need help in the community because of age, infirmity or disability. That has now reduced to £152 million despite demand rising by 15%. Such has been the pressure on Liverpool’s adult social care budget that the council has had to spend almost its entire reserves simply to support social care spending. We also have some of the highest levels of looked-after children in the country. As we know, those numbers have been going up across the country in recent years. As a consequence, the city council overspent last year on vital services for vulnerable children and young adults by £7 million.

Against that backdrop, and despite the pressures on its funding, the city council recently adopted a radical new approach to delivering social care. It has been able to find an additional £7.7 million investment to employ 160 new staff to cut the case load of children’s social workers by half, and I pay tribute to the city council for doing that even in these difficult circumstances. The council says that its new model will reduce the number of children for whom each social worker is responsible, allowing them more time to work with children, young people and families. I pay tribute to the council for that important work.

We had an excellent debate on maintained nursery schools last Thursday, in which I spoke about the two outstanding nursery schools in my constituency—East Prescot Road and Ellergreen. I know this is a matter for the Department for Education and, ultimately, the Treasury, but I echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside said about the crucial role played by maintained nursery schools.

I also echo the call from our city council for a royal commission to ensure a fair funding formula for local services. We have heard different points of view in this debate, each of us representing our own constituency. A royal commission could provide an opportunity for this to be looked at in a full, comprehensive and independent manner.

The Government’s own figures on core spending power show that, had Liverpool been subjected to the average level of cuts over the past nine years, our budget would be £71 million better off. We have seen Liverpool’s spending power per household cut by over £700 during a period in which Surrey has seen its spending power per household increase by £65.

My hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), the shadow Secretary of State, rightly said that the council tax base is crucial in determining what a local authority can actually spend. Liverpool City Council raises an average of £886 per chargeable dwelling. As such, we are in the bottom fifth of local authorities in the country. If we had the average tax base, we would have getting on towards £100 million more in council tax revenue. That is the basic injustice that hits the areas of the country with the greatest levels of poverty and inequality, which is why this settlement is unacceptable.

6.37 pm

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con):
I welcome most of the local government settlement for 2019-20 and its recognition of the work done by councils to provide hundreds of services to local residents. Given the rapidly expanding council funding gap, which the LGA reports will rise to £8 billion by the middle of the next decade, I urge the Government to use the 2019 spending review to begin clarifying their plans for sustainable funding for local government after March 2020.

Part of the way to achieve that sustainable funding would be to move to unitary councils across England, a change estimated to generate savings of nearly £3 billion, as revealed in a County Councils Network report. Based on an assessment of data across 27 two-tier local authorities in England, replacing them with unitary authorities could save between £2.4 billion and £2.9 billion nationally. Colleagues will know that process is already under way in Northamptonshire.

After 12 years as a district councillor and 10 years as a county councillor, including time as a county council leader, I know the great work that both tiers can do, but my experience has convinced me that unitary is the way forward to promote localism and democratic accountability, as well as efficiency. I take this opportunity to praise many colleagues at both Northampton Borough Council and Northamptonshire County Council.

Northamptonshire County Council has, to my dismay, become a shorthand for things going wrong, rivalling Venezuela in that regard. The current leadership who have taken on that profound challenge, such as county
council leader Matt Golby, deserve our thanks for their efforts to turn things around ahead of the move to unitary. The Secretary of State's announcement today on Northamptonshire County Council will, I am sure, be welcomed by council colleagues.

Coming back to the local government finance settlement, I welcome the additional £240 million allocated for adult social care, and £410 million for both adult and children's social care, announced in the Budget. Although that is helpful in the short term, adult social care faces a funding gap of £1 billion in 2019-2020. I appreciate the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care giving us April to look forward to by announcing that month—instead of a season, which is progress—for the launch of the much anticipated social care Green Paper, but I need to say to him and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government team, through you, Mr Speaker, that after all these delays it had better be good. It had better be radical, open to fresh and non-statist ideas, and cognisant of not only just how big a challenge but what an opportunity getting adult care right could be. Nothing is more central to effective local government funding, and thereby to MHCLG, than getting this right.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has made his point with considerable force and clarity, and it will have been heard by those on the Treasury Bench.

6.40 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Let me start with a couple of facts: there has been a 49.1% reduction in Government core funding to local authorities and a 28.6% real terms reduction in spending power, which means Government funding plus local council tax, since 2010; and there has been a 32% real-terms reduction in spending on non-social care areas. Those are not my figures, but those of the National Audit Office.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) mentioned the Centre for Cities report, which shows that those cuts have not been fairly distributed; they have been targeted at northern cities and northern councils. Some of the more affluent areas, such as Wokingham in Surrey, have had no reduction in core spending at all. This Government have used local government funding like a pork barrel, putting it into areas that support the Conservative party and penalising areas that do not. Since 2010, Durham County Council has lost £224 million in its budget, and it is predicted that in the next four years it will have to slash another £39 million. That is being done by a Conservative Government, but I do not want to let the Liberal Democrats off, because they also signed up to these cuts when they were in coalition.

On the ability to raise finance, Durham has a similar problem to that outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby, as 55% of its properties are in band A. The more core funding from national Government is cut, the more Durham County Council's ability to raise funding is limited. In addition, Durham can raise only a limited amount through the retention of business rates compared with what can be raised in Westminster and other places. So the future does not look bright for Durham County Council, a well-run authority, under this Government's proposals. If we look at core spending power per dwelling, which is what the Government are looking at, we see that the national average is £1,908 whereas the figure for Durham is £1,727 and Surrey's figure is £2,004. Areas of deprivation in Surrey would not even register on any type of social index compared with what we have in Durham, a former industrial area, which just shows us the way in which this Government have used the system to reward their own areas.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) raised the issue of public health funding. If the Government go forward with the notion of the fair funding formula—that should be getting done under the Trade Descriptions Act—Durham County Council is forecast to lose some £19 million, or 35% of its public health budget. That is happening in some of the most deprived communities anywhere in the country. It is a rural county, but it has deprivation on a par with some inner cities and parts of the former coalfields. How can it be right that under that formula Surrey would gain, and deprived areas such as County Durham would lose? The Government are taking political decisions about where the funding goes. There is this notion among those on the Government Benches that somehow every single council is the same, but I am sorry, they are not. The demands on my local council and councils such as Liverpool in respect of adult social care and looked-after children are a lot more severe than the demands in some of the areas that are getting extra funding.

In her statement on Europe on 10 December, the Prime Minister said:

“It means working across all areas to make this a country that truly works for everyone, and a country where nowhere and nobody is left behind.”—[Official Report, 10 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 25.]

I am sorry, but the policies of this Government over the past eight years have run counter to the Prime Minister's promise. That just shows how hollow her words are.

6.45 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Earlier this afternoon, in your absence, Mr Speaker, we had a striking contrast in both the style and content of the Secretary of State’s presentation on local government financing and the Opposition spokesman’s response. On the one hand, we had someone calm and measured who, with his experience as Security Minister and as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, has dealt with real crises, perhaps not least his own cancer. On the other hand, we had the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), who was more purple than reddish with indignation as he made his remarks about how his party would never do anything to hurt the people. He said that we must grow the cake. We in Gloucester remember how Labour grew the cake in Gloucester: no, let me make this point first. I remember how Labour grew the cake in Gloucester: by shrinking the economy; by spending furiously on public services while 6,000 of my constituents lost their jobs in business, apprenticeships dried up, and engineering and manufacturing were on the verge of closure, as my Labour predecessor blithely ignored the fact that we
[Richard Graham] had the second worst-performing secondary school in the country; by churning out youth unemployment; and by closing the King’s own post office. We know all about Labour growing the cake, going bankrupt, increasing unemployment—like all Labour Governments—and then complaining about austerity when Britain calls for the Conservatives to sort things out.

Let this House not forget that it was the last Labour-run—

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op) indicated dissent.

Richard Graham: The hon. Gentleman should listen to this. It was the last Labour-run city council in Gloucester that sold the car park for a pound and bought it back for a million. Let us also not forget that the current Leader of the Opposition claimed that 672 Gloucester City Homes tenants had been thrown out, although the actual figure was eight.

We do not need to take any lectures from the Opposition on growing the cake, but does that mean that every Conservative Government get it right? No, of course not. I wish to highlight briefly some of the issues for us in Gloucester. Library research confirms that Gloucester is in fact the worst-affected council, with a year-on-year spending decrease between this year and next of 4.4%. The council’s core spending power fell by more than 8% over the past four-year period.

In today’s world, we know that all second-tier councils must do as much as they can to generate efficiencies, whether by generating savings from increased productivity, merging their back offices, sharing space with other authorities or scrapping the mayor’s car—you name it. That is what every good council should be doing and it is what Gloucester City Council has done. The truth is, though, that as an urban district authority, it is difficult for us to grow and generate new homes bonus, because we have only 5 square miles of land. We are penalised by the deadweight calculation, which is the starting point of the number of homes, and we do not benefit as much as we could from business rate retention, although we are part of the pilot project in Gloucestershire.

The council is a good one. It is well rated by peer group reviews and respected in the city. It is leading on creative physical regeneration, with an award-winning bus station that is much admired in Cardiff and elsewhere, and making real progress on human regeneration by making sure that rough sleepers are helped into housing through the social impact bond and gearing up for a new homelessness hub, both of which are funded by the Government. None the less, the additional costs of dealing with homelessness issues are greater than the extra revenue we were given.

The Minister, who did see Gloucester and Cheltenham councils, at my request and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), has made some pragmatic decisions, but they do not, I am afraid, resolve the financial problems that my city council faces. These include issues such as pension contributions and the business of council fees and charges income. Despite being able to raise our precept, we will not, I am afraid, be able to match the costs if our city expects the delivery of the services that it so values at the moment.

I would love to ask the Minister this: will he have not a full blown review of local government funding, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) called for, but arrange for a senior official to look specifically at our city council and offer advice on whether the system is working for us and fair, and what more we can and should do to raise the revenue to deliver the services that are so valued across our city of Gloucester?

6.50 pm Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Like other Members, I want to remind Ministers what the places that they have cut so savagely actually look like. By next year, Newham will have lost 48% of its grant—£138 million a year. That is a £1,301 cut for every household, which is the second highest cut in the country in what is arguably the second poorest borough in the country.

Conservative Members like to pretend that this is all about population—the number of residents in an area who need council services. How can that be true given that Newham grew by almost a third in the 10 years leading up to 2015? We are already the fourth largest London borough by population, and we are expected to have the second largest population growth in London over the next 22 years as well. We also have the youngest population in the country, with 40% of residents under 25 according to the last census. That obviously massively increases need for children’s and youth services, as well as for local authority school services, public health, welfare assistance and more.

The Government seem to think that the only age group that needs council support is pensioners—through social care. It is absolutely true that social care is in crisis, and that affects my constituents in the same way it affects those of every other Member, but young people need much more support as well, and nothing illustrates that better than the fact that nine of my young constituents were murdered between January 2017 and March last year.

A further change that has increased demand for council services is the huge growth in the proportion of my constituents who have to rent privately. Private rentals have doubled—they made up 23% of the total in 2006 and 46% 10 years later—and private rents are simply extortionate. The lower quartile rent on a two-bed over a chicken shop in Newham is now £1,250 a month. Lower quartile earnings are £1,168 a month, so a month’s full-time pay will not even cover the rent, let alone luxuries such as food, heating, clothes and so on. It cannot be any wonder then that the council recently found that, when housing costs are included, 67% of Newham’s children live in poverty.

Although we do have serious problems locally due to the consequences of right to buy, it is not social housing that has reduced so massively, but owner-occupation. In 2006, owner-occupation represented 47% of local housing but, over 10 years, it has more than halved to just 23%. Homelessness and temporary accommodation are extreme problems in Newham—the situation is the worst in the country. The number of Newham residents in temporary accommodation almost doubled between 2012 and 2017. There are more children in temporary accommodation in the 36 sq km of Newham than there are in the 63,000 sq km of Yorkshire, the south-west, the north-east and the east Midlands combined.
This urgent and horrifying crisis is simply awful for the families who have to live with it day by day, but it has also meant fewer people living in Newham for long periods, thereby building up relationships and a sense of community, and far more people feeling constantly insecure. That insecurity in itself has generated yet more need for council services, and I believe that it has contributed to everything from criminal gang activity to mental health crises, and from childhood obesity to elderly loneliness—and even to things like fly-tipping. All these issues have a cost to the council and make it harder for council workers to do their most important jobs for the public.

Can the Government seriously tell me that my constituents have not been harmed by their cuts, and that those cuts have not contributed to the rise in young people being murdered or in fear on my streets? Can they seriously tell me that continuing these cuts over the next year will not deepen that harm? No, they cannot—not honestly. Frankly, the best way that this Government can help my constituents is by getting out of the way.

6.55 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I speak in two capacities: as a Member of Parliament representing a coastal constituency with wards that are among the most deprived in the country; and as chairman of the county all-party parliamentary group, whose role it is to ensure that county areas receive sufficient funding to provide good-quality services that meet their residents’ needs.

The Government’s proposals for 2019-20 address the short-term challenges faced by councils in the area that I represent, and I am supportive of them, but there is also a need to think strategically and look to the long term. Although the Government have recognised the challenges that immediately lie ahead, there is much work to be done as we look to the future. Yes, the settlement provides councils such as Suffolk County Council and Waveney District Council with breathing space and vital short-term resources. The Government have recognised the immediate challenges that such areas face and have made resources available. The £180 million from the levy account that is being returned to local government is much needed and welcome.

This is the final year of a four-year settlement upon which the Government embarked in 2015. It has provided councils with some financial certainty, but it has also required them to drive through efficiency savings that, in many respects, have been a really tough challenge. There is now very little, if any, fat left on the bone. Although this settlement contains vital short-term support, it does not address the medium-term financial pressures that councils face, and nor does it provide long-term certainty. The uncertainty beyond 2020 is creating significant financial risks for councils in county areas. A failure to provide a significant uplift in funding for them from 2020 onwards will challenge the long-term financial viability of the services that they provide.

It is vital that local government is provided with a long-term sustainable solution. This should encourage autonomy, incentivise growth and provide sufficient money for adult social care and children’s services, both of which are under real pressure. The fair funding formula is critical to securing this solution. The present system of funding is outdated, unfair and opaque. Moreover, county areas receive the lowest amount of funding per head from Government grants and retained business rates—£153 per person compared with £225 for unitaries, £319 for metropolitan boroughs and £437 for inner London wards. This is notwithstanding the fact that it is more expensive to provide services in rural areas, that there is an increasingly disproportionate elderly population in counties and that, as the county APPG’s recent report on social mobility highlighted, there is a real problem of social mobility in coastal areas and county areas, where young people are missing out on opportunities that are available so readily elsewhere in the country.

In the short term, the settlement just about keeps the house wind and watertight, but in the longer term, we require underpinning, a radical overhaul and additional investment. I believe that the Secretary of State and the Minister for Local Government understand the challenges that such areas face. I recognise the various demands from Members that they will have to balance, but I do believe that county areas have been taken for granted and ignored for too long, so I urge the Minister to put that unfairness right through the fair funding review and the comprehensive spending review.

6.59 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The past few years have seen the deliberate and systematic destruction of local government. It is local services delivered by local councils that most people see from day to day. From bin collections to park maintenance, from library services to food safety, from highway repairs to care services, these services matter—they are a core part of our local democracy and what people experience from government. With the excuse of austerity, this Tory Government have deliberately stripped out the ability of communities to shape their local areas. Most services are now being contracted out to private companies, and the oversight of good local services is deliberately fragmented and complex.

The biggest cuts to local government are still to come and still to be felt. Councils have emptied their reserves, cut services to the bone and shed the maximum number of council staff. The consequence of all this is poor local services—a tatty public realm, non-existent youth services and unmaintained parks. Worse than that, it is homeless people on the streets, low-quality care for the elderly and limited provision for vulnerable children, especially those with mental health problems. The Government offer nothing new for children’s social care, which has seen a £1 billion shortfall.

In my constituency, 82% of Bath and North East Somerset Council’s budget is spent on adult and children’s social care. This leaves the remaining 18% to fund everything else, from waste collection to road maintenance, library services, the arts, public realm improvements and community outreach services. These services are an absolute shadow of their former selves, becoming more and more squeezed under the pressure of a growing responsibility for social care. Bath and North East Somerset Council cut 15% of its total staff last year and still has another £12 million of cuts to make to meet central Government targets. We have heard today about inequalities. I acknowledge that Bath is one of the better local councils, so I absolutely understand what councils have to face in areas that are even less well off than Bath.
What is the Liberal Democrat answer to this? It is properly funded local government. We have been talking about the revenue support grant and how it provides some fair funding across the board. The Conservative Government currently plan to completely abolish the revenue support grant, which has distributed resources fairly from richer to poorer areas, and replace it with a system where councils can substantially increase council tax and retain the business rates that they collect. These proposals are highly divisive and will starkly increase inequalities across the country. Liberal Democrats are totally committed to the fair distribution of money across all areas of the UK for the provision of good local services. Wherever people live, there should not be a postcode lottery for local services. We will replace business rates with land value taxation, which will help to protect our high streets for the long term.

Liberal Democrats propose additional higher council tax bands so that everybody, including people in high-value properties, makes a fair contribution to the public purse. I understand the argument that just adding council tax bands will not make the substantial difference, so I confirm that the revenue support grant, as one of the fairer ways of providing fair council funding, is the absolute bottom line. There must also be, after 30 years, a revaluation of property values to correctly establish the correct council tax band for every property. While we still have council tax in the mix, it has to be fair.

Finally, I will touch on devolution and democracy. It is not only local government finance that is being cut to the bone by this Government—they are also taking every opportunity that arises to weaken local democratic accountability. Every structural change in local government proposed in the past few years has been to cut out the democratic levels and to have fewer elected councillors making local decisions.

The Tory agenda is clear: weaken local government, cut its budgets to the bone, remove the checks and balances of local democracy, and pave the way for large private sector providers answering to Whitehall. Liberal Democrats have a completely different vision for local government: properly funded and properly democratic, taking decisions about local services, delivering them locally and being locally accountable. This funding settlement is woefully inadequate and I will vote against it.

7.4 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): The funding challenges facing East Sussex County Council are well documented. It has had to make £129 million of savings since 2010 and has cut services to the core as a result. Most of the difficulty is due to the demographic challenges that the county council faces. It has the highest number of 85-year-olds in the country, and a quarter of the population are over 65, which puts huge pressure on adult social services. We heard earlier that most councils are spending money on their children’s services. In the budget for next year, East Sussex proposes to spend £171 million on adult social care and just £77 million on school services, because it is having to push the funding to where the greatest need is.

Over the weekend, I met the chief executive of East Sussex County Council and the leader of West Sussex County Council. They both have high praise for the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak). He has met them, listened to them and understands their problems, but they still face difficulties. They have the historical issue of being rural authorities with 50% less funding per head of population than urban areas, and we cannot continue like that. Many Members have mentioned the fair funding formula. It cannot come soon enough for areas such as East Sussex. I know that the Minister has had discussions with the council. When this four-year funding settlement is over, the council needs certainty, so that it can plan services.

Despite the revenue support grant dropping, East Sussex County Council has received extra funding from the Government. It has been lucky enough to be included in the business rates pilot, which has generated £1.6 million for it. It has secured £4 million of extra funding for adult social care, £2 million extra for services this winter, £4 million extra for potholes and £1.1 million for special educational needs. While not part of the revenue support grant, all those pots of money are making a real difference to communities in my constituency. I welcome that, but we need it to be ongoing, not in yearly one-off settlements. I urge the Minister to look at population projections in the fair funding review, because we do not want to be pitting old against young and asking who needs the funding most. It has to be done on a fairer basis.

While East Sussex County Council does need more funding, I am disappointed when councils just top-slice and cut services when funding is a struggle. I have the privilege of having the county town in my constituency of Lewes, and it is like a Monopoly board of local government infrastructure. None of it is joined up or shared. We have the beautiful town hall in Lewes town, which the town council shares and is well used by the community. Two minutes down the road, we have Southover House, which is for the district council and which no one else uses. A further five-minute walk down the road is the county hall building, which is the sole preserve of the county council. We have Sussex police headquarters another five-minute walk from that, which is overstretched and does not have enough space for the police, but the police and crime commissioner has her own headquarters another five minutes down the road from that. We then have the beautiful Lewes House building, which is completely underused but owned by the district council. It cannot be right that councils are not making the best use of the resources they have when they are struggling.

I echo the sentiments of my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) in urging councils to become unitary authorities. I would force them into that, because this is not the best use of resources. That would not only save £2.9 million across the country but enable better services. Our county council recently introduced fees for using the tips for tyres and rubble, which has dramatically increased fly-tipping, and the district council then has to pick up the tab for that. These are not joined-up services. This is not just about saving money; it is about a better service for local residents.

I will support the Government tonight, but I urge the Minister to devise an innovation fund. If the Government cannot force councils to become unitary authorities, they must incentivise them to do so, because they are not making the best use of their resources.
7.9 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I want to start by associating myself with the remarks of the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), in what I thought was a brilliant exposition of the injustice at the heart of this statement this afternoon. Be in no doubt: this statement today is a basic question of injustice and unfair deserts. It shows this Government’s willful determination not to do anything about tackling the injustices that now scar this country, including communities such as mine in Birmingham. If they did want to tackle them, at the heart of this statement would be a bold determination to make sure that we were investing most in those communities that need it most. Instead, as the shadow Secretary of State has set out with such brilliance, we have exactly the opposite.

Many of us on this side of the House came into politics for a simple reason: because we wanted to tackle the basic, fundamental injustice that the postcode in which people are born defines their possibilities in life. That is why I gave up a career in business to serve what is this country’s most income-deprived constituency, where four generations of my family have lived and worked.

Nine years into this Government’s austerity, those injustices are now looming larger than ever. This Government have given us a slower recovery than after the great depression. That what means in Birmingham is that it is harder to earn a good life than ever before. The employment rate in our city is now lower than it was before the great depression. In some parts of the west midlands today, people are now earning 9% less than they did in 2008. The ladder in life is harder to get on to because apprenticeship numbers in the west midlands have fallen by a third. That is 10,000 fewer apprentices in our region over the last year.

How can it be just for a child born in Ladywood to live eight years less than a child born in Sutton Coldfield? How can it be right that a kid born in Alum Rock has a third less chance of going to university than a kid born in Solihull? How can it be right that someone born in Bordesley Green has a one in five chance of being overcrowded, even if their parents or siblings are disabled? How can it be just that someone born in Birmingham this year has a four in 10 chance of being born in poverty? These injustices are wrong.

These inequalities demand an answer, not the proposals from the Secretary of State this afternoon. This Government were able to rustle up £1 billion for their friends in the Democratic Unionist party in the space of days. In Birmingham, we have taken the biggest cuts in local government history—£690 million to date, £85 million still to come and £46 million to come out of our budget this year. That is a total of nearly three quarters of a billion pounds. The bad news is that it could be worse because we face £161 million of pressures over the next two to three years. That is why I say to the Secretary of State today, on behalf of all the Labour MPs in Birmingham: this battering of our city has to stop and it has to stop now.

Yesterday morning, I met the friends of Kane Walker, the young man who died on the pavements of Birmingham a week or two ago. They could not stop for long because they were rushing to hospital to see a friend, homeless too, who had been bitten in the face by rats and they feared sepsis—the sepsis that they think killed Kane Walker just a week or two ago. But Kane Walker was not alone: one homeless person a week now dies in the west midlands, sometimes in medieval conditions. This, in the fifth richest economy on earth, is a moral scandal, and this statement this afternoon has done nothing to reverse it.

This Secretary of State takes the issues of Birmingham so seriously that, when its entire number of Labour Members of Parliament wrote to him demanding an urgent meeting last November, he cleared his diary immediately to offer us some time five months later—in March. I know how little this Government care for Britain’s second city, and I know it will take a Labour Government to bring justice back to our city.

7.14 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I warmly welcome the Secretary of State’s remarks. This is of course the fourth year of a longer term framework for local government funding, and the key element is the need for a fairer funding formula. We also need to deal with some of the underlying pressures for local authorities, particularly the time bomb that is adult social care. An extra £10 billion of funding for adult social care to 2020, including £650 million committed by the 2018 Budget, will go a long way to help in the short term. In the longer term, we need the fairer funding formula underpinned by the business rates retention pilots. I am delighted to see that North Yorkshire County Council has been entrusted with one of those pilots.

The fairer funding review and the spending review that comes with it are vital. If fairer funding is simply a redistribution of money—moving money from one local authority to another—it will be difficult for some authorities. We must learn the lessons of the fairer funding review in education, and fairer funding must come with extra money in the pot generally, to make it possible for some local authorities to manage as we redress the balance and make things fairer.

The present situation is unfair. Nine out of the 10 best funded authorities per capita per year are in London; they have about £1,000 spending power per person a year. In North Yorkshire we have £770 per person a year, despite the fact that a much larger proportion of that £770 is made up of council tax. We are contributing more but getting less in services. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wavenny (Peter Aldous) pointed out, central Government grants to local authorities to inner-London councils are £437 per person per year, for metropolitan boroughs they are £319, for unitaries they are £225 and for counties £153. The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) cannot talk about unfairness and avoid those figures. We must move to a fairer funding settlement.

I pay tribute to my neighbour, the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), who has looked at this issue and tried to simplify the system. Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication, as da Vinci said many years ago. My hon. Friend is right to want to simplify this and make it fairer. We must take on board many of the comments that have been made to make sure that the funding formula is fairer in the future.
Adult social care is putting more pressure on my constituency than any other issue and we need to take a more strategic approach to its funding. The Select Committees on Housing, Communities and Local Government and on Health and Social Care had a long joint inquiry on this and came up with a simple recommendation—to emulate the German system of social insurance, which involves a social care premium. It is a simple, scalable and sustainable solution. It is a small amount that everybody pays—everybody pays something so nobody has to pay everything. That is the key to it. It was introduced in Germany in 1995 to replace a system of local government funding, and it has been incredibly successful. It was a unanimous recommendation of those cross-party Select Committees.

The key element of the system is not the small amount people pay in, but how they get the money out. If someone is defined as in need of social care—a young adult or someone in later life—they can take it in the form of local authority provision, third-party provision or as a cash settlement every month which can be paid to a neighbour or loved one, be it daughter, son, nephew or whatever. It also helps to strengthen the social fabric by making sure that people are looked after by those who love them most and understand their needs the most. It is something that we should adopt, and I hope it will be in the Green Paper that is expected shortly.

7.19 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), a fellow North Yorkshire colleague. He made some powerful and thoughtful points, in particular on the disparity of funding between the north and the south. I enjoyed his contribution very much.

This is the second time today that I have had to stand up in this Chamber to fight against the unfair and disproportionate funding that is leaving my constituents behind. The funding formula is leaving them at the bottom of the table. Areas that are more deprived, as we have heard from so many Members across the Chamber, are not getting the funding and support they need. There is clearly unfairness in the funding system. It is vital that we make that point today. The Government have to look at it again.

Redcar and Cleveland Council has lost £90 million since 2010. That is 35% of our funding. How on earth can a council be expected to continue to provide the level of service it wants to provide for its residents, particularly in areas like mine with high deprivation and high child poverty, when it has lost 35% of its funding? Residents are seeing and feeling the impact. As many colleagues have said today, we have seen a huge increase in the crisis of social care for adults and for those with disabilities. There are huge challenges around mental health support, particularly for young people, and there has been a rise in the number of children being taken into care. The situation is just not sustainable. Something has to give. The Government must look again.

In Redcar and Cleveland, we have lost 1,100 jobs in the past nine years. We have faced not just the tragedy of those individual job losses, but the knock-on effect of spending power being taken out of the community. On top of other job losses, that is just not acceptable. In 2010, I worked for a local government think-tank. The big pressure around the cuts was the argument that said, “Councils have reserves. They can dip into their reserves and the cuts will hardly affect them.” Redcar and Cleveland has already had to spend £14 million of its reserves on trying to balance the books. There is nothing left. The cuts are going to the bone.

On top of that, Redcar and Cleveland lost business rates in the region of £10 million when we lost our steelworks. This is simply not acceptable. I have spoken to Ministers about the unfair system where Redcar and Cleveland was asked to pay £2.6 million for business rates relating to an industrial property that was revaluated that never even crossed its desk. It is not acceptable that Redcar and Cleveland has had to pay for business rates it never actually saw.

One in four children in Redcar and Cleveland are living in poverty. One in 10 four and five-year-olds are classified as obese, and that doubles by the age of 10 to 11. Currently 300 children—one in 10—are looked after. That has risen 35% since April 2017—a 35% rise in just two years.

I thank Sue Jeffrey and the Labour team in Redcar and Cleveland for their excellent work. They have done a superb job of dealing with the implications of the devastating cuts, protecting people on the frontline and supporting the most vulnerable people in our communities. They have kept our five leisure centres and all our libraries open. They have bust a gut to look after the poor and the needy. They are doing a superb job with both arms tied behind their backs.

Councils are at breaking point and this settlement gives the people of Redcar and Cleveland nothing. When people are already having to pay more council tax—an unfair tax—they are paying twice for services that are being cut to the bone. That cannot continue.

Mr Speaker: Four-minute speeches are now preferable—much more preferable.

7.23 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley).

I rise to put on record my thanks to the Minister and the Department for the rise in core spending power in my constituency, and to highlight the urgent need to finish the funding review, as I think every single colleague has said. The sector needs clarity and resolution by October so that it can plan for the long term. We see that acutely in my constituency. Redditch is just down the road from Birmingham. Opposition Members have spoken about the unfairness of funding in urban areas. Households in Birmingham receive 27% more than households in my constituency, yet the deprivation needs are comparable on any indicator. The areas that some Opposition Members are speaking about are starting from a much higher base. That has to be taken into account in any calculations about fairness.

Yesterday, I met Councillor Simon Geraghty, the leader of Worcestershire County Council. He specifically wanted me to thank the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), for listening to him on the specific issues facing
his council. It has had challenging and tough times, yet due to sensible and prudent management it is due to pass a budget. It will make savings and efficiencies, while being able to keep all the libraries open. I also recognise the hard work that it has put in, working with the district councils and Councillor Matt Dormer, to put together a unique bid that has gone into the business rates retention pilot in our area. That will deliver up to £4.9 million of additional funding, which can be spent on addressing some of the acute social care needs in Worcestershire, which is another area with an ageing population.

Local services are so important to my residents. I am sure I am not the only Member who, when I go door-knocking, finds that I get blamed for everything to do with local services as well as, of course, the national issues that consume us, such as Brexit. Often, local residents do not make any distinction. They just think that we are responsible for all of it, and indeed we are. That is why I am delighted that the hard work and the lobbying that we put in across Worcestershire has resulted in a reasonably good settlement for Worcestershire, which I welcome.

I will finish my remarks by touching on the town centre, which is of paramount importance to my constituents. Redditch is a new town. We are proud of our heritage. We want to cherish the beautiful areas that we have in our town centre, and yet, after eight years of Labour being in control of our district council, nothing has been done about that. The stark fact—shameful, I think—is that in eight years in control of Redditch Borough Council, Labour did not build a single home for social rent. We are already starting to do that, having taking control last year. I support that and want that work to go further.

My local council leader, Councillor Matt Dormer, is pulling together funding pots from the local enterprise partnership, the county council and various different places, including local government. Investment will be going into our town centre for the first time. We look forward to having those conversations and building a bright future for our town centres, which have been so long neglected under the Labour party in local government. We want to make a thriving and vibrant local economy, where people can feel free to start a business, invest and bring more revenue into our town, and where people can work and play and be proud, as they already are, to raise their families. I thank the Minister very much and I will vote for the settlement this evening.

7.26 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): In Derbyshire, we have seen a 60% reduction in our revenue support grant since 2010. Instead, we end up with short-term pots of funding. We have a Conservative county council that says it cannot spend its pothole money because it was given too late in the year. It has a better care fund that is £8 million underspent, in spite of huge cuts being made to our health services, including our voluntary services, in Derbyshire. Yesterday, the county council refused to refer that to the Secretary of State or to cover those cuts, which will make such a difference to our communities.

In the less than two years that I have been in this place, I have seen cuts to our libraries in Derbyshire—almost half the libraries have been transferred to community management, with no grant, and the rest of them have reduced hours—and our Sunday bus services have been cut, so now at the weekend, the Peak District is overrun with cars. In our schools, one of the biggest issues that I see in my casework is children with special needs being deprived of the support they need. Parents have been battling against schools and schools have been battling against the local authority year on year. We have seen educational psychologists cut yet again, even though they are crucial to diagnosing autism and special needs. When parents have been able to get the support they need to take the county council to a tribunal, the county council has lost 39 out of 40 recent cases. However, parents are still struggling on to support their children, who are not getting the help that they need.

It is only going to get worse for families. In spite of rising numbers of children on child protection orders—up by over a quarter in two years—the number of children in care in Derbyshire has risen by 9% in nine months. However, the county council has just put forward its response to the consultation: it is going to cut two thirds of its early help staff—293 of the 400-odd staff will be cut. Its responsibility for supporting families will be transferred to schools, which are already struggling. Those with no at-risk children—largely in better-off areas—will be fine, but those in areas where children desperately need support will not be.

Our children’s centres have been cut and most of them closed while youth services are being abolished. In adult social care, contracts for care at home are constantly being whittled away and private providers are at their wit’s end. Areas of my constituency simply will not bid for care packages because they cannot balance the books. As a result, more elderly people are stuck in hospital desperate to come home. Careworkers are being transferred from two to three shifts, but they cannot continue on that basis.

Care homes are having their funding frozen and community alarm services are being cut for four fifths of those who use them. Learning disability services, respite breaks, and now a consultation on day centres—the cuts are endless, and they hit the most vulnerable, who are the people the Government claim to protect. In just 18 months, 2,700 people have been referred to court for collection of council tax, and 7% of households have been lumbered with court costs and bailiff fees. The Government are hitting the poorest, and we are all paying more.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George). She described the challenges in Derbyshire much as I would describe those in East Sussex.

I want to thank all my district and county councillors, and indeed all my parish and town councillors, for their work. I spent eight years as a district councillor—I stood down the day I entered this place—and I think it essential that local government be well represented on both sides of the House. I also thank the ministerial team for listening to the lobbying and the concerns raised by me and my colleagues from East Sussex, which is to receive an extra 2.5%. We are also in the business rates retention pilot, which will mean a great deal to us.

We have a big challenge in East Sussex, although, in a way, it is a wonderful challenge. Some 28% of my constituents are over 65: the national average is 17%. A lot of people move to East Sussex to retire—for its
[Huw Merriman]
great quality of life—but the difficulty is that they tend to
downsize and live in smaller houses, meaning that they require social care but do not pay as much council
tax as people in counties such as Surrey.

If we are to reform social care, we must ask ourselves
whether we want a state system, meaning that there is no
postcode lottery as everything is funded equally
through the NHS, or whether we go for more radical
reform. In East Sussex, we cannot carry on as we are,
going to Ministers each year and asking for more. They
usually give more, for which I am grateful, but it feels
to hand to mouth to many of our councillors, who want
longer-term certainty.

Social care has gone from a third of East Sussex County
Council’s budget to 75%. We are not fixing holes in the
road, because we are fixing people—or doing our best
to. That should be our priority, but we need more if we
are to be a success. We know that nationally, social care
funding will need an additional £12 billion by 2030. If
we continue as we are without reform, there will be a
£6 billion hole. I hope that everyone in this place agrees
that we will need more money and more reform.

In the last 20 years, we have had 12 Government
papers, from both Labour and Conservative Governments,
and five independent commissions, but we still have not
had the reform we need. Surely it is in the gift of this
place, where there is no real Government majority, for
MPs to work together cross-party to deliver. We must
have reform as a matter of principle, from the Labour
did, and no more calling it a dementia tax, as the
Opposition did. We must work together now to find a
solution. I am willing to do that, and I hope that others
are as well.

I want to look at countries that have introduced
reform. In Japan, where there was no state funding for
social care until 2000—when it was recognised that
there was a problem—over-40s pay an additional amount
in their pay packets, but of course they started with a
blank page. It is to Germany that we should look,
however, as my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and
Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) rightly said. Its plan, introduced
in 1994—he says 1995—was delivered with political
consensus and has been a great success. People in work
pay half, employers pay the other half, and the retired
pay the full amount, which brings in the element of inter-
generational fairness. The contribution rate is 2.5% of
wages, payable to a ceiling, with those without children
paying more. To take out £283 per month, or a maximum
of £1,784, changes lives. The system has been reformed,
too, as impairments have developed. It used to be based
more on physical need; now it is based more on dementia
and the mental side.

Long-term care is a social risk that requires social
protection. Surely we can all come together and make
that happen.

7.34 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I draw
attention to my entry in the Register of Members’
Financial Interests.

I am delighted by the success of Stoke-on-Trent’s
pooled bid for 75% business rates retention. Increased
rates retention fits the city’s ambition to be a prominent
and notable success story of the Government’s localism
agenda, and will enable that ambition to be realised.
Stoke-on-Trent is on the up, and the city council has set
out a compelling strategic vision to keep it that way,
working closely with local partners across Staffordshire.
Challenges remain, but after decades of decline under
Labour there is huge local support for the growing
prosperity of our proud city and an appetite for locally
driven change, with local business and employment
opportunities being given the boost that they need.

People wanted to see improved living standards, and
since the Government took office in 2015, local
Conservatives, in coalition with independents, have indeed
delivered positive change. We have upped the ambition
for the city, making close-run, enthusiastically supported
bids for the title of city of culture and for a Channel 4
hub. We have a heritage zone in Longton, money from
the transforming cities fund to improve local transport,
and the Ceramic Valley enterprise zone.

Fulfil realising the city’s ambition requires local people
of all ages to gain directly, and be seen to gain directly,
from the implementation of pro-business, pro-development
policies. Getting more out of what we put in is a
fundamental requirement for improved ambition and
productivity in the Potteries and in Staffordshire more
generally. We are determined to share the proceeds of
local growth locally, generating the levels of support
that we need to continue our ambitions for redevelopment
and greater prosperity for our city. The hard work done
by the council in recent years has seen Stoke-on-Trent
recognised in independent assessments as one of the
best places in the United Kingdom in which to start a
new enterprise.

Local authorities have a vital role in making high
streets and towns places where people want to be. Rates
retention is an important reform because it ensures that
authorities have a direct financial incentive to improve
the sense of place and sense of destination, encourages
more people to live in town centres such as Longton
and Fenton, and encourages more small businesses to
move into spaces that are currently vacant. Initiatives
such as the future high streets fund are essential additions.
We must incentivise property owners to convert their
empty buildings so that they can serve new and creative
uses. I certainly hope that our bid for that funding will
be successful.

Brownfield land is a significant issue in Stoke-on-Trent,
a legacy of our past industrial decline. I was pleased to
meet my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and
representatives of Homes England recently to discuss
some of the challenges involved. Decontaminating land
to make it fit for house building can prove highly
expensive. Much of it consists of smaller urban sites,
and larger house builders are unwilling to take them on.
The challenges are often left with smaller developers,
who frequently struggle to swallow the high risk.

A focus on local business growth is particularly
important in cities like Stoke-on-Trent, because the residential
council tax base is low. The reality of our housing offer
locally means that council tax alone will never allow us
to keep pace with the growing and necessary demands
on the public purse from, for instance, social care. What
we are doing locally is seeking alternative ways of
generating revenue to help to fund services. That will
make us more self-sufficient, unlike Labour’s approach,
about which we heard earlier. It would only saddle our
constituents with more borrowing and more taxes, which
we cannot afford.
7.38 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): We have not heard a great deal today. We expected, perhaps, a rabbit to be pulled out of a hat. Word had it that the Prime Minister had a few quid to give out, but we have not seen much of that today. It could have been used in a morally just way: it could have been sent to the areas that have suffered the biggest cuts although they also suffer the most significant deprivation. Those areas have been targeted by the Government, as has been set out today in the many excellent speeches made by Labour Members in particular.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) said that people now questioned why they were paying council tax at all, given that the neighbourhood services that they received were being reduced. My hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman), for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) and for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) made the same points about the human cost of removing vital public services. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) outlined the very real community impact of austerity and the Government’s targeting of our communities. Through to my hon. Friends the Members for Redcar (Anna Turley) and for High Peak (Ruth George), we heard story after story of the human and community cost of austerity.

What shift did we get from the Government? Absolutely none. Why? This has not happened by accident, and the Government will not suddenly wake up and realise that they have made a horrible mistake. The policy has been deliberate and targeted from day one. The Institute for Fiscal Studies said:

“In England, cuts have been much larger for poorer, more grant-dependent councils than their richer neighbours.”

Why?

“This pattern arose directly from the way central Government allocated grants.”

That was deliberate and targeted and it has not stopped today. Despite our calls and our outlining the real human cost, the policy continues.

Mr Jim Cunningham: If the Government were serious about helping women and bringing an end to austerity, they could have funded local authorities to give free bus passes to the women they robbed of their pensions. Surely they could have done something like that.

Jim McMahon: The Government have been very good at shifting money from those who need it most to areas that will secure the support of their Back Benchers. How many times today have we heard Conservative Back Benchers praising their Front Benchers and thanking them for giving in to their lobbying? So much back patting has gone on as Government Members congratulate each other on taking food off the tables of the poorest in society to shift funding to the richest.

We have heard time and again from Conservative Members how much more expensive services are in rural areas. There is no doubt that some services are more expensive to deliver in rural areas by unit cost. However, let us look at the evidence. In 2014, the Government commissioned a report that examined every single service that local authorities deliver throughout England. It showed that it is true that some, but only 15%, of services are more expensive in rural areas. In urban areas, 31% of services are more expensive, and whether areas are urban or rural has no bearing on the delivery of 50% of services. The evidence therefore shows that services are more expensive to deliver in urban areas. That is because the deprivation is ingrained and generational. It is tied to the local economies, and councils are there to try to keep it all together.

When our communities have asked for hope and direction, what have they been given? Not even warm words or an acknowledgement of the human cost. Now more than a million older people do not get the social care they would have got in 2010. Children who are at risk of violence and abuse are not given the protection they need, because the Government have walked away and said that it is nothing to do with them. It is everything to do with them. When other Departments were fighting their corner, where was the Ministry? When austerity first struck, local government was hit hardest. We have lost 800,000 members of staff from local government. We have the lowest number of staff since comparable records began, yet the central Government workforce is the largest since comparable records began. Local government has taken more of a hit than any other Department. Within local government, Labour-controlled areas have taken the hit, and that is politically motivated.

The Government had the chance to put this right today. They have failed to be fair and just, and failed the people we come into this place to serve. Shame on the lot of you.

7.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): It is a pleasure to close the debate. I start by joining my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), in paying tribute to all the committed people who work in local government and deliver for their communities every single day. We are all grateful to them for their hard work and dedication. I thank all hon. Members for their passionate speeches today, particularly those who brought their personal experience of local government to the Chamber—our debates are the richer for that. Although I may not agree with the content of Labour Members’ speeches, I respect the passion with which they represent their local communities.

As a northern MP, I feel that the north is lucky to have, in my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson), a champion for the northern powerhouse. He is committed to pushing the Government on rebalancing the economy and working constructively with them. That sentiment was echoed by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), who spoke well about the importance of economic regeneration in his constituency and what the Government are doing to support his residents as they look to a brighter future.

My hon. Friends the Members for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) and for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) made excellent speeches about the need for all Members and all local authorities to think about how we can serve our constituents better and at cheaper cost ever
single day. We should always strive for ways to achieve that, given that the taxes that fund our public services are paid through their hard work and efforts. My hon. Friends the Members for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) and for Waveney (Peter Aldous) do a great job in this Chamber of representing their district council and county council respectively, and I thank them for all their engagement with me and the Department over the few months in which I have had this job. I can tell my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby that the Secretary of State is well aware of the excessive activity of a few councils with respect to borrowing for commercialisation, and this is something that the Department is actively looking at as we speak to the Treasury.

Many Conservative Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), for Gloucester (Richard Graham), for Lewes, for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), for Waveney, for Redditch (Rachel Mclean) and for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), made powerful and compelling cases for a root-and-branch review of how we distribute money in local government today. We heard about the specific issues that councils face on the ground that our current funding formula simply does not capture. I pay tribute to their work in bringing this to my attention and that of officials. They mentioned issues such as the rapidly changing demographics that are driving up demand for adult social care. These are the kinds of things that a new formula fit for the 21st century should absolutely cover, and I look forward to working with all of them as we develop a funding formula that is right for every part of this country.

My hon. Friends the Members for Northampton South, for Thirsk and Malton and for Bexhill and Battle spoke of the absolute importance of getting adult social care right. I know that my colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care are committed to doing exactly that, and I agree that the solutions should be radical, not statist. I hope that they will include consideration of the excellent work of the Select Committee.

Three themes have run through the speeches that I have heard in the debate, and they are the three things that everyone agrees that our local councils do: first, they support the most vulnerable in our society; secondly, they drive economic growth in their areas; and, thirdly, they build strong communities. I am proud to say that this Government are backing them to do all three. It is local authorities whose hands are the first to reach out to those who fall on hard times, and I am delighted that this settlement provides them with a real-terms increase in financial resources to support that vital work.

Councils told us that the most acute pressure that they faced was in adult and children’s social care, so this Government responded with £650 million in incremental funding in the Budget. Councils told us that they wanted to do more to support people with disabilities, so this Government responded with an extra £55 million to make vital home adaptations. Rural councils highlighted their particular challenges, so this Government responded by maintaining the rural services grant at record levels. But Conservative Members measure success not by how much money we spend, but by how many lives we are changing, so we are supporting local authorities to innovate and improve to ensure that we are careful with taxpayers’ hard-earned money and that people are getting the best possible services.

In children’s care, where there is a huge variation in performance, we are investing £84 million to spread best practice from Leeds, Hertfordshire and North Yorkshire across the country so that children everywhere will benefit from best-in-class practice. In technology, we recently launched an innovation fund to support councils in embracing the digital revolution. Working with the Local Government Association, we are developing a tool to help councils to benchmark, analyse and drive performance. Across local government, whenever there are opportunities to improve lives, save money and transform services, this Government will be relentless in pursuing them.

The Government understand that the only sustainable way to pay for our public services is to create the economic growth that will fund them. Let us not forget the vital role that councils play in creating prosperity for their communities. Rather than being reliant on central Government handouts, local authorities should be empowered and rewarded for their entrepreneurship. I am pleased to say that our business rates retention scheme does exactly that, and local authorities are expected to retain almost £2.5 billion of business rates growth this year. Across the nation, from Yorkshire to Southampton, our 15 new business rates retention pilots demonstrate this Government’s commitment to backing councils’ ambitions for their local economies. We all know that the enemy of that growth is the higher taxes that the Labour party would inflict on our residents.

Local authorities are key to strengthening our communities. Every single day, they ensure that people are proud of the places in which they live. Those communities must start with the houses that people call home, so this Government are backing local authorities to fulfil those people’s aspirations. The new homes bonus part of the settlement has awarded councils almost £8 billion since it started for 1.5 million additional homes that they have brought forward, each one providing incentive and rewards for those councils that are trying to ensure that every one of their residents can fulfil the dream of homeownership.

However, local authorities told us that they want more. They want greater flexibility to build more of their own homes, so this Government listened and lifted the housing revenue account borrowing cap. Strong communities also need vibrant high streets, so this Government are trusting local councils with a £675 million fund to transform and revitalise our town centres. Finally, when it comes to our communities, the only holes that I want to see pouring money down are the ones on our local roads, so this Government were pleased to ensure that councils have £420 million to fill potholes for our motorists. From homes to roads to high streets, this Government are backing local authorities to create communities where everyone can thrive.

We have heard a lot about deprivation today, and there was an accusation that this Government are somehow trying to massage the numbers. When we put together the new funding formula, we listened to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee report that was published at the end of 2017, which made a compelling case for reducing the number of indicators to fund local government without sacrificing accuracy.
That is exactly what our funding formula does. Deprivation accounts for less than 4% of the variation in spend for universal services—[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I need to hear what the Minister has to say. I am sure that he is nearly at the end.

Rishi Sunak: We heard a lot about Liverpool and a lot about Surrey. Members of this House should know that households in Liverpool have £400 more to spend on local services than households in Surrey. Only a third of spending in Liverpool is financed by council tax versus almost 85% in Surrey. This funding formula is accurate and based on the facts.

In conclusion, I will continue to listen to local councils to learn from their expertise and to champion their cause across Whitehall. I tell them that their voice is heard loud and clear and that they will be supported by this Government. I commend the settlement to the House.

Question put.

The House proceeded to Division.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I remind the House that the motion is subject to double-majority voting: of the whole House and of Members representing constituencies in England

The House having divided: Ayes 298, Noes 240.

Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England: Ayes 270, Noes 208.

Division No. 322] (7.54 pm)

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argr, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Braverman, Suella
Breton, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Frear, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Dame Damian
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Hallon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinsrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kr warteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Merron, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Moore, Damien
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Tellers for the Ayes: Iain Stewart and Wendy Morton

O’Brien, Neil
Abbott, Rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniacci, Tonya
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Barron, Rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, Rh Margaret
Benn, Rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, Rh Sir Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, Rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, Rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdi, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, Rh Sir Desmond
Swire, Rh Sir Hugo
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tilhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Truss, Rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, Rh Mr Edward
Vara, Gils Shaimesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, Rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whatley, Helen
Wheeler, Rhs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, Rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, Rh Gavin
Wilson, Rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wrapp, Rh William
Wright, Rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nic
Davey, Rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Davies, Philip
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Rh Manmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Annellese
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmmore, Chris
Etseron, Bill
Evan, Chris
Farron, Tim
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, Rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furnias, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
George, Ruth
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Rh Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hanson, Rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, Rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, Rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hiller, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Rh Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P
Jones, Helen
Jones, Rh Mr Kevan

Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Ged
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, Rh Norman
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly (Proxy vote cast by Mark Tami)
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, Rh John
McFadden, Rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Meams, Ian
Miliband, Rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Norris, Alex
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Philips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel

NOES

Abbott, Rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniacci, Tonya
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Barron, Rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, Rh Margaret
Benn, Rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, Rh Sir Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, Rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, Rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdi, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, Rh Sir Desmond
Swire, Rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tilhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Truss, Rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, Rh Mr Edward
Vara, Gils Shaimesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, Rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whatley, Helen
Wheeler, Rhs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, Rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, Rh Gavin
Wilson, Rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wrapp, Rh William
Wright, Rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nic
Davey, Rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Davies, Philip
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Rh Manmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Annellese
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmmore, Chris
Etseron, Bill
Evan, Chris
Farron, Tim
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, Rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furnias, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
George, Ruth
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Rh Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hanson, Rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, Rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, Rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hiller, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Rh Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P
Jones, Helen
Jones, Rh Mr Kevan

Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Ged
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, Rh Norman
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
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Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly (Proxy vote cast by Mark Tami)
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, Rh John
McFadden, Rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Meams, Ian
Miliband, Rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Norris, Alex
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Philips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip (Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft)
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Sellar, rh John
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, rh Mark
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Therma
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Wilson, Phil
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel
Tellers for the Noes:
Thangam Debbonaire and Jeff Smith

Question accordingly agreed to.
Resolved,
That the Local Government Finance Report (England) 2019–20 (HC 1916), which was laid before this House on 29 January, be approved.

8.12 pm
More than three hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the motion, the Deputy Speaker put the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Order, 31 January).
Resolved,
That the Report on Referendums Relating to Council Tax Increases (Alternative Notional Amounts) (England) 2019–20 (HC 1917), which was laid before this House on 29 January, be approved.—(James Brokenshire.)
Resolved,
That the Report on Referendums Relating to Council Tax Increases (Principles) (England) 2019–20 (HC 1918), which was laid before this House on 29 January, be approved.—(James Brokenshire.)

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 4 to 11 together.

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

INCOME TAX

That the draft Devolved Income Tax Rates (Consequential Amendments) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 10 December 2018, be approved.

DATA PROTECTION

That the draft Data Protection (Charges and Information) (Amendment) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 17 December 2018, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (BUILDING AND BUILDINGS)

That the draft Construction Products (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 18 December 2018, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS)

That the draft Recognition of Professional Qualifications (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 19 December 2018, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES)

That the draft Solvency 2 and Insurance (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 8 January, be approved.

That the draft Insurance Distribution (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 19 December 2018, be approved.

That the draft Financial Conglomerates and Other Financial Groups (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 17 January, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (COMPANIES)

That the draft Companies, Limited Liability Partnerships and Partnerships (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 10 January, be approved.—(Jeremy Quin.)

Question agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): There are a large number of petitions to be presented and I hope that it will be of assistance to the House if I set out how we shall proceed. Once the first petition relating to the future of maintained nursery schools has been read to the House with its prayer, subsequent petitions on the same topic should not be read out in full. Members should give a brief description of the number and the location of petitioners and state that the petition is in the same terms. Members presenting more than one petition should present them together. When Lucy Powell has presented her petition, she should proceed to the Table and hand her first petition to the Clerk, who will read out the title in the usual way. For subsequent petitions, Members should proceed directly to the petitions bag at the back of the Chair. I shall call the next Member immediately after the previous Member has finished speaking. At the expiry of half an hour, no further petitions may be presented orally, but they may be placed in the petitions bag, and I will record them as formally presented. I now call Lucy Powell to present her petition.

PETITIONS

The future of maintained nursery schools

8.14 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to present petitions on behalf of nursery schools across England, and will be joined by many colleagues. I thank them and nurseries across the country for their campaigning work.
Petitions presented today are on behalf of thousands of parents, teachers, governors and local people who value and use these maintained nursery schools. The petitioners raise concerns about the future viability of maintained nursery schools. One third of their funding is due to end next April—that is the next academic year. Without continued supplementary funding or a long-term solution to sustainable funding, many nurseries could close, and many are already taking staffing and place decisions for next year.

These nurseries are the jewel in the crown of our education system, boosting social mobility and eliminating the development gap between poorer pupils and their peers’ pre-school. Some 98% are outstanding or good and two thirds are in the most deprived areas of the country. Warm words are not enough from Ministers; we now need action.

The first petition states:
“...the petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to urge the Government to take action to ensure nursery schools are financially sustainable for the future.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to urge the Government to take action to ensure nursery schools are financially sustainable for the future.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

The other petitions are:

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Walton Lane maintained nursery school in Nelson, Lancashire.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of College Green Nursery School, maintained nursery school in Brent.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Bognor Regis maintained nursery school in West Sussex.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Oxclose Community Nursery School, a maintained nursery school in Washington, Sunderland.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Kingswood maintained nursery school in Watford, Hertfordshire.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Maidenhead Nursery School in Windsor and Maidenhead.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Kenilworth Nursery School in Kenilworth.
Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I would like to present three petitions in the same terms, on behalf of 1,107 residents of the Chipping Barnet constituency, concerning St Margaret’s Nursery School, Hampden Way Nursery School and the Barnet Early Years Alliance. I also highlight a petition in the same terms concerning Moss Hall Nursery School that is being submitted this evening by my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer).

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Moss Hall Nursery School, maintained nursery school in Barnet.

The petition of the parents, carers and staff of BPYA - Brookhill Nursery, maintained nursery school in Barnet.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to present a petition in the same terms as my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), from the parents, carers, staff and governors of the wonderful Hillview Nursery School in Britain’s best constituency, Harrow West. Almost 100 people have signed the petition.

The petition of parents, carers, staff and governors of Hillview Nursery School maintained nursery school in Barnet.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I would like to present petitions from parents, carers and staff at Windsor Nursery School and Phoenix Nursery School—both in Wolverhampton South East—in the same terms as those presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell).

The petition of parents, carers, staff and governors of Winston maintained nursery school in Wolverhampton.

The petition of the parents, carers and staff of BEYA - Brookhill Nursery, maintained nursery school in Barnet.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): I would like to present a petition on behalf of Ditton Nursery School and Warrington Road Nursery School, which has been signed by parents, carers and staff at those schools. I do so on the same basis as my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell).

The petition of the parents, carers and staff of Ditton/Warrington Road Nursery School, maintained nursery school in Halton.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I would like to present a petition—signed by parents from Somerset Nursery School, along with teachers and governors—in the same terms.

The petition of the parents, carers and staff of Somerset nursery school maintained nursery schools in Wandsworth, London.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I rise to present petitions in the same terms about the future of maintained nursery schools. I have received over 1,600 signatures from these nurseries.

The petition of the parents, carers and staff of Cippenham maintained nursery school in Slough.

The petition of the parents, carers and staff of Baylis Court Nursery School maintained nursery schools in Slough.

The petition of the parents, carers and staff of Lea Nursery School maintained nursery school in Slough.

The petition of the parents, carers and staff of Chalvey Nursery School maintained Nursery School in Slough.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Slough centre maintained nursery school in Slough Berkshire.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I rise to present petitions in the same terms from the wonderful St Werburgh’s Park Nursery School; the wonderful Redcliffe Nursery School and children’s centre in Redcliffe; and the wonderful St Philip’s Marsh Nursery School, Barton Hill children’s centre and Cashmore early years centre, also in Bristol.

The petition of the Parents, Carers, Staff and Governors of Redcliffe Children’s Centre maintained nursery school in Bristol.

The petition of the Parents, Carers, Staff and Governors of St Philip’s Marsh Nursery School (and Cashmore Barton Hill Children’s Centre) maintained nursery school in Bristol.

The petition of the Parents, Carers, Staff and Governors of St Werburgh’s Park maintained nursery school in Bristol.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I rise to present a petition in the same terms on behalf of four remarkable nursery schools in Birmingham, Erdington: Castle Vale, Featherstone, Marsh Hill, and Osborne. It is signed by 1,500 people.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Featherstone maintained nursery school in Erdington, Birmingham and Marsh Mill nursery school, Osborne nursery school and Castle Vale nursery school in Birmingham.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I rise to present petitions on behalf of three outstanding nursery schools in Reading East: Caversham, Newbridge, and Blagdon.

The petition of the parents, careers, staff and governors of Caversham maintained nursery school in Reading.

Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to present the petition from 85 parents, carers and staff of the much-valued Abercromby Nursery School in Liverpool. It is vital that adequate funding is provided for this facility, which has enriched so many young lives.

The petition of the parents, carers and staff of Abercromby Nursery School maintained Nursery School in Liverpool.
Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I rise to present a petition in the same terms on behalf of six outstanding nursery schools of Burnley.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Whitegate Nursery School, Padiham. [P002329]

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Ightenhill maintained nursery school in Burnley. [P002340]

The petition of the parents, carers and staff of Basnett Street Nursery School maintained nursery school in Burnley. [P002342]

The petition of the parents, carers and staff of Rockwood maintained nursery school in Burnley, Lancashire. [P002343]

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Rosegrove Nursery School maintained nursery school in Burnley. [P002345]

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I would like to present a petition on behalf of parents, carers and staff of the fantastic Bedworth Heath and Atherstone maintained nursery schools in the same terms. It has 89 signatures.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Atherstone maintained nursery school in Atherstone, Warwickshire. [P002351]

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): I rise to present a petition in the same terms on behalf of 116 constituents in support of the excellent Stockingford Nursery School in Nuneaton.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Stockingford Nursery maintained nursery school in Nuneaton. [P002326]

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I present five petitions in the same terms on behalf of many, many thousands of residents—parents, guardians, staff and communities of nursery schools in Cambridgeshire.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff, governors and local community of Homerton Early Years Centre maintained nursery school in Cambridge. [P002330]

The petition of the parents, carers, staff, governors and local community of Colleges Nursery School maintained nursery school in Cambridgeshire. [P002332]

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Brunswick maintained nursery school in Cambridgeshire. [P002333]

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Histon Early Years Centre maintained nursery school in Histon, Cambridgeshire. [P002334]

The petition of the parents, carers, staff, governors and local community of The Fields Children Centre maintained nursery school in Cambridgeshire. [P002335]

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): I rise to present a petition in the same terms on behalf of the outstanding Hindley Nursery School in the constituency of Makerfield. There are 125 signatures.

The petition of the parents, carers and staff of Hindley Nursery School maintained nursery school in Makerfield. [P002339]

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to present a petition in the same terms from parents, carers, staff and governors of the brilliant Lillian de Lissa Nursery School in Birmingham, Edgbaston.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Lillian de Lissa maintained nursery school in Birmingham. [P002348]

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I rise to present two petitions in the same terms signed by over 400 people on behalf of Highters Heath Nursery School in Billesley and Allens Croft Nursery School in Brandwood in my constituency.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Allens Croft maintained nursery school in King Heath Birmingham. [P002341]

The petition of the parents, careers, staff and governors of Highters Heath maintained nursery school in Warstock, Birmingham. [P002347]

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) for all the work that she has done on this. I rise to present a petition in the same terms as everybody else for the outstanding Lee Royd Nursery School in my constituency, in south Accrington.

The petition of the parents, carers and staff of Lee Royd Nursery School maintained nursery school in Accrington. [P002349]

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): In the same terms, I present a petition on behalf of parents, carers and supporters of Victoria Park Nursery School in Newbury and Hungerford Nursery School in Hungerford, both maintained nursery schools, in the same terms as others.

The petition of the parents, careers, staff and governors of Victoria Park and Hungerford Nursery School maintained nursery school in West Berkshire. [P002338]

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I rise to present in the same terms a petition on behalf of one remaining maintained nursery school in my constituency, the wonderful Sunny Brow Nursery School. It has been signed by 238 constituents.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Sunny Brow maintained nursery school in Middleton. [P002350]

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I rise to present petitions in the same terms as my hon. Friends from parents, carers, staff and governors of three highly valued nursery schools in my constituency: Nell Gwynn Nursery School, Ann Bernard Nursery School,
and The Grove children and family centre. They are all hugely valued by the over 279 people who have signed the petition.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff, governors and our local community contacts of The Grove Children and Family Centre which is a maintained nursery school in Southwark.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Nell Gwynn Nursery, maintained nursery school in Southwark.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I rise to present petitions in the same terms and on behalf of 211 constituents for the excellent Warwick Nursery School and 174 constituents for the equally superb Whitnash Nursery School.

The petition of the parents, carers and staff of Whitnash maintained Nursery School in Leamington Spa.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Warwick Nursery School, maintained nursery school in Warwick.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I am Spartacus, and I rise to present a petition in the same terms, signed by 170 parents, carers, staff and governors of the outstanding Boundstone maintained nursery school in Lancing in my constituency.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Boundstone maintained Nursery School in Lancing, West Sussex.

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): I would like to present four petitions in the same terms, on behalf of parents, staff, carers and governors of the outstanding Boundstone maintained nursery school in Lancing in my constituency.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Houghton Community maintained nursery school in Houghton and Sunderland South.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Hetton Lyons maintained nursery school in Sunderland.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Mill Hill maintained nursery school in Doxford Park, Sunderland.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Houghton Community maintained nursery school in Houghton-le-Spring, Sunderland.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Hetton-le-Hole maintained nursery school in Sunderland.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I would like to present a petition in the same terms on behalf of the wonderful Clyde Nursery School and the wonderful Chelwood Nursery School in my constituency, which have collected well over 200 signatures between them.

The petition of the parents, carers and staff of Clyde Nursery School, maintained nursery school in Lewisham.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I rise to present a petition in the same terms on behalf of parents, staff, governors and supporters of the exemplary and only stand-alone maintained nursery school in the Borough of Gateshead: Bensham Grove Community Nursery School.

The petition of the parents of Bensham Grove Community maintained nursery school in Gateshead.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I rise to present a petition in the same terms on behalf of St Giles maintained nursery school in Lincoln—an amazing, priceless school that supports families in so many different ways. I dare not begin to think how Lincoln would manage without it.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of St Giles maintained nursery school in Lincoln.

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab): I rise to present six petitions in the same terms, three from my constituency—Chapel Street, Hart Hill and Rothesay—and, on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), Gill Blowers, Grasmere and Pastures Way nursery schools.

The petition of the parents, carers and staff of Chapel Street, Gill Blowers, Grasmere, Hart Hill, Pastures Way and Rothesay maintained nursery schools in Luton.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Rothesay maintained nursery school in Luton.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Chapel Street maintained nursery school in Luton.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I rise to present a petition in the same terms on behalf of 131 parents, carers, staff and governors of the exceptional Tanglewood Nursery School in Chelmsford, in God’s own county of Essex.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Tanglewood maintained nursery school in Chelmsford.

Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab): I rise to present petitions in the same terms on behalf of two nursery schools in my constituency that are both doing a fantastic job in very difficult conditions: Lord Street Nursery School and Harrington Nursery School.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Harrington Nursery School, maintained nursery school in Derby City.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Lord Street Community Nursery, maintained nursery school in Derby South.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab): I rise to present a petition in the same terms from the excellent Grandpont Nursery School in Oxford.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Grandpont, maintained nursery school in Oxford.
Children’s Social Care: Rotherham

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Iain Stewart.)

8.27 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I am grateful for the chance to hold this debate because I need the Minister to hear about and understand the unique situation facing Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council with regard to children’s services. The debate is also timely, as we have just debated the local government finance report.

I am sure the Minister agrees that there is no more important topic to be debated than the safeguarding of children and securing them a positive future. Local authorities up and down the country are struggling to fund their children’s social care services in the light of cuts since 2010, and Rotherham is no different. In real terms, the funding for Rotherham’s budget since 2013-14 has been reduced by 74%—a cut of more than £62 million. The Government have told councils such as Rotherham that they are making “significant additional resources” available to support children’s social care, but that funding is primarily for innovation and does not redress the shortfall in core funding affecting so many local authorities.

The depletion in available resources has been compounded by a rising demand for children’s social care services. Rotherham council has experienced a dramatic rise in demand since 2015. There has been a significant increase in the number of children in receipt of statutory social work intervention at all levels—children in need, child protection and children in care. Nationally, the number of child protection inquiries has increased by 158% in 10 years, from 77,000 in 2007-08 to 198,000 in 2017-18.

Like other authorities across the country, Rotherham has experienced a significant increase in demand. In Rotherham, as of December 2018, the number of children on a child protection plan was 562, and the number of children in need was 1,447. In Rotherham, the number of children in care has risen from 407 children in March 2015 to 634 in December 2018, well above the national average increase. Rotherham has experienced the third highest increase in numbers in 2017-18 out of 152 local authorities in England. Let us remember that the average annual cost of care, based on placement cost alone, for a looked-after child in Rotherham is £54,000 per child.

A significant contribution to this dramatic increase is the impact of Operation Stovewood, the National Crime Agency investigation into past child sexual exploitation in Rotherham by grooming gangs. The investigation is unique, and it is the largest operation the NCA has ever carried out.

Sarah Champion: Sadly, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right. This was a multi-agency hub for survivors, and the council argued in the strongest terms the need for such multi-agency working, as did the National Crime Agency, but no, the money has not been forthcoming.

Operation Stovewood has placed unprecedented and unbudgeted additional pressures on the authority. The council estimates the investigation is currently costing an additional £4.3 million per year, which is estimated to increase to £7 million next year, yet only £500,000 per annum of additional money has been forthcoming. The decades of sexual abuse in Rotherham and other towns have been a great shame on this nation. If there had been an earthquake affecting the lives of 1,400 children in Rotherham, we would have got emergency funding from the Government to help with their recovery. However, with no such money forthcoming for child abuse, we are largely leaving victims and survivors to get on with the recovery themselves.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I first put on the record our thanks to the hon. Lady for all that she does in this sector? It is a very difficult sector to work in—it is very difficult to put forward the stories she puts forward—but she does it admirably well. I think this House is indebted to her—and in particular her constituents should be very proud to have her as their MP.

Does the hon. Lady not agree that social services throughout the United Kingdom are teetering on the brink of collapse? While we are debating this issue in this Chamber, there are children throughout the United Kingdom right now who are sitting in neglected homes, with no one to turn to and no hope as they slip through the net. Does she not believe that it is past time that we secured—we look to the Minister very gently and very honestly as we say this—the additional funding and training to enable the system to handle the vast volume of children who need someone to advocate for them as they scream in silence?

Sarah Champion: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words, and I completely agree with the points he makes. We are storing up a national disaster if we do not support these children, ideally with early intervention, or with whatever help they need throughout their lives. I ask the Minister: please will he agree to invest additional resources in supporting looked-after children and care leavers—yes, in Rotherham, but also across the country—so that they can get the proper support they need to repair their lives?

Rotherham council is doing the very best it can. Ofsted gave Rotherham high praise in its 2018 inspection report, which I would like to quote. It said:

“Improved identification of risk and continued focus on uncovering and tackling complex abuse have led to increased demands on social care. A recent increase in the numbers of children looked after has placed additional demands on placements. Some of this increase is due to improvements in identifying risk, and to the local authority’s complex abuse work.”

It went on to say that the council had plans in place to address the demand:

“They are not complacent in the approach they take in order to better understand, continue to identify, and address the large-scale serious abuse suffered by children and young people. Managers, leaders and partners are diligent in their ongoing efforts to expose both current and historic exploitation. This is seen in the number of successful prosecutions and ongoing court trials of perpetrators.
Support to encourage children and young people who have suffered abuse helps them to feel safe enough to disclose their experiences and continue to develop. This includes services for those who are now adults. The stringent efforts of the local authority and partners to confront large-scale exploitation and abuse will continue to have its challenges, as victims continue to be identified.”

The council has committed to implementing successful evidence-based programmes and has invested nearly £1 million of its own funding in innovative programmes alone. Recent analysis found that its expenditure on children’s social care has increased 90% between 2010 and 2016, compared with an average of 30% for other English local authorities. But the flip side of providing the level of care needed is the amount of extra funding for children’s social care services that the council has had to find to meet escalating demand. The council increased the children’s services budget by £20 million in 2016-17, but as demand continues to increase further, Rotherham borough council forecasts an overall £16 million overspend for children and young people’s services for the current financial year. That leaves the council yet again in the position of having to find even more funding from its own resources, and it is further increasing the children’s social care budget in 2019-20 by a net £7 million, making a total annual investment of £27 million over and above the 2015-16 budget.

Sarah Champion: The hon. Gentleman is right: it is short-term and does not address the underlying problems that the early intervention of good social work can do to prevent such escalation and the costs associated with it—not only the financial costs, but the costs to the individual.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady not only on this debate but on the enormous amount of work that she has done in this area. Does she agree that the most expensive thing is getting it wrong? That has been borne out in Rotherham and in other high-profile cases. The fear is that the money now going in to mop up the problems after getting it wrong—the intensive care for sexual-predator victims historically—is now taking up all the resources, so that there is a shortage of resources for the preventive work needed to make sure that children do not get into such dangers in the future. It is a false economy to take our eye off that ball while mopping up the problems of the past.

Sarah Champion: I am also concerned that there is insufficient support for teenagers and young adults as they transition out of statutory care, often without the support of parents or carers. In Rotherham, girls who were sexually abused as children have previously fallen through the gaps as they reach the age of maturity and statutory support falls away. Despite exploitation continuing beyond their 18th birthday, society turns its back and instead blames the victim and accuses them of making damaging lifestyle choices, rather than seeing them as vulnerable people in need of support.

With the exception of £3.4 million of one-off support from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in 2015-16 and the £500,000 of annual funding provided for Stovewood, the council has had to fund these increased costs by making savings on other services and prioritising resources for children’s services. The additional funding announced for social care in the autumn Budget and earlier today is insufficient to support the extraordinary levels of demand on councils across the country.

The Chancellor’s recent announcement of an £85 million fund to assist councils with rising numbers of children in care is welcome, but the Department for Education has indicated that this money is likely to go to councils which have good or outstanding Ofsted ratings? If not, will he justify the rationale for denying support to those councils, regardless of the number of children they have in care?

Rotherham council has worked so hard to make its service a success, even in the light of drastic cuts, but how long can it and other councils be expected to maintain standards in such a difficult climate? Rotherham council has studied the reasons behind the rise in numbers of children in receipt of social work services, and in particular the numbers of children in care. It has found that when early intervention is not available or not properly co-ordinated, children do not receive the right intervention at the right time. Consequently, concerns have then escalated to the point where children have been taken into care, which is costly to the state and devastating to the child.

As funding has dried up, councils have found themselves in a double bind. Required under statute to deliver services to children most at risk of harm and children in care, resources have been concentrated to the extent that the Local Government Association finds that 71% of children’s social care funding is now spent in just those areas. Of course, providing funding for the most vulnerable is the right thing to do. However, the reduction has driven a reduction in council spending on universal services such as Sure Start and early help, which so often provide the light-touch early intervention that can identify concerns and support families before crisis point is reached. I therefore beseech the Minister to recognise the value in children’s care services and recognise that every child in this country deserves an opportunity to thrive, and that that takes persistent sustained and ambitious intervention from Government to achieve. Councils will be £3 billion short by 2025 if they maintain current service levels. Will the Minister agree today to ask the Chancellor to meet this shortfall in the spending review?

Support for 16 and 17-year-olds and care leavers must be improved. Children’s Society research has unsurprisingly found that vulnerabilities in childhood can intensify into early adulthood if left unchecked. The Department for Education’s own research shows that children receiving statutory support from children’s services do less well at school and are the most likely group to end up NEET—not in education, employment or training—in early adulthood. Will the Minister therefore commit to reviewing the support available for 16 and 17-year-old children in need as they make the difficult move into adulthood?

The Minister knows that excellent social work practice occurs in local authorities across the country on a daily basis. Families receive a service that helps them to get
their lives back on the right track: dads get support to quit drinking, mums get the mental health treatment required, parents re-enter work, and children get to school on time. If MPs query what the extra money I am requesting is actually needed for, then I beg them to visit their local children’s social care teams and listen to what social workers say.

More resources result in a less stretched service and more time for professionals to spend with families providing the support they need at the earliest possible moment. More resources result in that little bit extra in the social worker’s budget: a pram for the destitute mum; a burger for a teenager running away from home; or a taxi to get dad across town for his mental health assessment. Why is that important? Because social workers want and need to give every opportunity they can to keep children at home with their families.

In November last year, the UN rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights concluded that poverty in the UK has been a political choice. Well, the Government have before them another political choice: whether to fund services that protect vulnerable children from harm and provide high-quality care for children in the state system, or to choose to ignore the crisis and pretend that their funding for innovation and transformation is anything more than a drop in the ocean. Let us not be in any doubt: this is also a political choice. Will the Minister please make the right choice tonight and commit to providing the core funding that Rotherham so desperately needs?

8.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on securing this important debate. We have heard interventions from the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) about her work in this area. I whole-heartedly agree that nothing is more important than the work we do to ensure that vulnerable children are able to live safe and happy lives and achieve their potential wherever they live and whatever their background or circumstance.

I congratulate Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council on how hard it has worked to turn around its children’s services, with the instrumental support of our commissioners, including Mary Ney and Patricia Bradwell. I was delighted when Rotherham’s children’s services were rated “good” by Ofsted last March, following three years of intervention by my Department and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to address systemic failings. That is a real credit to Ian Thomas and Sharon Kemp, and to the local politicians who have worked so closely with them. It is good to see the right hon. Member for Rotherham and South Yorkshire police to assess the demand on local services as a result of Operation Stovewood. As set out in the Government’s victims strategy, we want to support even more victims to speak up by giving them the certainty that they will be understood, protected and supported through their journey, regardless of their circumstances or background and whether or not they report the crime.

We all agree that the failings that led to the child sexual exploitation that took place in Rotherham must never, never happen again, either in Rotherham or elsewhere. The Secretary of State and I are united in making it our priority to do everything that we can to prevent that. That is why my Department is funding the child sexual exploitation response unit to provide independent support to local areas and will be funding a new £2 million child exploitation service, which is launching later this year. That is on top of over £2 million of funding for two innovation programme projects. The hon. Member for Rotherham referred to them as drops in the ocean, but they are innovative programmes to test new models of safeguarding children. That includes the Lighthouse project, based in Camden, which is providing a complete range of services for victims of child sexual abuse and exploitation and their families, under one roof.

We know that many of the children and young people who were victims of child sexual exploitation in Rotherham are now facing, or have already faced, the difficult transition to adulthood, about which the hon. Lady is rightly concerned. The Government are committed to ensuring that they and all other vulnerable children are ready for adult life, avoiding cliff edges in support. That is why we have extended the offer of support from local

As I hope we all agree, we welcome the further £410 million in 2019-20 for local authorities to invest in adult and children’s social care services, which was announced in the autumn Budget. That is on top of the more than £200 billion until 2020 that was made available in the 2015 spending review for councils to deliver local services, including children’s services. Of that, Rotherham is currently forecast to have a core spending power of £206 million in 2019-20—an increase of 1.6% on last year.

I recognise that Rotherham and other local authorities are delivering in a very challenging environment—it would be foolish to claim otherwise—and that they have had to make difficult choices as they work to meet the needs of the most vulnerable. I assure the House that my Department is continuing to work closely with the sector to build the strongest evidence base for long-term children’s services funding as part of the spending review. We are also working closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to inform a review of relative needs and resources to make sure that at future Government funding settlements, the money gets to where it is needed most.

On top of that core funding, my Department has agreed to provide an additional £2 million to Rotherham over the four years to 2021, recognising the additional pressures from the increase in children’s social care referrals from Operation Stovewood. That is in addition to the nearly £750,000 that we gave in 2015-16 to alleviate the immediate pressures on services. My Department also remains committed, along with the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice and NHS England, to continuing to work with Rotherham and South Yorkshire police to assess the demand on local services as a result of Operation Stovewood. As set out in the Government’s victims strategy, we want to support even more victims to speak up by giving them the certainty that they will be understood, protected and supported through their journey, regardless of their circumstances or background and whether or not they report the crime.

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authorities to all care leavers up to the age of 25, and why our reforms to support special educational needs also now extend from nought to 25.

By revising it last year, we strengthened the statutory guidance, “Working together to safeguard children”, to make clear the importance of transitions, and it now states clearly the expectation that a local authority should plan for transitions in advance for children on child in need plans and child protection plans, including, specifically, where children are likely to move between children’s and adult services.

I turn to the hon. Lady’s comments about early help, which we know plays an important role in promoting safe and stable families. Early help is about intervening early with the right families at the right time and in the right way. The statutory guidance is clear that in doing that, local areas should have in place a comprehensive range of effective and evidence-based services to address assessed needs early.

Across Government, we are doing that by tackling the problems that cause children to be in need. That includes better supporting those with alcohol-dependent parents, landmark legislation for those affected by domestic abuse, investment in early years education and support for children and young people’s mental health. The Government have also committed £920 million to the children’s and adult services.

In making sure that the right families receive the right support at the right time, investment in innovation is key and must not be underestimated. The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham said, the cost of non-intervention and failure is much higher. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham said, the cost of non-intervention and failure is much higher. Rotherham has been allocated £5.5 million from 2015 to 2020 and has already received over £3 million of that funding.

In making sure that the right families receive the right support at the right time, investment in innovation is key and must not be underestimated. The hon. Member for Rotherham is critical of that investment, but I would argue that it is right that core social care funding be supplemented by that support for local authorities to manage rising demand and costs through adopting and adapting the best new practices.

Sarah Champion: To be clear, I am not critical of innovation—it is great—but it should come on top of core funding, not instead of it. The Minister mentioned the £500,000 a year for four years. That will fund 10 looked-after children placements. We have over 600 in Rotherham. Will he please just tell me whether he is going to give us additional funding? We are on our knees in Rotherham and begging him for support.

Nadhim Zahawi: I attempted earlier to explain our plan for the spending review, but I hope the hon. Lady will understand that I cannot pre-empt a spending review from the Dispatch Box.

The sector, my Department, the Ministry of Justice and the new What Works Centre for Children’s Social Care, funded by my Department, are all looking to understand better what makes a difference in supporting children to stay with their families safely and preventing them from reaching this crisis point. Strong decision making is critical to ensuring that children are removed from their families only as a last resort.

As I highlighted earlier, promising signs are emerging from our £270 million investment in the children’s social care innovation, partners in practice and improvement programmes. For example, an integrated edge-of-care service, No Wrong Door, in north Yorkshire, has delivered extraordinary results, with 86% of young people staying out of care and getting greater stability and improved educational and employment outcomes. All of this is strengthening families and protecting children.

We continue to learn from what achieves the best outcomes for children and families and to support local authorities to adopt and adapt the programmes that successfully intervene to prevent problems from escalating. The hon. Lady mentioned the £84 million investment over the next five years to build on learning from the most promising innovation programmes and projects, such as that in north Yorkshire, and to improve social work practice and decision making. In up to 20 local authorities, this new strengthening families and protecting children programme will support more children to stay safe at home with their families, where that is in their best interests. The hon. Lady asked how the funds would be allocated. We are working with the sector to determine how best to do that, looking particularly at authorities that are struggling to meet challenges caused by rising pressures.

The practice of staff locally—from the leadership of directors of children’s services to the decision making of social workers—is also paramount in ensuring that the right children are given the right support at the right time. We are undertaking a programme of reforms to ensure that there is a highly capable, highly skilled workforce making good decisions about what is best for children and families. That includes a significant investment in training and development to meet clear professional standards for social workers. We have also established a new specialist social work regulator, Social Work England, and we are rolling out a national assessment and accreditation system. I am pleased that we are discussing Rotherham’s participation in the second phase of our voluntary roll-out of the programme.

Alongside our existing programme for aspiring practice leaders and new practice supervisors, we are working with the sector to establish a strategy to support current and future leaders. As I have said before, this is about realising our aim to establish a consistently stronger, more confident profession, making better assessments of children’s safety and welfare and equipped with the skills to deliver lasting change for families.

Let me end by echoing the hon. Lady’s thanks to social workers and all those who work so hard to support vulnerable families and children every day. I have seen their passion and dedication at first hand. For example, last year, during my visit to Brighton, I spent the day with two social workers, Ruth and Jen, who were an absolute credit to the profession. As I said at the beginning of my speech, we have a shared ambition to ensure that the most vulnerable children have the safety and stability that they need in order to achieve their potential.

Question put and agreed to.

8.56 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): Last month I announced five new public sector challenges, to be funded from the £20 million GovTech innovation fund. In the spring we will publish a strategy for the use of innovation in public services.

Chris Green: Can my hon. Friend confirm that the GovTech fund is being used to identify technologies with the potential to improve medical care and deliver better services at a lower cost?

Oliver Dowden: I am delighted to confirm that to my hon. Friend. There is huge potential here for improvement in public services. So far the GovTech Catalyst has funded two health-related challenges: the first seeks to improve the medication pathway for people entering custody, and the second will assess how machine learning could improve prediction and provision in relation to adult social care.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): At the weekend, 70 Labour MPs and Members of the European Parliament signed my letter to the Government asking them to review the operation of the EU settled status app for EU citizens, which is currently available only on Android phones and not on iPhones. What advice does the Cabinet Office give?

Oliver Dowden: We recently announced measures including simplifying Public Sector Procurement

2. Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): What recent progress has my Department made on its proposed changes to public sector procurement?

Oliver Dowden: We are determined to deliver value for money for taxpayers through better procurement, and to support a healthy and diverse supply market.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): I know the Minister will be aware that delivering public services in rural areas is particularly challenging. Will he consider how he could use tech and innovation to facilitate better public services in areas such as those that I represent?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the great aspects of the GovTech challenge fund is that it is often used in rural areas. In rural Scotland, for example, we are looking into how it could be used to help to ensure that the environment is properly managed, and we are working on other similar schemes.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Time and again, Mr Speaker, you have heard me raise the issue of deeply unsatisfactory broadband coverage in my constituency, which greatly impairs the delivery of vital public services. Responding to a question that I asked not long ago, the Prime Minister mentioned the shared prosperity fund. Might that fund be used to tackle the problem of very poor broadband coverage? If the Minister cannot give me an answer now, will he agree to meet me to discuss the issue?

Oliver Dowden: I am always happy to meet all Members, and I have heard the hon. Gentleman’s representation in respect of the shared prosperity fund. Our industrial strategy has already committed us to spending more than £1 billion on digital infrastructure, including £176 million on 5G and £200 million on broadband for local areas. There is, I know, an issue with the Scottish National party Government getting the money to the frontline, which is why my right hon. Friend the Culture Secretary has announced that in future, money will go directly to councils.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): When it comes to the delivery of technology with the use of public money, we know whose side the Government are on: their mates in the megafirms. Their spending on Cloud provision with just one company, Amazon Web Services, has increased by 8,000% since 2015. The next time the Minister signs off another multimillion-pound tech contract, will he perhaps spare a thought for one of the UK’s incredible small and medium-sized enterprises?

Oliver Dowden: The Government are committed to ensuring that SMEs win their fair share of Government contracts. Unlike the Labour Government, this Government have set the target of devoting a third of all spending to SMEs. However, the hon. Lady rightly raised the issue of Amazon Web Services. Let us look at the figures. AWS is a G-Cloud supplier. A total of £3.2 billion has been spent on G-Cloud. How much has been spent on AWS? Just £70 million, which amounts to less than 2.2% of total spending.
procurement processes, taking account of social value when awarding contracts, and excluding large suppliers from Government contracts if they cannot demonstrate prompt payment.

Mohammad Yasin: I thank the Minister for his answer. The number of businesses receiving late payments from the Cabinet Office has nearly tripled in the past two years. Does the Minister agree that this makes a mockery of the Government’s plans to crack down on public sector suppliers who pay late?

Oliver Dowden: Prompt payment is important to all businesses, particularly small businesses. That is why we have set a target for 90% of undisputed invoices from small and medium-sized enterprises to be paid within five days. We are making good progress, and six Departments are already exceeding that target. I know that there has been an issue in respect of the Cabinet Office, but I can give the hon. Gentleman the latest figures, from December, which show that 95% of invoices are now meeting the 30-day target and that 82% are meeting the five-day target.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): Will the Minister join me in welcoming moves to roll over the WTO Agreement on Government Procurement—the GPA—and in welcoming the access that that would give to UK companies competing abroad and the opening up of our own markets to foreign competitors?

Oliver Dowden: I know that my right hon. Friend has a great deal of experience in this area, and he is absolutely right to highlight the importance of the GPA. I am pleased that we have made progress and reached agreement in principle for the United Kingdom to join the GPA, and I am confident that we will have that in place shortly.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is not the Minister guilty of a bit of jiggery-pokery? [HON. MEMBERS: “Oh!”] The fact of the matter is that if the Government looked at good examples such as Huddersfield University and Kirklees Council, they would see the way in which they emphasise local and regional procurement, which brings in jobs and wealth and retains them in our communities. Why do this Government not do the same?

Oliver Dowden: We are absolutely committed to ensuring that we get the very best suppliers, which is why we have introduced a balanced scorecard approach. That allows suppliers to take into account a wide range of factors, including environmental factors and factors relating to the quality of produce. Those are the sort of reforms that this Government are committed to introducing.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): The Government give a very welcome emphasis to the employing of small and medium-sized enterprises in Government contracts, and that is very good stuff, but does the Minister not agree that in reality, Government procurement processes are so complex, so difficult, so massive and so expensive that it is actually companies such as the defence primes that get the contracts and then hammer down the prices they pay to their subcontractors? How can we find better ways to ensure that SMEs win some of those valuable contracts?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the issue of SMEs winning contracts. This is why we have abolished complex pre-qualification questionnaires on small-value contracts, for example, and in November I announced that if major strategic suppliers were not paying their small providers on time, they could face being excluded from Government contracts.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I am aware that current statute means that wage rates cannot be mandated, but it is possible to use the procurement process to encourage employers to consider paying the real living wage in the context of fair work policies. Indeed, that is the process undertaken by the Scottish Government. Will the Minister consider following Scotland’s lead and using procurement to ensure that employers pay the real living wage?

Oliver Dowden: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I hope that he will acknowledge the progress that this Government have made in introducing a national living wage for the first time. The effect of that national living wage, which will rise by almost 5% this April, is that an average person working full time on the national living wage will be almost £3,000 a year better off—and that is not counting the massive increase in the personal allowance that also cuts their taxes.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Of course, it is not a living wage; it is just a minimum wage re-badged.

The Government have repeatedly insisted that Interserve’s “current intentions are a matter for the company itself.” However, it emerged last night that Cabinet Office officials were playing an active role in talks to negotiate a rescue package. It seems that the Government cannot make up their mind whether they have a responsibility to intervene and protect public services and jobs or whether to let the market decide, so which is it?

Oliver Dowden: The Government are absolutely clear that their principal task is to ensure the continued delivery of public services, and that is what we have ensured in respect of our strategic suppliers. The hon. Gentleman raises the case of Interserve. I welcome this morning’s announcement, which I am sure he has seen, which demonstrates that it is making good progress towards refinancing, but we are clear that that is a matter between the lenders to that company and the company itself. The Government are not a party to those negotiations.

Information Law

3. Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the implications for his Department’s policies of the Information Commissioner’s January 2019 report, “Outsourcing oversight? The case for reforming access to information law”.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): The Government are fully committed to transparency and openness across the public sector and have already introduced a range of measures to increase transparency in contracts. That means that we are publishing more
Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Someone came to my surgery this week and clearly made an implied threat to me, a number of Members of this House and a former Prime Minister. However, if I report any of that, I am breaching the confidentiality of the person who came to see me, so I want to know the Minister’s advice.

Brandon Lewis: I do not think that my hon. Friend would have been breaching confidentiality, because if such conversations are happening, that represents a threat that he would be well within his rights to report to the police.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I have been subjected to online intimidation. Does the Minister agree that we need to drive home the message that the secrecy of the iPhone or keyboard is not protection enough for people to spew vile, intimidatory statements and messages to anybody in public life?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. All of us in public life should call out such things when we see them. We must be clear about what is unacceptable and report it to the authorities where appropriate, so that people feel able to engage online in a proper and fair way without intimidation or abuse.

Tiers of Government: Collaboration

5. Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): What steps he has taken to review how different tiers of Government work together.

Mr Clarke: We are committed to working productively with all levels of government, including local authorities, directly elected Mayors and devolved Administrations across the UK. We will also work closely with the devolved Administrations to review the formal structure of inter-governmental relations.

Mr Clarke: People across the Tees Valley are delighted at the devolution model led by Ben Houchen, our excellent Conservative Mayor. Ben is delivering on his manifesto promises, which included rescuing Teesside airport and leading the regeneration of the steelworks. Will my right hon. Friend commit the Government to maintaining their excellent record of support for Ben’s work in getting Teesside on the front foot again?

Mr Liddington: I pay tribute to the leadership that Ben Houchen and his colleagues on the Tees Valley combined authority have shown. They have very ambitious plans, and we look forward to continuing our joint working with them on a local industrial strategy to drive productivity, growth and employment in the Teesside region.

Paul Girvan: In light of there being no Executive in Northern Ireland, what measures are being taken to ensure services can be delivered for Northern Ireland?
especially within the public sector, we have had difficulty in getting decisions across the line. We need ministerial intervention.

Mr Lidington: As the hon. Gentleman knows, Parliament agreed to change the law late last year to give Ministers in the Northern Ireland Office greater powers in giving directions to the Northern Ireland civil service, but the answer is for the political parties in Northern Ireland to come together so that we can see the Executive and the Assembly restored. That is the way to give effective representation for effective decisions to be taken.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that there is no formal machinery for the Parliaments of the United Kingdom to work together and to scrutinise the work of the Joint Ministerial Committee and the Executive functions that work together. The Interparliamentary Forum on Brexit again met in January and called for this. Will he support this Parliament and provide it with the necessary resources so we can institute proper interparliamentary machinery in the United Kingdom?

Mr Lidington: We are very open to proposals from my hon. Friend’s Committee and from others in this House and the House of Lords. We are working together with the devolved Parliaments and Assemblies. If Parliament will lead, the Government will support it.

7. [909030] Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): One way in which the Government are coming together across Departments is through the Leader of the House’s working group on the early years, which is supported by the right hon. Gentleman’s Department. Will he ensure that that review remains ambitious and radical in its proposals and does not become a victim of departmental-itis?

Mr Lidington: Having spoken to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House about this on a number of occasions, I do not think anybody can doubt her determination to ensure that this issue is given proper priority. I expect proposals from that group later this year.

Devolution

6. Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the devolution of power to local authorities.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): The Smith Commission was clear that the Scottish Government should work with the Scottish Parliament, civic Scotland and local authorities to develop ways in which greater devolution within Scotland could be provided.

Bill Grant: I thank my right hon. Friend for that response. Does he agree that local authorities are best placed to deliver local services, rather than taking a centralised approach?

Mr Lidington: I think that that is right. For example, it will be very important to involve local authorities in my hon. Friend’s constituency and in neighbouring constituencies in taking forward our ambitious proposals for an Ayrshire growth deal.

Voter ID Pilot Schemes

8. Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Whether his Department plans to conduct further voter ID pilots; and if he will make a statement. [909031]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): A diverse range of local authorities have confirmed that they will be taking part in the voter ID and postal vote pilots for the 2019 local elections. These pilots will provide further insight into ensuring security of the voting process.

Mr Evans: I know different local authorities are using different methods as to what constitutes ID, but does the Minister believe enough progress will be made so that, should this Parliament go the full five years, we will have voter ID available at the next general election?

Chloe Smith: Yes, I do. I am grateful to the authorities that are piloting voter ID this year. Their experience will help us to formulate the right policy to roll it out nationally.

Mr Speaker: Let me say to the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) that the Cumbrian steak and kidney pie, the merits of which he commended to me, was of the highest quality.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Mr Speaker, I am incredibly grateful to you for those kind words and for coming along to Cumbria Day.

Is the Minister aware that voters in my constituency, the Lake District and the Yorkshire Dales cannot vote at all on planning and housing issues that affect them? What steps will she take to bring in democracy for those parts of our country that are under the aegis of a national park, which are not directly elected?

Chloe Smith: I am somewhat familiar with the issue because of my proximity to the Broads Authority in my constituency, but I suspect this question may be for a colleague to answer and I will ask them to do so.

Topical Questions

T1. [909037] Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): Last week, I announced new measures, as part of the follow-up action to the Government’s racial disparity audit, to improve outcomes for ethnic minority students in higher education; to ensure league tables reflect performance in addressing inequalities; and to encourage higher education providers to make their workforces more diverse.

Sir Mark Hendrick: Some 16% of the adult population of this country has some form of disability. Yet when I look around this House, I see very few Members with a disability. When are we going to see an effective Access
to Elected Office Fund? We need a Parliament that is representative of the public it serves. When are we going to be like that?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman raises this issue. He is right to say that we need to raise that level of participation. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities is working on a fund that will help that to happen. Furthermore, a statutory instrument will be before the House next Monday that will help with this by addressing election expenses.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Members discharge their duties in a variety of ways, but does my hon. Friend agree that it is not possible to discharge them properly from inside a prison cell? When will the hon. Member for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya) do the right thing, stand down and give the people of that part of the country the representation they deserve?

Chloe Smith: My hon. Friend makes a fair point, and it comes down to what the people of Peterborough need: a hard-working and present MP. Of course we have passed legislation in this place to enable recall. I suspect that may be used in this case, but I hope it will happen promptly, for the sake of the people of Peterborough.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Let us consider these figures: 25,342 and 21,900. Those were the number of voters who cast their votes for me and for the Minister to serve as elected parliamentarians, yet just 100-odd votes secured a win in the most recent hereditary peer by-election in the other place. The winner was eligible to stand because his great-grandad’s cousin’s dad’s fourth cousin’s dad’s cousin’s great-great grandad was made a Lord by Charles I in 1628. What progress is the Minister making on reform of the other place?

Chloe Smith: May I first welcome the hon. Lady back to the Dispatch Box? It is a pleasure to see her here again. Two points need to be made: first, the legislation she cites was that of her own party; and, secondly, reform of the House of Lords is not a priority for this Government. We have been clear on that matter and I can be so again today.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): What conversations is the Department having with local authorities in Scotland and the Scottish Government about relocating civil service jobs north of the border, specifically in areas such as international trade?

Mr Lidington: The Government have a policy of seeking to relocate Government offices and agencies outside London wherever possible. We are keen to work with Scottish local authorities, as well as local authorities from all around the United Kingdom, to secure that objective.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): The Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy reported last year that it was concerned that “the current complex arrangements for ministerial responsibility mean that day-to-day oversight of cross-government efforts is, in reality, led by officials, with Ministers only occasionally ‘checking in’.”

T7. [909043] Do the Government have a grip on cyber-security?

Mr Lidington: Yes. It is right that different elements of cyber-security report in to different Departments. For example, where this relates to an offensive cyber-capability, as part of our defences, that is rightly part of the Ministry of Defence’s responsibility. The relevant Ministers do co-operate regularly, and I assure the hon. Gentleman that this all reports back to the National Security Council where the relevant Cabinet Ministers take the decisions.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): On the inter-ministerial early years working group, which is an excellent initiative, is the Minister aware that the cost of child neglect is estimated at some £15 billion per year? So when negotiating with the Treasury, will he be mindful that funding for this is not only the best way of giving kids the best start in life, but a good way of saving money?

Mr Lidington: I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House will be very glad of my hon. Friend’s support.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What with the £1 billion-plus of Northern Ireland contributions secured by the Democratic Unionist party, the knighthoods for the European Research Group, and now the cash-for-votes inducements that we hear are being offered to MPs, are the Government not a bit worried about sailing dangerously close to the wind of the Labour-introduced Bribery Act 2010? Will the Minister reaffirm that no votes in this place should be for sale? Especially not mine; I have not been offered anything.

Mr Lidington: I am deeply shocked that the hon. Lady has so little confidence in her own colleagues as to think that they would be capable of that.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Some of my most engaged constituents are expats who currently reside in France or Spain. Does the Minister agree that it is unfair and undemocratic to deny these British citizens the right to vote after an arbitrary 15 years?

Chloe Smith: Yes, I do, which is why we support the private Member’s Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies), which will redress that injustice and deliver votes for life.

T4. [909040] Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): Northern Ireland has required voter ID for 13 years. Why is it necessary to run a pilot programme when we have already evaluated it and found that it works effectively and has not affected voter turnout?

Chloe Smith: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s support on this matter. We should see such support throughout the House for a set of measures that are reasonable, proportionate and already used in countries around the world and in our own country, the United Kingdom, to help to protect voters and ensure that their vote is theirs alone.
Although there are many other important issues that I would like to discuss with the Minister for the Cabinet Office today, sadly none is more vital or urgent than Brexit, so I would like to use our time to have a sensible, grown-up discussion about what the actual plan is between now and 29 March. To that end, I ask him this: if the briefing is correct that there will not be a fresh meaningful vote on the withdrawal agreement next week, when will that vote take place?

Mr Lidington: I think that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was completely clear on that at this Dispatch Box last week. She said that the meaningful vote itself would be brought back as soon as possible, and if it were not possible to bring it back by the 13th, next Wednesday, the Government would then make a statement and table a motion for debate the next day.

Emily Thornberry: I thank the Minister for his answer. I take from that and from other briefings that the time for a fresh vote will be after the Prime Minister has secured what she called last week “a significant and legally binding change”—[Official Report, 29 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 679.]
to the withdrawal agreement so that this House has something genuinely different on which to vote. If that is the case, will the Minister simply clarify what will happen if we start to approach 29 March and that significant and legally binding change has not been achieved?

Mr Lidington: The Prime Minister, as has been announced by No. 10, will be in Brussels tomorrow where she will be seeing President Juncker, President Tusk and the President of the European Parliament, Mr Tajani, to discuss the changes that she is seeking following the recent votes in this House both to reject the deal that was on the table and to support the amendment in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady). I do think that the right hon. Lady needs not just, perfectly fairly, to question the Government, but to face up to the fact that if, as both she and I wish, we are to have a sensible, grown-up discussion about what the actual plan is to do with the withdrawal agreement unless the Prime Minister is willing to reconsider the red lines on which the agreement is based. Does he not agree that the sensible, cautious thing to do at this late stage is to seek a temporary extension of article 50 so that we have time to see whether the negotiations succeed, or, if they do not, to pursue a different plan?

Emily Thornberry: Again, I thank the Minister. Does the Prime Minister seriously think that she will get anything different from the responses that we have heard from the EU over recent days? None of them has given us any encouragement that the EU is willing to reopen the withdrawal agreement unless the Prime Minister is willing to reconsider the red lines on which the agreement is based. Does he not agree that the sensible, cautious thing to do at this late stage is to seek a temporary extension of article 50 so that we have time to see whether the negotiations succeed, or, if they do not, to pursue a different plan?

Mr Lidington: The problem with the right hon. Lady’s proposition is that it would simply defer the need for this House, which includes the Opposition Front Bench team, to face up to some difficult decisions. She has criticised the approach that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has taken, but I have to put it to her

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [90045] Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 6 February.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington) rose—

Hon. Members: More!

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is a notable celebrity, not only in Aylesbury but here in this House.

Mr Lidington: I have been asked to reply, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is in Northern Ireland outlining the Government’s commitment to the people there and our plan to secure a Brexit deal that delivers on the result of the referendum.

I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in welcoming today’s announcement that the next meeting of NATO Heads of State and Government will take place in London in December 2019. This is fitting, as 70 years ago this year, the United Kingdom, led by those Atlanticist champions Clement Attlee and Ernie Bevin, was one of the alliance’s 12 founding members and London was home to the first NATO headquarters. We will continue to play a key role in NATO as it continues its mission of keeping nearly 1 billion people safe.

Andrew Bridgen: I have always considered the Leader of the Opposition to be just an unconstructed Marxist. However, in the light of video footage that has emerged this week, I may well have to change that view. He clearly campaigned vigorously against repeated EU referendums in Ireland, and he declared forcefully that he did not wish to live under a “European empire of the 21st century”.

In the spirit of cross-party consensus, will my right hon. Friend join the Leader of the Opposition and dismiss once and for all any prospect of a second EU referendum?

Mr Lidington: The Government’s position is clear. We said to the British people in 2016 that we would implement the result of the referendum and not to accept their vote as decisive. The duty of politicians is fairly, to question the Government, but to face up to the fact that if, as both she and I wish, we are to have a sensible, grown-up discussion about what the actual plan is to do with the withdrawal agreement unless the Prime Minister is willing to reconsider the red lines on which the agreement is based. Does he not agree that the sensible, cautious thing to do at this late stage is to seek a temporary extension of article 50 so that we have time to see whether the negotiations succeed, or, if they do not, to pursue a different plan?

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that, last week, the Leader of the Opposition, having met the Prime Minister, went out in front of the cameras and demanded changes to the backstop as part of the approach that he wanted to see for the future. The right hon. Lady has said that she would be comfortable with the backstop. Does she agree with her leader, or is she sticking to her guns on this?

Emily Thornberry: I hear what the Minister says, but he does not seem to give us any answers. I genuinely appreciate his attempts, but I hope that he will understand the concern that all of us have, not just in this House, but across the country, that we have a Government treading water in the Niagara River while the current is taking us over the falls. [Interruption.]}

Mr Speaker: Order, be quiet. The Whip on duty, the right hon. Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher), has no useful contribution to make other than to nod and shake his head in the appropriate places. No chuntering from a sedentary position from him is required or will persist.

Emily Thornberry: Can we go back to the central issue: there is no way that we can avoid a border in Ireland after Brexit without a full customs union, or a permanent backstop, or some new technological solution. Will the Minister tell us which of those options the Government are currently working towards?

Mr Lidington: The right hon. Lady again makes this commitment, saying that the Labour party wants to see a permanent customs union, but most people who support a customs union say that they want to ensure that businesses can expect to export to the EU without tariffs, quotas or rules of origin checks. That is precisely what the Prime Minister’s deal does, and it also allows this country to establish trade agreements with other nations around the world, so what part of that deal does the right hon. Lady actually object to?

Emily Thornberry: If the right hon. Gentleman would like me to answer questions, I would be quite happy to hold a seminar for him at another stage regarding what a proper Brexit ought to look like, but let me continue with my job, and perhaps he can continue with his and answer some questions. The technological solution is a non-starter. A permanent backstop will never be acceptable to the European Research Group or the Democratic Unionist party, and the only solution that will actually work is a full customs union. That is what I said at our first encounter here in 2016. It is the answer that is staring the Government in the face. If they backed it, it would command a majority in this House. It would avoid the mayhem and chaos of no deal, and protect the jobs at Nissan, Airbus and elsewhere that are currently at grave risk, so can the Minister explain why the Prime Minister is so dead against it?

Mr Lidington: Even if we did take the right hon. Lady’s somewhat ill-defined description of a permanent customs union, it would not address issues in respect of Northern Ireland and Ireland regarding regulatory standards for industrial goods or phytosanitary checks for foodstuffs and livestock. Even in her own terms, her answer is inadequate. The right hon. Lady may well then go on to say that she also wants to be part of a single market. Indeed, she has said that she would be happy with the same position as Norway, but that means the continuation of free movement and her party’s manifesto explicitly said that free movement would stop, so is the right hon. Lady supporting a Norway model or is she supporting the Labour party’s manifesto?

Emily Thornberry: Flattered though I am that the Minister feels it necessary to ask me questions, it is important to make it clear that the reason that I have asked these questions today is that the Minister for the Cabinet Office understands Europe, Northern Ireland and Brexit probably better than any of his Cabinet colleagues. If anyone from the Government could give us answers, it would be him. But the truth is that there are no answers. Plan A has been resoundingly rejected by Parliament, plan B was ruled out by the EU months ago, and the Government are in danger of sleepwalking the country towards leaving with no plan and no deal at all. With just over 50 days to go, may I give the Minister a final opportunity to tell us whether there is a better plan than this—or, for goodness’ sake, will they let Parliament take charge instead?

Mr Lidington: As I said earlier, the Prime Minister will be reporting back to this House next week following her discussions in Brussels and elsewhere. I have to say to the right hon. Lady that the two-year deadline—the 29 March deadline—stems from European law and the wording of article 50, which lays down the two years. As I recall, the right hon. Lady voted in favour of triggering article 50; perhaps it was one of those votes where she was present but not involved. If she and her Front Bench are worried about no deal, they have to vote for a deal. Every time they vote against a deal, the risk of no deal becomes greater. It really is time for the Opposition Front Bench, for once, to put the national interest first, do the right thing and vote for a deal.

Q5. [909049] Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Last Friday, the Health Secretary made a superb visit to Princess Alexandra Hospital in Harlow, where he met inspirational staff doing outstanding work for patients. However, our hospital is crumbling. Sewage is coming into the operating theatres and our infrastructure is failing. Will my right hon. friend lobby the Treasury to ensure that we get capital funding so that Harlow can get the new hospital that we desperately need?

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend the Health Secretary was very impressed by what he saw on his visit to Harlow, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) will remain a very ardent champion of the need for renewal of those hospital facilities. He knows that as part of the Government’s long-term plan for the NHS, NHS England will make decisions about its capital investments for the future, and I am sure that he will drive his case home with it.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I welcome the Minister to his place.

While the chaos of the UK Government’s shambolic Brexit negotiations has dominated the headlines, this Government have sneaked through a cut in pension credit that will see some couples up to £7,000 a year
worse off. An estimated 300,000 more pensioners are now living in poverty than in 2012. Does the Minister agree that his Government need to change course and, instead of robbing pensioners, start supporting them?

Mr Lidington: I think that the right hon. Gentleman is talking about the situation of mixed-age couples with one person over pensionable age and receiving a pension and the other of working age. What the Government have done—indeed, what this House voted for some years ago—is perfectly logical and in line with the intention of the benefits system.

Ian Blackford: We certainly did not vote for that. What we have seen from this Government is that they continue to put their hands into the pockets of the poorest in our society. In fact, this Tory Government are allowing a proposal to take free TV licences from pensioners. It is this Conservative Government who are denying women born in the 1950s their full rights to state pensions. It is this Tory Government who preside over the lowest state pension in any developed country—quite shameful. Pensioner poverty is not a myth; it is a reality. With Scottish pensioners being short-changed by the UK Government, the Minister must agree that the only way to end pensioner poverty in Scotland is to put fairness back into our pension system and give older people the dignity that they deserve in retirement—for pension reform to be taken on by the Scottish Government in an independent Scotland, where we take our responsibilities seriously.

Mr Lidington: The right hon. Gentleman has some nerve here. He knows that it is in the power of the Scottish Government, under devolution legislation, to top up social security benefits if they choose to do so. He knows—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is a lot of wild gesticulation and very animated expressions, and people looking at the Minister, but there is too much noise—let’s hear the fella.

Mr Lidington: The right hon. Gentleman knows that he and his party have voted against this Government’s Budgets even though those Budgets have reduced tax upon the lowest-paid in every part of the United Kingdom. He knows that the budget set by the SNP in the Scottish Parliament last week has led to Scots being more highly taxed than people in any other part of the United Kingdom—and that in a year when the Scottish Government’s block grant as a result of the Chancellor’s Budget decisions was increased by £950 million. The SNP has block grant as a result of the Chancellor’s Budget— and that in a year when the Scottish Government’s tax take is higher than people in any other part of the United Kingdom. Parliament last week has led to Scots being more highly taxed than people in any other part of the United Kingdom. He knows that the budget set by the SNP in the Scottish Parliament last week has led to Scots being more highly taxed than people in any other part of the United Kingdom—and that in a year when the Scottish Government’s block grant as a result of the Chancellor’s Budget decisions was increased by £950 million. The SNP has block grant as a result of the Chancellor’s Budget—

Q. [909053] Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Citizens Advice in Solihull has been a cornerstone of my community for over four decades. Does my right hon. Friend share my dismay at the fact that the council procurement process has seen 60% of its funding wiped out overnight? Will he join me in calling on Solihull Council to do everything to ensure the survival of my brilliant local Citizens Advice?

Mr Lidington: I certainly understand, not least from my own constituency, the valuable service that Citizens Advice provides in many parts of the country. As my hon. Friend knows, the funding available through the local government settlement is largely not ring-fenced. These are decisions for elected local authorities to take at their discretion, but I am sure that the local authority in Solihull has heard clearly my hon. Friend’s concerns.

Q2. [909046] Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent Rachel wrote to me saying: “My husband can’t live day to day without insulin. He’s trying to build up a supply by putting in prescriptions early, but there are limits to how much he can order and keep and we have no idea how bad this could get. I’m also worrying about my son, who has serious food intolerances. I lie awake at night worrying about it.” As the Minister knows, 99.5% of insulin used in the UK is made in the EU, and that is the tip of the medicinal iceberg. The Home Secretary, the Foreign Secretary and the Leader of the House all say that we need extra time. When will the Government allow our constituents to sleep at night and announce a delay to article 50?

Mr Lidington: Obviously if there are concerns about a particular case, the relevant Health Minister will be happy to discuss it with the hon. Gentleman. On his more general point, as part of sensible contingency planning, my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary and his Department have been talking to the suppliers of insulin and other key medicines and treatments to ensure that supplies will remain available to patients who need them, whatever the outcome of the current Brexit negotiations.

Q11. [909055] Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Health and safety is strictly followed inside schools, but we expect our children to cross dangerous roads to get to the school gate. Will my right hon. Friend consider introducing new minimum requirements, a funding pot to provide for pedestrian crossings and signage, and reductions in speed limits to ensure that our children are looked after and do not have to cross such dangerous roads?

Mr Lidington: I completely understand the concerns about that issue of not only my hon. Friend but many parents. Of course, a lot depends upon the location of a school and the circumstances of the roads around it, but I am sure that a Minister from the Department for Transport will be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss those ideas.

Q3. [909047] Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): This is Children’s Mental Health Week. There has been a massive deterioration in children’s mental health, with one in seven children now having a mental health disorder, much of which is linked to rising poverty. There is a chronic shortage of trained psychiatrists to treat those children, and we rely on the EU for one in seven trained psychiatrists and much of the primary research. What will the right hon. Gentleman do to avoid a further deterioration of the situation if we brexit?

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister.
Geraint Davies: Does he agree that parents who voted to leave did not vote to leave their children in greater risk of mental disorder and deserve a final say to protect their future?

Mr Speaker: Order. If the hon. Gentleman sought my advice, I would have provided it. He was doing extremely well, but he should have cut it off about 25 words earlier.

Mr Lidington: On the hon. Gentleman’s point about EU health workers, with the end of freedom of movement, we will need to put new arrangements in place. The immigration Bill before the House provides the framework within which those more detailed arrangements can be made for the future. Of course, the health service in Wales is devolved and a matter for the Welsh Government and Assembly, but NHS England’s long-term plan will see the largest expansion of mental health services in a generation.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I listened very carefully to the quiet and earnest exchange between my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), the shadow Foreign Secretary, on the subject of arrangements for Brexit. I have to say that I formed the impression they were trying to find detailed points on which they could disagree, and that if it was left to them, they would take about five minutes to agree a proposal that would take us smoothly through 29 March into proper negotiations. May I ask my right hon. Friend if he would arrange that, on 14 February, we can finally have some indicative votes in the House so that the sensible majority can express their opinion? We can leave smoothly and start proper negotiations, based on a customs arrangement and some regulatory alignment in the transition period, and stop being so dominated by Corbynistas and the European Research Group.

Mr Lidington: I have to say that, in the past couple of weeks, one of the things I have been spending my time doing is talking to right hon. and hon. Members from all parts of the House, including Labour Members, about their views regarding the way forward on Brexit. If the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) wanted to come and see me as well, I would be very happy to talk further to her. I just think it is a pity that the Leader of the Opposition waited a full fortnight before even opening discussions with the Government.

Q4. [90048] Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): The people watching expect MPs to be working together at this time in the national interest. While the Prime Minister is away chasing political fixes, the Minister knows that this Brexit crisis could be resolved right here in this House, because many Members would support a deal that was then put to the public for their approval. Why will he not offer this public final say when he knows that it would break the deadlock?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman has been a completely open and honourable champion of the second referendum, and I respect that fact. He knows the Government’s concerns that that would lead to an erosion of public trust in our political process, and that it would not actually settle the question because there would then be demands from whoever lost a second referendum to proceed to a third. I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that he needs to persuade his own Front Benchers, because I find that opposition to a second referendum is quite deep in both major parties in the House.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): I have just come from speaking at the launch of a draft EU-UK free trade agreement. It lays out 300 pages of what such an agreement would look like and invites the Government and businesses to engage, but it depends on us being outside a customs union with the EU. Notwithstanding the earlier exchanges on this very topic, will my right hon. Friend recommit himself today to our manifesto commitment to be outside a customs union with the EU in the future relationship?

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend, perfectly properly, made reference to the 2017 Conservative manifesto, but I could also refer him to many, many statements made from this Dispatch Box and elsewhere by our right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to the same effect. I would say to him that, for the complex negotiations that would be needed to establish the detail of the future economic partnership between ourselves and the European Union, we need to have the implementation or transitional period that is specified in the withdrawal agreement. That is what businesses of all sizes in all sectors are asking us in this House to do, and that is why the House should come together and support a deal.

Q6. [90050] James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): Will the Minister explain why councils such as Bury, with less availability of brownfield land, cannot use the most recent independent Office for National Statistics figures on household projections to determine local housing need, thus saving more of our precious green belt from development?

Mr Lidington: Of course, new tests of housing need have recently been introduced. They are designed to reflect the fact that under successive Governments of all political parties, we as a country have been building far fewer new homes than our country and particularly our younger generation now need. I can say to the hon. Gentleman that, representing one part of the country with some of the fastest housebuilding rates anywhere in England, I think this is a social justice challenge that we have to face up to, but the national planning policy contains within it very strong tests to protect against inappropriate development in the green belt, and the Government will stand by that approach.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Last week it was announced that emergency services and women and children’s services are going to be moved out of borough from Telford’s Princess Royal Hospital. I have asked the Health Secretary to call in that decision for review, because the needs and health outcomes of people in both Telford and Wrekin have not been considered. Will my right hon. Friend join me in urging the Health Secretary to review the decision and to listen to the concerns of people in Telford and Wrekin?
Mr Lidington: As I would expect, my hon. Friend is a very strong advocate for the health needs of her local area. I understand that she met the Secretary of State for Health yesterday, and I am sure that he will reflect carefully on the case that she put to him.

Q7. [909051] Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): With fuel poverty on the rise thanks to this Government, it is important that everyone who needs cold weather payments receives them. My constituents who live less than 10 miles from a certain weather station—the majority—receive those payments when temperatures fall below zero. However, the arrangements for my constituents in a neighbouring ward are based on a measurement from another weather station that is 20 miles away. Will the Minister act to end the postcode lottery for cold weather payments for the good people of Bellshill, Coatbridge and Chryston?

Mr Lidington: The Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that the most vulnerable people get support when they need it most. It is important, obviously, that people are able to keep their homes warm during any cold snaps, and the cold weather payments and winter fuel payment enable them to do that. I will ensure that the relevant Minister looks into the particular constituency issue raised by the hon. Gentleman.

Jack Breerton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): On behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who has been in his constituency this morning, I want to thank Staffordshire fire and rescue and Staffordshire police for their efforts in the horrific fire that occurred in Stafford this week. I also want to thank the local schools for the support being given to children who know the family. Will my right hon. Friend join me in expressing our condolences to the family and friends of the children and parents involved?

Mr Lidington: I do not believe that there is any other than horror and the most deeply felt sense of sympathy with the family and friends of the children and parents involved. Thanking through what that family have had to live through, and must face living through in the future, it strikes one that it must be almost unendurable. On behalf of the whole House, I hope, I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the emergency services—let us not forget that, for those who were called out to the scene, this would have been a traumatic experience—and to the local schools. The fire and rescue service will lead an investigation into the causes of this tragedy, and obviously we will have to await the outcome of that before deciding whether any further lessons should be drawn.

Q8. [909052] Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) opened her heart to share the story of her son Martin and the pain that she went through when he died as a child. The Prime Minister committed to establishing Martin’s fund, a children’s funeral fund that would mean that parents would not have to bear the cost of burying their child, yet nine months on, 3,000 families have had to find the funding to bury their children because the Government have not put the fund in place. When can we see the fund and, importantly, will the Government commit to backdating payments to the date on which that announcement was made?

Mr Lidington: As the Prime Minister has said, it is not right that grieving parents have to worry about how to meet the funeral costs for a child. We have confirmed that parents will no longer have to meet the costs of burials or cremations, and fees will be waived by all local authorities and paid for instead by Government. We have been working, as I think the hon. Gentleman acknowledged, on the most effective way to deliver the fund, because we need to make sure that we get this right, but I take his point about the need to step up the pace. We will provide an update to Parliament on implementation as soon as possible, and I will certainly draw his comments and the support that he has from other Members right across the House, on a cross-party basis, to the attention of the Ministers concerned.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I am proud to represent Penzance, which is at the start of the rail link to London and elsewhere. Five years after the track was cut off by both coastal erosion and landslides, the planning application has finally gone in to create a resilient rail link for Devon and Cornwall. Will my right hon. Friend assure my constituents and the House that adequate funds will be made available to avoid any further delays?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the critical importance of this stretch of line not just to south Devon but to the whole south-west, in particular people living in Cornwall. I have been told by the Department for Transport that the first phase of work to protect the sea wall at Dawlish began in November last year, with essential repairs to breakwaters. That is part of a £15 million wider investment to make the railway at Dawlish and Teignmouth more resilient to extreme weather. Top-quality engineers have been carrying out detailed ground investigations to develop a long-term solution to protect the railway and to minimise disruption for passengers. We are now talking to Network Rail about the long-term plan.

Q10. [909054] Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Last year, my constituent with cerebral palsy was awarded £55 a week in personal independence payment. She was then diagnosed as having fibromyalgia, an incurable and often severely debilitating condition. She was summoned for reassessment and the private profit-driven company this Government choose to make such assessments decided that she is healthier with fibromyalgia than she was without and stopped her benefit in its entirety. That leaves her £2,900 per year worse off than she was before, literally punishing my constituent for being ill. How do the Government possibly hope to justify such a travesty of justice?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman raises a constituency case. I do not know the details other than those he has just relayed to the House, but I will ask the relevant Minister at the Department for Work and Pensions to talk to him and to look into the details of the case in greater depth.
Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I point out to my right hon. Friend that the House has already had some indicative votes? The House did not like the withdrawal agreement as it was and would prefer not to leave without a withdrawal agreement at all, and the whole Government voted to replace the backstop. What progress is being made in the discussions led by a remarkable alliance of my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg)? They are promoting what is known as the Malthouse compromise, which would replace the backstop with a perfectly viable scheme to secure an open border in Northern Ireland under all circumstances. What is holding it up?

Mr Lidington: There is no attempt to hold anything up. The Government are very determined that we need to make progress, not least because of the two-year deadline under article 50 and the importance to our businesses of leaving the EU in an orderly manner with a withdrawal agreement. The group to which my hon. Friend refers has been meeting my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union. Those talks continue.

Q12. [909056] Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): ISS is a private contractor that employs some of my constituents as porters and cleaners at Kingston Hospital, but it will not pay them sick pay. One was refused sick pay after suffering a stroke, and coercing sick people to come into a hospital risks infecting vulnerable patients. ISS has now threatened to break off negotiations with the GMB trade union if there is any political campaigning on this issue, including contacting MPs. Will the right hon. Gentleman condemn ISS for undermining its workers’ basic democratic right to contact their MP, and will he call on ISS to pay its workers fairly, including when they are sick?

Mr Lidington: Two issues were raised there. On the point about access to a Member of Parliament, there is no excuse for any organisation or individual to try to stop a constituent approaching their Member of Parliament. While this is ultimately a matter for you, Mr Speaker, there have been previous occasions when such attempts have been ruled as a contempt of Parliament, so I hope that message will go back. On the substantive point about the operation of the contracts, clearly the contract would have been let by the relevant part of the NHS, but the Health Secretary has indicated to me that he is very willing to sit down with the hon. Gentleman to talk through the details.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Following on from the excellent question from my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), I remind the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster that the House passed the so-called Brady amendment on 29 January. Three hundred and seventeen Members were present and actively involved, as they all voted for it, including my right hon. Friend and the whole Government. The amendment said: “and requires the Northern Ireland backstop to be replaced with alternative arrangements to avoid a hard border”.

As the Government voted for it, will he confirm that that is still their policy, and if not, which bit of “replaced” was not clear?

Mr Lidington: The motion also said, of course, that subject to those changes, those who voted for it would be willing to accept the withdrawal agreement. Talks are continuing with the so-called Malthouse group, but my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister spelled out in Belfast yesterday how she intends to take forward the work following the vote for the amendment in the name of our hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady).

Q13. [909057] Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The premise for the Oxford-to-Cambridge expressway has never been consulted on, yet this multi-billion-pound, multi-lane highway is set to carve through the landscape between Oxford, Milton Keynes and Cambridge and will affect millions of people. A consultation is due to start on the route options later this year, but will the Minister guarantee today that there will also be a formal consultation on whether the expressway is the right thing to do at all?

Mr Lidington: The expressway is part of a strategic plan for the Oxford-Cambridge corridor, which is probably the best opportunity for economic growth, innovation and job creation anywhere in Europe at the moment. Like the hon. Lady, I speak as somebody who has a constituency interest—not just a Government interest—in this. There will be a public consultation on route options later this year. There will then be a public consultation on the preferred route, and communities will be able to comment on all aspects of the expressway during those consultations.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): There can be no doubt that the people of Venezuela are really suffering: 40 of them were killed in recent protests, many more have been detained and many are simply voting with their feet and leaving—those who can. What more can we do as a Government to help these people, and does my right hon. Friend agree that sanctions are still a valuable tool?

Mr Lidington: What is happening in Venezuela is appalling. We have seen the suppression of democratic institutions and traditions, and we have seen 3 million people forced to leave their country and live as refugees. We and our EU partners have been clear that we need to put pressure on those around Maduro. We need to keep that pressure up, and we are looking at what further steps we can take to ensure peace and democracy, including through possible sanctions. It would be a help if, in this House, we spoke with a united voice, rather than having the Leader of the Opposition looking to Maduro’s Venezuela as a role model for this country.

Q14. [909058] Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The Prime Minister is on record as saying that she does not want a “business as usual” relationship with Russia. Will the Minister explain, then, why in the past year, the Conservative party has trousered £1 million in donations from individuals with strong links to the
Kremlin, including a former Russian Defence Minister and the wife of President Putin’s former Finance Minister?

Mr Lidington: Party matters are not a subject of Government responsibility, but all donations to the Conservative party have been properly accounted for and declared to the Electoral Commission in accordance with the law. There are people of Russian origin who are United Kingdom citizens and as entitled as any other naturalised UK citizen to support and donate to the political party of their choice.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): For parents across East Renfrewshire, the safety of their children online is an absolute priority, so I very much welcome the announcements from the Government of more steps in relation to social media companies, but can my right hon. Friend confirm that the online harms White Paper remains on track to be out on time and that, whatever happens with Brexit, this workstream will be a priority for the Government?

Mr Lidington: Yes, and I actually talked to the Culture Secretary this week about the need to press ahead with urgency on this task. We have heard the calls for an internet regulator and a statutory duty of care, and we are seriously considering these options. Our White Paper will clearly set out how responsibilities should be met and what should happen if they are not.

Q15. [909059] Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Falklands veteran Rory McCormick met his Russian spouse six years ago. She obtained a valid article 10 EU residence card in Ireland. Now he, his two children and his wife, who is lawfully resident in the UK under the Immigration Act 2014, are being refused private tenancy in Ipswich. Does the deputy Prime Minister believe that it is morally defensible for a British citizen and his family to be made homeless in their own country simply because the Home Office guidance wrongly rules out article 10 cards issued outside the UK as valid eligibility documents for letting agents?

Mr Lidington: As the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, I am not familiar, as he is, with the details of his constituency case, and I was not certain from how he posed his question whether the problem was with the documentation alone or whether there was a more substantive problem, but the Immigration Minister or another relevant Minister will happily talk to him to try to sort this out.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that Brexit provides us with the opportunity to introduce a controlled and fair immigration system that no longer discriminates against the rest of the world outside the EU and that that system should be the least bureaucratic possible?

Mr Lidington: I agree with my hon. Friend on both those points. It is important that in the future we have a system that is fair, makes it easy for the brightest and best in the world to come and work and study here and judges people not by the country they come from but on the skills they bring to this country.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Minister will recall that my colleagues and I in the coalition introduced the naming and shaming of companies that fail to pay the minimum wage. This practice has ceased since last summer, apparently because civil servants are tied up on Brexit duties. What does this tell us about the Government’s new-found enthusiasm for labour rights, and when will these lists be published?

Mr Lidington: I would have hoped that the right hon. Gentleman acknowledged that the Government have continued to take forward and strengthen further the policies on the national living wage, which we worked together on during the coalition days, but I will look into the point he has made, discuss it with my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary and perhaps a drop him a note to say what we have concluded.
Points of Order

12.48 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During Prime Minister’s questions, I raised the issue of the attack on pensions and pensioners, and I was surprised to hear the Minister for the Cabinet Office claim in response that the Scottish Government had responsibility, if we so chose, to deal with the problems created by the UK Government. He will know that pensions are reserved and that the Scottish Parliament cannot create any new pension or old-age benefit because of the restrictions in section 28 of the Scotland Act 2016, under which we cannot give pensions assistance or assistance for reasons of age. We find it intolerable that time after time the UK Government claim that the Scottish Parliament or Government have powers they patently do not have, and it must stop.

Mr Speaker: That is not a matter for the Chair, but the right hon. Gentleman has made his point with force and clarity. If the Minister for the Cabinet Office wishes to respond, he can. He is not under an obligation to do so, but if he does not, I suspect, knowing the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), who is a persistent blighter, that he will not go away. Quite understandably and justifiably, he will want to return to the issue over and over again, so it might be best if the Minister would deploy his considerable intellect and respond.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am very clear that the advice I have is that under the Scotland Act 2016 the Scottish Government have the power to top up reserved benefits. It is for the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) to defend the decision of a Scottish Government not to do so.

Ian Blackford: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I think the idea of further debate is fermenting in the mind of the leader of the Scottish National party as we speak. I am not sure that there is any “further to”, but I am in a generous mood—[Interruption.] I think that gesture means it will be short, so very well.

Ian Blackford: I have respect for the Minister, but he needs to reflect on the fact that pensions are reserved, period, under legislation from this Government.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is a bit like me; he likes to have the last word. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) is a precious delicacy in the House, and we should not squander him too early. I will come to him.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It has been widely reported that the Secretary of State for International Trade has advised industry representatives that he proposes to introduce measures in the event of a no-deal Brexit to reduce all import tariffs on goods to zero. The impact of that in job losses in our manufacturing and farming industries would be enormous. It would also undermine the Government’s much vaunted ambition to negotiate new trade deals by giving away what other countries would happily bargain access into their own markets to obtain. Have you, Mr Speaker, received any indication from the Government that a Minister is preparing to make a statement to this House on such a far-reaching and important matter?

Mr Speaker: No, not as yet, but who knows what is to follow. We live in hope. The hon. Gentleman’s grinning countenance suggests that he is satisfied with his efforts for now.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am sorry that I have not given you notice of this, but it was not possible. Since Prime Minister’s questions began, the President of the European Council has said that there is a “special place in hell” reserved for Brexiteers. I do not recall any President insulting Members of this House, members of the Government and the British people in such a way. What means are open to the House or the Government to respond to such a completely outrageous insult?

Mr Speaker: I am not responsible for the statements of the President of the European Council, and I did not know—I was not hitherto conscious—that the hon. Gentleman was notably sensitive, that he was in any sense a delicate flower, and that he was capable of being a quickly and severely injured soul by virtue of the ad hominem remarks of others. If indeed he has been developing a sensitivity and he feels insulted—[Interruption.] Or even, as the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) chunter from a sedentary position, wounded.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Deeply.

Mr Speaker: Deeply wounded, apparently. Well, then I am sorry for the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). Whatever views he has and expresses, as far as I am concerned, as he knows, I hold him in the highest esteem because he takes Parliament seriously; he always has done and he always will do. It is not for the Speaker to arbitrate between different political opinions. What the Speaker likes to see and hear is the sight and sound of committed parliamentarians who take their responsibilities seriously. No one does so more obviously than the hon. Gentleman.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: It seems to be very much a phone-carrying day. Very well.

Joanna Cherry: I shall keep this brief, Mr Speaker. I did not have the chance to advise you of my point order in advance, as it arises from that of the right hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). May I respectfully suggest to you that you respectfully suggest to the right hon. Gentleman that he might want to go beyond the headlines of the BBC in future? What the European Council President Donald Tusk actually said was that there is a “special place in hell” for “those who promoted Brexit without even a sketch of a plan of how to carry it out safely”.

So perhaps—[HON. MEMBERS: “Oh!”] Well, Mr Speaker, sometimes the truth hurts, doesn’t it?
Mr Speaker: To be frank, as Speaker I do not really mind what it is that the President of the European Council has said, because it is not a matter that concerns me. I hope that the hon. and learned Lady will forgive me if I note en passant that in the course of making a point that I know was very important to her, she inadvertently elevated the hon. Member for Wellingborough to membership of the Privy Council. Perhaps it is only a matter of time, but the Treasury Bench might wish to leave it there for now, but I am glad that the hon. and learned Lady is in a jocular spirit, and the same seems to be capable of being said of the hon. Gentleman, even if he is deeply wounded.

BILL PRESENTED

EUROPEAN UNION (REFERENDUM ON WITHDRAWAL AGREEMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Tom Brake, supported by Sir Vince Cable, Jo Swinson, Wera Hobhouse, Mr Ben Bradshaw, Dr Sarah Wollaston, Stephen Gethins, Jonathan Edwards, Caroline Lucas, Stephen Doughty and Geraint Davies presented a Bill to require the holding of a referendum in which one option is to endorse the agreement between the United Kingdom Government and the European Union on the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union and the other option is for the United Kingdom to continue to be a member of the European Union; to require the Prime Minister to seek an extension of the period of two years specified in Article 50(3) of the Treaty on European Union to a period ending after that referendum; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on 22 March, and to be printed (Bill 331).

Armed Forces Covenant (Duty of Public Authorities)

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

12.56 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require public authorities to deliver services in accordance with the armed forces covenant; and for connected purposes.

It is a great privilege to present this ten-minute rule Bill. I consider it a huge privilege to serve as Northern Ireland’s only voice on the Defence Committee, following the service of my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). We recognise the enormous sacrifice given not only during the Northern Ireland troubles and through Operation Banner, which remains our country’s longest continuous military deployment, but historically and to the present day, and we value the above average contribution that Northern Ireland makes to our country’s overall strength. Collectively, as a nation, we honour that commitment. Collectively, as a Parliament, we progressed the armed forces covenant, which nobly states:

“To those who proudly protect our nation, who do so with honour, courage, and commitment, the Armed Forces Covenant is the nation’s commitment to you.

It is a pledge that together we acknowledge and understand that those who serve or who have served in the armed forces, and their families, should be treated with fairness and respect in the communities, economy and society they serve with their lives.”

I stand by those laudable and honourable words, but, regrettably, we cannot as parliamentarians say with confidence that the covenant runs smoothly and is always applied equally across the United Kingdom. That is the injustice that I hope my Bill will address. The statutory duty it proposes will extend throughout the United Kingdom. The covenant is intended to be a universal commitment, and the experience, care and compassion veterans receive should be the same, but their experience is far from universal.

For too long, the experience of Northern Ireland-based veterans has been substandard. Yes, we have devolution. Yes, we have particular issues that are alive in Northern Ireland that do not pervade other parts the country. But the covenant was not caveated in any way, and we should not caveat our resolve to ensure its full implementation.

I recall the first occasion when, during scrutiny of the covenant implementation report in the Defence Committee, I laid before the then Veterans Minister correspondence received from the Health Minister in Northern Ireland at the time, Sinn Féin’s Michelle O’Neill. Responding to the needs of an individual veteran, she stated categorically that the armed forces covenant did not apply in Northern Ireland. In fact, she said that it did not apply “here”, because she could not bring herself to say “Northern Ireland”. She was wrong, but she was able to abuse her ministerial role to frustrate the honourable outworking of our nation’s commitment.

Such sectarian intransigence exists, and, depending on the allocation of ministerial office in Northern Ireland, it has the potential to block implementation in all the key operational departments. The shame of that action
is matched only by the apparent unwillingness of this Parliament to meet it head-on. The sacrifice offered across our country is the same. The lives lost or injuries sustained do not confine themselves to respective parts of our nation, nor should we confine ourselves in our response.

For two years, successive covenant implementation reports have highlighted the fact that armed forces champions have been appointed in each of Northern Ireland’s 11 local authorities. On the face of it that is great progress, but when we know that local authorities in Northern Ireland have no role or influence in housing, health—including mental health—or education, it amounts to nothing more than tokenism.

In the most recent covenant report, some space was given to the through-life support offered to our veterans community. I read with interest three pages about the great work being undertaken in England, a further page about the work undertaken in Scotland, and yet another about the work undertaken in Wales. There was not a single line about Northern Ireland. There was nothing: no encouraging progress, no hurdles to be overcome, no aspirations for the future.

When Border Force recruitment in Northern Ireland was suspended because one of the eligibility criteria was service in the armed forces, the tension between the covenant and equality legislation became all too apparent. There is a misguided belief that equality laws in Northern Ireland act as a barrier to providing for our veterans community. It would, of course, be hugely advantageous to amend section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to include veterans as a protected class, in line with the aims and aspirations of the covenant. More pronounced, however, is the embarrassing failure to mount any justification for the reasonable aims of the covenant, which is all that Border Force needed to do.

Rather than justifying the reasons why service in the armed forces was a sterling criterion, demonstrating key skills that would enhance an application from a veteran—which is what the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland sought—Border Force decided that it was better to remove veterans’ opportunity to serve their country once again. How dishonourable that was. Rather than advancing the cause of those applicants, Border Force pulled the rug from under them. They were prepared to defend our country in their armed service careers, and they were prepared to defend it again through service in Border Force, yet we in this Parliament did not manage to defend their future career prospects.

Given all the constraints, and the seemingly intractable unwillingness to overcome them, I must especially praise the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association for Northern Ireland, which seeks valiantly to serve our veteran population. I also pay tribute to the Ulster Defence Regiment and Royal Irish Regiment benevolent funds, which continue to support veterans and their families, from Omagh to St Patrick’s in Ballymena and from Thiepval to Palace Barracks in North Down at the edge of my constituency.

With its new veterans support officer, RFCA NI attempts to navigate the system in Northern Ireland and seeks to find subtle workarounds, but in doing so, it is unfolding the circumstances of scores of individuals who, unlike their mainland counterparts, have had no opportunity to avail themselves of the services that they require and expect and that we should provide. It is discovering a lack of resources and a lack of legislative support.

When I say that, I look at the Veterans Minister, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood). I know of his personal commitment, and I know how much he has engaged in matters that do not arise solely in Northern Ireland. The issues raised by the fact that the covenant is not running smoothly apply throughout the United Kingdom. In the Defence Committee, we are identifying distinct differences in mental health provision and other support services in Scotland, Wales and England.

I believe we must say that no longer should our veteran population in Northern Ireland—and in other parts of this United Kingdom—remain with one hand tied behind their back. We owe them more than that. I have focused my remarks on Northern Ireland, but I know only too well that the principle applies across our nation. We have the chance to change that. At the very least, let this parliamentary process—through my quest for a statutory duty to implement the covenant—honour those who so gallantly honoured us.

Question put and agreed to.
Ordered.

That Gavin Robinson, Nigel Dodds, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, Emma Little Pengelly, Dr Julian Lewis, Mrs Madeleine Moon, John Spellar, Leo Docherty, Mr Kevan Jones, Anne-Marie Trevelyan, Ruth Smeeth and Jamie Stone present the Bill.

Gavin Robinson accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March and to be printed (Bill 332).
Social Security

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, we will debate motions 2 and 3 together.

1.7 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): I beg to move,

That the draft Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following motion:

That the draft Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers’ Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

Sarah Newton: These two statutory instruments will increase the value of lump sum awards payable under the Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers’ Compensation) Act 1979 and the diffuse mesothelioma scheme, which was set up by the Child Maintenance and Other Payments Act 2008. Those schemes stand apart from the main social security benefits uprating procedure, and there is no legislative requirement to review the level of payments each year. None the less, I am happy to increase the amounts payable from 1 April this year by September’s consumer prices index of 2.4%.

The Government recognise the very great suffering of individuals and their families caused by the serious and often fatal diseases resulting from exposure to asbestos, coal dust and other forms of dust. The individuals affected may be unable to bring a successful claim for damages, often owing to the long latency period of their condition, but they can still claim compensation through these schemes.

I will briefly summarise the specific purpose of the two compensation schemes. The Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers’ Compensation) Act 1979, which for simplicity I will refer to as the 1979 Act scheme, provides a lump sum compensation payment to those who have one of five dust-related respiratory diseases covered by the scheme, who are unable to claim damages from employers because they have gone out of business and who have not brought any action against others for damages. The five diseases covered by the 1979 Act scheme are diffuse mesothelioma, bilateral diffuse pleural thickening, pneumoconiosis and byssinosis, as well as primary carcinoma of the lung if accompanied by asbestosis or bilateral diffuse pleural thickening. The 2008 mesothelioma lump sum payment scheme widens the criteria for compensation to those who have contracted diffuse mesothelioma but who are unable to claim compensation for that disease under the 1979 Act scheme—for example, those people who were self-employed or whose exposure to asbestos was not due to work.

Payments under the 1979 Act scheme are based on the age of the person with the disease and their level of disablement at the time of their diagnosis. All payments for diffuse mesothelioma are made at the 100% rate. All payments under the 2008 scheme are also made at the 100% disablement rate and based on age, with the highest payments going to the youngest people with the disease. In the last full year, from April 2017 to March 2018, 3,680 people received payments under both schemes, totalling £49.2 million.

I am aware that the prevalence of diffuse mesothelioma is a particular concern of Members, given the number of deaths from this disease in Great Britain. It is at a historically high level. The life expectancy of those diagnosed with diffuse mesothelioma is poor; with many people dying within 12 months of diagnosis. The disease has a strong association with exposure to asbestos, and current evidence suggests that around 85% of all mesotheliomas diagnosed in men are attributable to asbestos exposures that occurred through work. Our latest available information suggests that there will continue to be around 2,500 diffuse mesothelioma deaths per year before the number of cases begins to fall during the next decade, reflecting a reduction in asbestos exposures after 1980.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): The Minister will be aware that Barrow and Furness has the highest number of asbestos-related cancer deaths in the whole of England and Wales. Is she aware of how many sufferers who were previously compensated under the scheme covering pleural plaques are now falling victim to terminal asbestosis and finding themselves ineligible for any compensation under these schemes? Does she not feel that that is unjust? Will she meet me and representatives of my community to discuss that?

Sarah Newton: I am always happy to meet colleagues from across the House if they have particular constituency issues or if people who really need support are falling between the cracks. There are three different schemes available to support people, and we are talking about two of them today. I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to explore those issues and to discuss the three compensation programmes to see whether there is more that we can do. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that people get the support to which they are entitled.

We expect to see a decline in the number of people being diagnosed with diffuse mesothelioma in the coming years, but many people will continue to develop the condition and the other respiratory diseases, based on their exposure, for some time to come. That is why the Government are committed to working in partnership with their arm’s length bodies and agencies to improve the lives of those with respiratory diseases. I want to give the House an example of that commitment.

Last summer, I hosted a lung health summit, bringing together the Union of Democratic Mineworkers, my hon. Friends the Members for Sherwood (Mark Spencer) and for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) and representatives from the British Lung Association and the NHS. This was an opportunity to discuss the important work that the Government and our partners are doing and to listen to the first-hand experiences and problems, brought to my attention by my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood, that miners are encountering today as they try to get an appropriate diagnosis and therefore the financial support that we want them to receive.

A huge amount of work has been done as a result of that lung health summit, and I was delighted—as I hope everyone will be—to see that the recently published NHS long-term plan recognises the objective of improving...
outcomes for people with respiratory disease. The long-term plan sets out how the NHS will take action in a number of areas. This includes expanding programmes that support earlier diagnosis of respiratory diseases—including the pioneering lung health checks trialled in Manchester and Liverpool—and increasing access to proven treatments such as pulmonary rehabilitation. As part of the engagement process for the Government’s long-term plan, an NHS England respiratory oversight group has been created, which includes membership of the British Lung Foundation. In addition, NHS England has been working closely with the taskforce for lung health, which has also recently published its own five-year plan to improve lung health.

I want to take a few moments to talk about the work of the Health and Safety Executive in this regard. It does excellent work, the length and breadth of the country, but we seldom have an opportunity to reflect on that in this House. As a nation, we should be really proud of our long history of trying to prevent illness and injury at work. The very first factory inspectors were appointed under the Factory Act 1833 to prevent injury and overworking among child textile workers, and we have come a long way since then. The Health and Safety at Work etc. Act came into force in October 1974 and the Health and Safety Executive was formed in January 1975. The HSE is now well established as a mature regulator with a mission to prevent work-related death, injury and ill health. This is borne out by the most recent published HSE statistics, which show a long-term downward trend in the rate of self-reported non-fatal accidents and fatal accidents to workers. Indeed, the UK consistently has one of the lowest standardised rates of fatal injury when compared with any other large economy.

Turning back to the importance of these regulations, I am sure we all agree that, while no amount of money can ever compensate individuals or their families for the suffering and loss caused by the diffuse mesothelioma and pneumoconiosis covered by the 1979 Act scheme, those who have those diseases rightly deserve some form of monetary compensation. Finally, I am required to confirm to the House that these provisions are compatible with the European convention on human rights, and I am happy so to do.

1.18 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): The Child Maintenance and Other Payments Act 2008 made provisions for lump sum compensation payments to be made for those suffering from diffuse mesothelioma. It also made provisions for their dependants. The mesothelioma lump sum payments regulations laid before the House have uprated the lump sum payments for sufferers and their dependants by 2.4%. We welcome the fact that the Government have reviewed the rates in line with inflation, and we recognise that, as the Minister said, they are under no obligation to do so under the 2008 Act.

Mesothelioma is a type of cancer that covers the lining of the body’s organs. It is also almost exclusively caused by asbestos, when fibres have entered the lungs of sufferers and caused damage over time. The greater the exposure to asbestos, the more likely it is that someone will be at risk of mesothelioma. It can also affect those who have been indirectly exposed to asbestos. The victims of indirect asbestos exposure have been seeking justice through access to the diffuse mesothelioma payment scheme for some time, and the Government must seriously consider that matter.

It can take up to 40 years after the original exposure for mesothelioma symptoms to develop, and it is likely that the increase in the numbers of mesothelioma sufferers’ deaths in recent years is due to exposure that took place before the introduction of asbestos regulations in the 1970s. Mesothelioma has devastating effects on sufferers, as the Minister rightly said. For most victims, a diagnosis brings with it the inevitability of death, and one such death was that of my good friend, Brian Jamieson, who passed away in December. He was an active trade unionist who worked on Trafford Park, where he unfortunately acquired the disease. Tragically, only five in 100 people survive the cancer for more than five years after diagnosis.

The damage caused by asbestos is widely seen as one of the biggest public health crises in this country, ruining the lives not just of sufferers themselves, but of their families, friends and communities. The Department for Work and Pensions suggested that 53,000 people will die from mesothelioma between 2030 and 2037, and it is estimated that 2,500 people die every year as a result of the disease. The 2008 scheme provides a one-off payment to sufferers who have no occupational link to the disease or who are self-employed, including, for example, sufferers who live in close proximity to a workplace containing asbestos.

While Labour welcomes the regulations and the uprating of the lump sum payments, several serious issues remain. Alongside many campaigners, we are concerned about the disparity between lump sum payments made to dependants and those made to sufferers. It is unclear why dependants, who are themselves usually impacted by the effects of mesothelioma, receive so much less than sufferers. The difference in the amounts is stark. A mesothelioma sufferer aged 70 will receive £17,961 under the draft regulations. However, if the sufferer dies at aged 67 or over, their dependants receive just £8,000 as a lump sum payment. In 2010, the then Minister, Lord McKenzie of Luton, rightfully pledged to equalise payments, noting the unfair nature of the regulations. The Government have faced repeated calls to honour that commitment, but they have failed to do so. This is also an equality issue. The difference in payments is likely to affect mainly women whose husbands were directly exposed to asbestos at work. How can the Government continue to justify the difference between lump sum payments? Will the Minister tell us the most recent estimated cost of providing equal payments for sufferers and their dependants?

Communities are still being affected by asbestos exposure to this day, and exposure results in an estimated 5,000 deaths every year. The all-party group on occupational safety and health estimated that, shockingly, 75% of the 29,000 schools in Britain contain asbestos, so it is vital that we continue to raise awareness. What additional funding will be made available this year to ensure that we continue to make people aware of the dangers of exposure to asbestos? What campaigns are being run by the Health and Safety Executive about asbestos exposure?

As the Minister noted, the HSE plays a vital role in ending harmful exposure to asbestos, but this Government are responsible for a 40% cut to its budget. By this year,
Mike Amesbury: My right hon. Friend makes a powerful point. I have family members who were miners until they were put out of work, so I completely agree. Labour welcomes the support available to sufferers and the uprating of the provisions, but it is clear that issues remain. I urge the Minister not only to ensure that equal treatment of sufferers and dependants is achieved, but to consider the implications of Government cuts and the introduction of universal credit for sufferers throughout the UK.

1.29 pm

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): I welcome the draft Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations 2019 and the draft Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers’ Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations 2019. I understand that both schemes, which will ensure fair and timely payments to those with asbestos-related diseases, fall outside the general benefits uprating process and that, as such, no review mechanism is formally built into legislation to uprate the payments each year.

The Government’s 2.4% increase in the payments is very welcome and rightly demonstrates an ongoing commitment to supporting those suffering from asbestos-related diseases, many of whom contracted the disease through no fault of their own, and their families. For reasons that will become apparent, I wonder whether a future statutory instrument will include a table of occupations or professions—the regulations include a helpful breakdown of the ages of those with mesothelioma at first diagnosis—as that would help to identify those at risk and could perhaps be cross-referenced with other areas of support for those suffering from mesothelioma, where necessary.

Five years and one month ago, our former colleague from Wythenshawe and Sale East, Paul Goggins, tragically and suddenly passed away. Paul and I had tabled several cross-party amendments to the Bill that became the Mesothelioma Act 2014, and colleagues on both sides of the House will agree that his expertise and compassion have been and continue to be a great loss. He was the driving force behind much of the work on mesothelioma, and the ongoing success of the scheme is testament to his commitment to the issue and a fitting legacy for him as a parliamentarian.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I was under, Paul was an enormously useful knowledge base. At times I went back to my civil servants and said, “No, I have facts from people who were involved in this.” That was very useful, and the House should recognise the work of Paul Goggins.

Tracey Crouch: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend’s intervention. I still have the Christmas card that Paul gave to me just before we rose for Christmas in 2013, in which he started, “Dear fellow meso warrior”. He was passionate about this, and it was a real privilege to have tabled amendments in his name—obviously, he was unable to be here to push them through.

We were successful during the passage of the Mesothelioma Act—with the support of colleagues on both sides of the House and in the other place, led by
Lord Alton of Liverpool—in aligning payments with the 100% average civil damages. I am therefore sure that, like me, Paul would have welcomed the Minister’s written ministerial statement of 23 January on the diffuse mesothelioma payment scheme which confirmed, thanks to the excellent work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), that the levy to be charged for 2018-19, payable by the insurance industry to fund the scheme, will be just short of £40 million.

Since the launch of the scheme in 2014, £130 million has been paid in compensation to almost 1,000 sufferers—that is £130 million that was not previously available to those suffering from mesothelioma who are not covered by the alternative schemes and unable to trace their employer’s liability insurance. I am grateful for the efforts of everyone in the House, including the late Paul Goggins and my right hon. Friend, who was the Minister at the time, in helping to provide such compensation for those who would not have had it previously.

Having worked with long-suffering officials at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport for three and a half years as a Minister, I will take a second to praise the oversight committee’s annual report on the scheme. The report is well set out and tells us everything we need to know in a clear and transparent way, so I thank the officials who worked hard on it.

One amendment that Paul and I were sadly unsuccessful in adding to the legislation would have introduced an additional levy on the insurance industry to fund research into mesothelioma. It remains the case, as it has for decades, that mesothelioma is poorly understood and underfunded. We know it has a long latency period and is an incredibly aggressive form of lung cancer, and we also anticipate a future spike in diagnoses, with Medway a particular hotspot for the disease given its rich shipbuilding and industrial heritage. I am pleased that Medway clinical commissioning group is working with the local hospital to review its respiratory pathways, including the care of lung cancer patients, and the CCG is keen to be in the next round of lung health checks because of the higher incidence of mesothelioma in the area.

As the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) said, we urgently need better to understand the disease. We need to work towards a meaningful treatment, and perhaps even a cure. Although I accept that this does not fall wholly within the remit of the Department for Work and Pensions, it is notable that the annual review shows that the levy scheme had a £3.45 million surplus last year. Following agreement with the insurance industry, the surplus was divided equally into the levy for the next three years. It might have been better to put that money into research, as while £3 million is small change in the insurance world, it is a lottery win for research. Again, that might be worth considering for next year. I would be grateful if, on the back of this debate, the Minister would write to me to elaborate on what work her Department is undertaking to engage the Department of Health and Social Care in better understanding the disease and improving outcomes for sufferers.

Asbestos in schools is an important topic. Although, again, this does not fall wholly within the remit of the DWP, it does have important implications for the various schemes the DWP administers for sufferers. In a 2015 Adjournment debate on asbestos in schools, I mentioned that the issue needed a cross-departmental effort led by the Department for Education through the Priority School Building programme. I would be grateful if the Minister could update us on any discussions she has had with DFE colleagues on the potential impact of asbestos in schools. For example, is any data shared on the profession of applicants to the asbestos-related schemes whose benefits are administered by her Department?

There is a huge amount to commend in the Government’s ongoing commitment to supporting those who suffer from mesothelioma and asbestos-related diseases. I miss my meso partner in crime, Paul Goggins, enormously. Although he would agree that the progress should be celebrated, he would continue to say that there is always much more that can be done further to improve the outcomes for sufferers of this terrible disease.

1.36 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am pleased to be able to contribute to this debate. The Whips Office asked me whether I would like to contribute because my constituency historically had a strong mining tradition, and I am particularly pleased to take part because 3,000 or so people lose their life to mesothelioma each year.

In August 2008 one of those who lost their life to the disease was John MacDouggall, then the Member of Parliament for the constituency I have the privilege to represent. John was only 60 years old, and he should have had years and years of active life ahead of him. He had given 26 years of service to the people as a councillor and as a Member of Parliament, and for many years before that he had been a trade unionist. It is a tragic irony that while John, through his trade union activities, was working for safer working conditions for his colleagues at the Rosyth dockyard and, later, at the Methil oil rig yard he was working in an environment that led to his tragic early death, denying him and his family the active retirement he had a right to expect.

The last time I remember seeing John—as far as I know, it was the last public activity he was able to carry out—was at an event organised by a stalwart of Fife Council, Willie Clarke, as part of a campaign to get proper recognition and proper compensation for former miners and others whose lives were blighted by pneumoconiosis. It seems appropriate to mark both John and Willie today. Willie gave 43 years’ service as a councillor in Fife, and he retired in 2016.

I think the reason for these regulations today and for why there is a statutory compensation scheme for miners, plumbers and others who suffer from these terrible diseases, is the determination of people like Willie Clarke. As a councillor and as a National Union of Mineworkers official, he worked with other officials in the NUM and in other trade unions. Without them, I do not think we would have a statutory scheme today, so I pay tribute to Willie, the late John MacDouggall and others who have gone before us. They deserve the credit for our having this scheme.

The scheme is not perfect, and it can be criticised, but it has to be better than what we had before. Until we had a statutory compensation scheme, people had to take their employer through the courts. As the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) mentioned, the compensation to a family for the loss of a loved one is often much, much less than the compensation paid to
a patient who has to live with the consequences of their illness. That fact has been abused mercilessly by employers and others for decades. Often the reason for delays and so-called “complications” in compensation cases was purely down to the fact that the employer knew that if they could keep the case going until the claimant died, the size of any compensation payment would be significantly reduced. This was an insidious, vile and evil way to treat people, when they had often given years of service to companies, but that was what the business interests of employers often dictated. Again, I pay tribute to those who have helped to make sure that such a situation has been significantly improved. It has not been entirely sorted out, but things are better than they were in years gone by.

My grandad, Peter Quinn, whose name I am proud to bear, died when I was 10. I only remember him as an old man, one who was usually sick. He had to get a downstairs bathroom installed in his house and convert a front room into a bedroom because he could not get up and down the stairs. He could hardly walk the length of his garden—that is what I remember of him—but he was not much older than I am today. He had been a plumber all his days, which is clearly what caused the damage to his lungs and ended his life prematurely, as it ended the lives of tens of thousands, and possibly millions, of hard-working people the length and breadth of these islands. Those who are left behind and still have to live with the consequences of these appalling diseases deserve all the help we can give them, as do their families and loved ones.

I certainly support the proposal being put forward today. I was not surprised, because I already knew this, but it was disappointing that the Minister said there is not a statutory entitlement for these payments to be increased by the rate of inflation every year. Why is there not? Surely it is time to say to these people, “We think that the compensation that people like you will get in five years’ time should be worth the same in real terms as the money you are getting just now.” It should not need a decision of Parliament to accept—or, in theory, to reject—that increase. This is not money given to people to let them live in luxury. It is given to people as inadequate compensation for the loss of many years of their life and, very often, for the loss of quality life during the years they have left. We are talking about the people who made this collection of nations what it is. We would not have the economy we have today were it not for the shipyards in places such as Burntisland, which John MacDougall represented for so long, and for the mines, which produced massive wealth for so few, but which also destroyed the lives and livelihoods of so many. It is therefore appropriate that we continue to operate this compensation scheme and give, as an absolute minimum, an increase that allows people to keep pace with inflation.

However, I urge the Minister to give serious consideration to amending the legislation so that in future these increases in benefits can be made automatically. There should not be any option for this House to impose what would, in effect, be a reduction in real terms. I support the inflationary increase now, but I hope that by this time next year, and perhaps a wee bit more, will be given automatically as a matter of right and not at the discretion of this House.

1.43 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I rise in support of both these statutory instruments, which are sensibly being taken together, not least because we can now talk about the need to compensate people because of two basic products: coal and coal dust; and asbestos. This country got its wealth from coal, as men went down the mines to bring the coal out. For centuries, the wealth it provided put this country where it was. Asbestos was the great invention post-war, the insulating product that saved many lives, not least in fire prevention and insulation. Subsequently, however, it has destroyed millions of lives in this country today.

I am supporting the Minister today. I sat on the Bench where she is, taking these original measures through. I will make some more arguments in a moment, but at that time I made exactly the argument that the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) just made: why is this increase not automatically put through? I do not think there is an answer to that; I think this is just about bureaucracy and red tape. When the Bill was introduced all those years ago it was not perfect, as Bills often are not. There was so much happiness that that compensation Bill was brought through by the Labour party that things were missed or, as was my experience when I brought through the Mesothelioma Act 2014, people said, “It is too difficult. We don’t have the information at the moment. It can’t quite be done in that way.” I will touch on that in a moment. Such a measure would need primary legislation, but it could be tagged on to the many, many social security Bills that this House sees regularly—if we get the long title right, that can be done.

I know that the Minister will be listening, not only to me, but to Members from across the House, as, rightly, that is how she is as a Minister. So, first, I ask her to say to her officials, “This should be the last time that this is done this way.” This House can find time, if it really wants to, to right a wrong. There is no way in the world this House will be sitting there thinking, “That Penning is going on again, just like he did when he was a Minister”, but what I am saying is right.

I wish to touch on a trivial point that the shadow Minister made: it is not “fibres” that cause mesothelioma, but fibre; something so small it would sit on the end of my finger will, 40 years from now, almost certainly kill people if it develops. No one understands why, and I will address that in a moment. The public need to understand that this could affect people working in a school, a shipyard or myriad other occupations, including my former occupation of firefighter. We were completely unprotected when we were going in to pull ceilings down, and turn things over and damp things down so that they did not reignite. Often there would be asbestos there, and we knew that. But we were the lucky ones, I think, because we were protected by the Fire Brigades Union, the union I was a member and branch secretary of; I recall being thrown out of the Labour party for a few years because we were too militant at the time. For me, as a trade unionist, this issue was very important, as firemen have died from asbestos-related diseases.

We have talked about the mines. Miners, often generation after generation, put their lives at risk to go down the mines. Should we have learnt from the dangers? I agree that in some cases we should have
done, but in other cases we did not really know. I used to live just down the road from a coal merchant, and as lads we often used to go to earn a bit of pocket money by filling the sacks. The coal dust there was not that much different from that in a mine, although the work was not as arduous as working down a mine. Did we realise, and did they realise, that this could seriously damage our lungs in the future? Of course not. So we need to learn from the past, and we have rightly done so.

I was enormously proud to bring through this House, as the Minister, the 2014 Act, which compensates people in cases where we cannot find their insurer and their employer, and where they were the missing few. I was lobbied heavily by my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) and by Paul Goggins and others to make it 100% rather than the 80% that was initially proposed, and to include third parties. Let us just think for a minute about what “third party” means. It often means the partner. It often means the wife of someone who worked in a shipyard and came home in his overalls covered in asbestos, which she then washed and hung out on the line. Is it right that we do not make sure that she has just as much, and that those families and those kids have just as much? The kids playing in the yard where those overalls were hanging could have been affected, but let us hope that has not happened. Could we, as was suggested in the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend, have written into the legislation that research should be part of the funding? I was told by my officials that we could not guarantee the money and we must not jeopardise the Bill, but that we could come back to that later. Well, here we are now, later. I stood at that Dispatch Box and said that if there was money there from the levy, that would be used for compensation. I said that on behalf of Her Majesty’s Government, on the Treasury Bench, as the Minister, with full authority from the Government. That should now be happening. There was clearly enough money there from the levy, that would be used for compensation. I said that on behalf of Her Majesty’s Government, on the Treasury Bench, as the Minister, with full authority from the Government.

We are not even talking about taxpayers’ money; it is a fund, and we could use it to do two things. First, if possible, we could find a cure and work out exactly what is going to go on. In retrospect, that will save lives and stop people needing money from the levy fund in the first place. I am no longer confident—hindsight is a privilege to be the Minister responsible for it some five years later.

1.53 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): I want to tell the Minister and the House a little about the life of Jack Hordon, who was until recently one of my constituents. Sadly, Mr Hordon died in December last year after a life in which he had worked in Barrow shipyard and in the merchant navy on behalf of the New Zealand Shipping Company. He was similar to many thousands of my constituents over the years, and similar to many people in shipbuilding areas and coalmining towns who served their families and their communities. They provided for themselves and their families, but in Barrow shipyard they also did a service for the nation by building vessels that went to war and the submarine fleets that have kept our nation safe for many years. Sometimes because of a lack of knowledge and often because of employers’ lack of care for their employees at the time, those people were exposed and unwittingly exposed their families—including their children, as the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) rightly described—to this deadly killer that sometimes lay quiet for decades until it struck and took away their lives in the most cruel and painful circumstances.

I raise Mr Hordon’s case partly because his life is representative of so many, but also because of the particular gap and injustice exposed by his recent experience. I am very proud to be the successor of Lord Hutton of Furness. He now sits in the other place but was the previous Member of Parliament for Barrow and Furness. He was the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in the previous Labour Government, when I was privileged to serve as his special adviser, and he was determined to speed up access to justice for mesothelioma sufferers and to stop the terrible situation in which there were delays in many sufferers getting their compensation payments, as previous speakers have described.
While Lord Hutton was serving in government, there was also a debate about pleural plaques. After he left the post, he privately lobbied his successor in the Department not to close the scheme and to remain alive to the potential pitfalls of the Government’s approach to pleural plaques. The window for claiming pleural plaques compensation was closed in 2007, and there was a debate about that at the time. Mr Hordon fell ill in 2017 and was diagnosed in August that year as a sufferer of malignant mesothelioma. For 20 years, he had been the full-time carer of his wife of 65 years. Throughout their life—all the time that she suffered from severely debilitating disabilities—they had never claimed. He had always worked assiduously to provide for the family so that they could stand on their own feet. When he fell ill, there was severe distress in the family at his no longer being able to perform that role. Mrs Hordon was forced to go into emergency care, which became permanent, at great distress to her and to the family.

The financial burden and the uncertainty meant there was a real imperative to seek mesothelioma compensation. The initial contact with solicitors was positive. As was the experience of many Members’ constituents, the solicitors said that the case could be taken forward at the greatest possible speed. However, they soon came back with the discovery that Mr Hordon had previously made a claim for pleural plaques, and it turned out that he had signed that, on the strong advice of his solicitors at the time, as a full and final settlement. The family were left unable to claim. They went back over their circumstances around it: one is the injustice of him being denied the compensation that he needed every bit as much as anyone else who falls victim to such a disease; and secondly, there is a case for an inquiry into the practices around pleural plaques at the time. Mr Hordon’s family is clear that he cannot have been given proper advice by the solicitors and by those who were estimating the chances of his condition developing into something that was terminal. The fact is there was a financial incentive for some firms to use sharp practices: “to bite off the hand” of those offering it.

I am grateful to the Minister for agreeing to a meeting when he came to the House. As he said, the House generally—perhaps, I meant to say, the Department—he went on to say, “has never been so full.” This is an important subject for the House. I am very pleased to be here, and very pleased to be taking—

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): I never thought that I would be involved in this debate at such a late stage in my life. I remember making my maiden speech. I had worked down the pits. There were 700 pits and 700,000 miners at the time. Those miners were very much responsible for assisting the nation both during the second world war and after. Those were very hard days in the mines, yet I finished up in this place, mainly because they wanted me to stop another Labour candidate from getting the seat. [Interruption.] That is the truth. I finished up in the palace of varieties, and here we are, many years later, discussing the very thing that I spoke about way back in 1970. It is almost like the Common Market coming back all over again—which it is.

I want to say from the outset that I agree with the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) and the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) who talked about the yearly increase. We do that for a lot of things in Parliament; we increase things automatically. When I think about this subject, I can say that there is no better reason for having an uprate in September, or whenever it is, in accordance with the increases that have taken place in inflation, in pensions and in quite a lot of other things. It would be excellent if, in these 90 minutes, we were able to get that message across. If we get the right kind of people at the Dispatch Box later, perhaps they will be able to give a nod and a wink in this direction. I have seized on this issue today mainly because it was raised by the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead from the Tory party and the hon. Member for Glenrothes from the Scottish National party.

I remember the time when mesothelioma was first raised in the House; it was raised by Mick Clapham, one of my colleagues from Barnsley. Unlike Lord Hutton, he is not in the House of Lords. I suppose that he should be—in a way. He was the one who came here with this funny sounding word that is very difficult for people to remember—mesothelioma. I remember thinking, “How does he manage to get it out of his mouth?” I had to practise saying the word at night. Yes, it is very important to remember Mick Clapham and the fact that he seized on this very important subject.

Tracey Crouch: I remember Mick Clapham because for my sins—for which I have repented through my rebellions over the Mesothelioma Act 2014—I worked for the insurance industry. Mick was the bane of our lives, particularly around the subject of compensation not just for mesothelioma—for those who could not find their employers—but for pleural plaques. The hon. Gentleman is quite right to recognise the sterling work that he did to change hearts and minds among not just Labour Members but Conservative Members for the plight of those who suffer from asbestos-related diseases.

Mr Skinner: Yes, I will get on the phone to Mick and let him know about today’s events. Seriously, if I can tell him that there will be an automatic yearly increase, it will be a token to him and to all those who took part in that exercise at the time. I am very pleased to be here, and very pleased to be taking—

Sir Mike Penning rose—

Mr Skinner: Yes, I will give way.
Sir Mike Penning: I just thought that it would be important to the House to put this on the record: I am sure that the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) never thought that he would agree with me.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): He has not said that he has yet.

Sir Mike Penning: Well, he has actually.

This is why this House is so important. We can come together and say what is right, what is wrong and what can be done. If we come together to put a little bit of pressure on the Minister—not so much at the Dispatch Box today because she will be dragged over the coals—the Secretary of State and the Treasury, we can simply say, “This must be easier for you as a Government, and rather than bringing this forward, we can unite on this.”

Mr Skinner: I could not agree more. The fact is that it would be a breath of fresh air away from Brexit. That is my selling point. This is something that the Government will be remembered for. I will tell Mick Clapham on the phone that it is on its way and all the rest of it. It is an exercise away from the torment of Brexit, which even I never thought would reach this stage of argument. I have been voting for about 10 or 15 years—almost on my own—against every treaty. When I used to walk into the Lobby, I would sometimes bump into our leader, and I would say, “What are you doing here?” I used to think that I should have been on my own. However, we are not arguing about that today, because we want to concentrate on this issue.

I want to commend my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) on the Front Bench, who has put the case very well indeed. With all my experience of representing people in the pits, I know how difficult that can be. I want to ensure that we make something out of this, and that yearly increase would be marvellous.

I thank everybody who has taken part in this important mini debate. When we think about the problem of mesothelioma and asbestos, we realise just how lucky we are to escape from it. Many of us go through life never realising that we are so close to all these things. My father was the same; he worked for 50 years in the pits, and when he went for the pneumoconiosis tests, he was told that he had it but he did not qualify for the scheme because the level was less than 10%. I have found countless others who fell into the same trap. I ask the Minister to look at the question of pneumoconiosis, because although it would not make any difference to my father—he went a long time ago—the truth is that a lot of people need a helping hand in that regard. I was speaking to one today.

I thank everybody for taking part in this important debate. It means that people suffering from mesothelioma will be regarded in a different light than they were before. People will understand that they are not the forgotten few who have been left on the shelf. There are still thousands of people with pneumoconiosis, particularly in the mining areas and especially in Wales. I found out about the levels in Wales through my own experience working in the pits. It may have been because of the anthracite—I am not sure. It is pretty clear that miners in Wales mined a lot of anthracite, and pneumoconiosis levels there were sky-high compared with some other areas’ mining districts. That is something to remember.

I compliment everybody who has taken part in this debate. It is very important and it means a lot to the people who are suffering and hanging on, especially those with mesothelioma and those who have been affected by asbestos, with pleural plaques and everything else. Believe me, this condition is almost like a death sentence the moment that people get it. Pneumoconiosis is slightly different from a medical point of view.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way near the end of his speech. I just want to echo his thanks. It is 30 years and one month exactly to the day when my father died of mesothelioma, having served his apprenticeship at the docks in Glasgow and in Burma before then. He was not able to claim and my mother was not able to claim at the time because she did not know how to go about it, so I thank everybody for the work that has been done.

Mr Skinner: Well, the story goes on and if I can stay on my feet long enough, there will be some more. There is no doubt that mesothelioma has affected a lot of people, whereas pneumoconiosis was almost entirely connected to the mining districts. The truth is that this is a killer disease, and we have to keep our eye on the issue and assist in all the ways that we possibly can, today and in the future. We shall all be on the phone to tell our friends that we managed to get this issue discussed and debated in a way that means it is not a static thing—that a lot of us have decided it would be a good idea to always remember them.

Sarah Newton: It is an absolute pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner). He probably does not realise how much we have in common. It was wonderful to hear him talk about when he came into the House back in 1970, when the subject of his maiden speech was mining in his constituency. When I had the privilege of being elected to represent my home in Cornwall in 2010, the subject of my maiden speech was very much my community and my ancestors, who were Cornish miners. They were mining different things—minerals, tin in particular—but of course suffered the same risks of exposure. In our case it is silica dust rather than coal dust. I have always had the passion, as the hon. Gentleman does, to speak up for those people in my constituency and for my ancestors. My grandfather worked in the docks in Falmouth and was exposed to the very risks that so many hon. Members have spoken about this afternoon.

The hon. Member for Bolsover and others have asked why we are not automatically uprating these particular compensation schemes. Well, let me gently say that this debate makes a powerful case for why it is important that we do have an annual debate. I will absolutely think about what has been said about automatic uprating, but if we had automatically uprated the schemes this year and the provisions had gone through on a motion along with every other social security payment, would we have had the benefit of this debate? We have had the benefit of the hon. Gentleman reminding the House of the huge contribution of Mick Clapham. As he said, it is really important that we do not forget these things and that we do not forget the hard work that has been undertaken by colleagues from all over the House over many years. These are hard-won successes, so it is important that we take these opportunities to remember.
Mike Amesbury: This really is about doing the right thing and working together. Obviously we have heard very powerful historical stories from Members right across the Chamber, but automatic uprating is the right thing to do.

Sarah Newton: Of course we want to do the right thing, which is why we are here today, uprating the scheme. However, we should pause to reflect on the fact that this debate has enabled us to look at this dynamic situation; the hon. Member for Bolsover was absolutely right to describe it as such. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) said that he has doubts about some of the forecasts around the schemes. We have also heard from other Members who want us to look at research and at what more we can do. If we did not have the opportunity of this debate, how would hon. Members have been able to raise those matters? I will seriously look at the question of an automatic uprating, but today has also proved the importance of giving hope to so many constituents through such a debate.

Sir Mike Penning: The Minister is being very generous and the House is listening very carefully because this is such an important debate. This House is not going to turn down the uprating—never would. But we could actually have a proper debate on this subject through the Backbench Business Committee or in Government time. Actually, half the things that we have been talking about today are nothing to do with what is actually on the Order Paper, with all due respect, Mr Deputy Speaker; we have been having a more general discussion. That is probably the answer. I accept that the Minister has to take this question away, but this is a golden opportunity to say that this House accepts that the scheme should be automatically uprated. We should then have a general debate on the issues, but that should not be a reason not to uprate the schemes.

Sarah Newton: My right hon. Friend makes a really important point. I have already committed to taking this matter away, but this debate has been very valuable. As we have seen from the quality and range of contributions, this debate has allowed the time for Members to raise a lot of important matters. Quite rightly, we have roamed far and wide, but this was an important debate none the less.

Peter Grant: Following on from the comments of the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), with respect I do not think that the opportunity for us to talk to ourselves—and possibly to people watching—for an hour or so justifies the potential uncertainty for sufferers. Just now, they do not know how much they are going to get next year or the year after. I would quite happily forgo the chance to listen to my own voice for 10 minutes if I knew that my constituents could be certain for the rest of their lives that their payments would always keep up with inflation. This is the fourth time in three weeks that businesses has collapsed hours early, so there are plenty of other opportunities—through the Backbench Business Committee and elsewhere—to have these debates if Members so wish. I appreciate that the Minister cannot give a definite answer from the Dispatch Box just now, but I really hope that she will take this point back to her colleagues and come back with a positive answer at some point in the future.

Sarah Newton: I am happy to confirm what I have already confirmed to other hon. Members across the House—that I am absolutely happy to take that away and look at it.

I thank the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) for his support for these upratings. He asked me a number of questions that I would of course very much like to answer. Before doing so, I join him in paying respect to his constituent Brian Jamieson. One of the things the hon. Gentleman asked me about was engaging with unions. Of course, trade unions play a really vital role in our society. I have already had a meeting with the National Union of Mineworkers, together with the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock), where we talked about a range of issues that the hon. Gentleman raised today. I will continue that dialogue, as well as meeting the Union of Democratic Mineworkers too.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): This debate reminds me of my own grandfather, George Winter, who suffered from pneumoconiosis. I cannot remember the exact percentage he had, but it was high, as was true of many miners in Tredegar in south Wales, where I am from. He was crushed in a pit fall in the Ty Trist colliery in Tredegar in his thirties. He had a broken femur and a crushed ribcage, and he was hospitalised for nine months. He always taught me, as I am sure that many Labour Members have been taught, that the trade unions were the most important vehicle for promoting good health and safety to make sure that people were respected and looked after at work.

Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for sharing with us the tragic case of his grandfather. That reminds us, as so many colleagues have done today, of the sacrifices that people have made in these essential industries. So much of what we look around at has been created by people who made the sacrifice of working in these very, very physically demanding and dangerous industries. He is right to remind us of the sacrifices that the families have made.

The hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) recognised—I join him in this—the work of Willie Clarke and John MacDougall, and other NUM officials, in creating the schemes that we have before us today. He also talked about Peter Quinn, his grandfather, and his premature death as a result of exposure to asbestos. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) about his father, who died 30 years ago. That really shows how the exposure to these dusts has had such a catastrophic effect on so many people’s lives, not only in this House but across our country.

I am absolutely delighted that the former Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gwent, was able to join us today and speak so passionately, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch). I recognise the really important contributions that they both made, as well as the former Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, in bringing in the 2014 diffuse Mesothelioma payment scheme. As was so rightly pointed out, that filled the gaps in the schemes we are talking about today, meaning that many, many more people are getting financial support.
I want to add my own tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford—our meso warrior. This really shows the difference that individual Members of Parliament can make in this House by banding together with other colleagues to make such important changes to people’s lives. I take on board her very sensible suggestion that we look at the age of people when they are diagnosed as well as their occupation. We need to be constantly looking for new trends to make sure that we are aware of people working in new or different occupations who had hitherto been thought not to be so directly affected and who might benefit from these schemes. I know that she takes a particular interest in teachers and teaching.

Tracey Crouch: I perhaps ought to put it on the record that, because of my passionate speech on Second Reading of the Mesothelioma Bill, when it was quite clear that I wanted to make changes to the legislation, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), as the Minister at the time, made sure that I was not put on the Bill Committee. Newer Members of the House looking to make a difference in this place should perhaps make a more anodyne contribution on Second Reading and then do their bit in Committee.

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend is a doughty parliamentary campaigner, and she shares a very interesting tip with newer Members of the House.

I am very happy to take away my hon. Friend’s suggestion, which was powerfully backed up by the former Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead, that we should look at the surplus within the scheme, which is funded by a levy on the industry. Those surpluses could well be used for further research. I will take that away and look at it. It was rightly pointed out that we need to be very mindful of future projections about the numbers of people who might be affected to make sure that the scheme has adequate funding to meet any future unanticipated needs. I will look at that again to determine whether there is more that we could do on that.

I want to reassure the House on the two points raised about what more the Health and Safety Executive is doing to raise awareness of the risks of asbestosis, especially in schools. The Department for Education and the HSE have been working for long periods on what more can be done to be raise awareness of the good management of asbestosis, whether in hospitals or in schools. The Department for Education has taken a real interest in this. There is now a new assurance scheme that started last March, and funding is made available through the Department for the upgrading of school facilities. We are making a lot of progress in assessing the risk and skilling people up to manage asbestosis when they find it and then ultimately replace it. The Health and Safety Executive is always informing all the different workplaces of the risks of asbestosis and what can be done to reduce them.

It is absolutely fair to say that the Health and Safety Executive has had to make efficiency savings in its budgets over the past few years. However, in no way, shape or form can one say that that is leading it not to be able to do its job well. When I meet the chief executive and the chairman, as I do regularly, they tell me that they have the resources that they need to keep people safe at work. We have only to look at the evidence of what is happening in workplaces to see that the HSE has been innovative and creative, working in partnership with others. As I said in my opening speech, there are far fewer people acquiring injuries, and having fatal injuries, at work. That is to the great credit of the Health and Safety Executive, as I think a lot of Members across the House have recognised.

Finally, there is the question of the equalisation of the sums that are paid out between the people who are directly affected by the conditions and their loved ones. The same issue is raised each time this debate is held. The Government’s view is that it is most important that the funding is given to the people with the condition who would most benefit from it. Of course, I fully understand that families can be devastated and very badly affected, but there is still the recognition that they are able to get compensation, even if it is not at the same level. When we have to make decisions about how we use our precious resources—the taxpayers’ money that is available—it is only right that we target that money by giving it to the people to whom it can make the biggest difference.

We have had a really excellent debate in which we have managed to raise a lot of issues around the health service, education, the Health and Safety Executive, and research. I am very grateful for Members’ contributions and for the support across the House for these very important schemes that are having a very positive impact on people’s lives. I look forward to working with Members who have asked to meet me on how we can work even more closely together and make an even more positive contribution.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved,**

That the draft Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

**Resolved,**

That the draft Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers’ Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.—[Sarah Newton.]
The future of maintained nursery schools

2.29 pm

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I am always proud to represent my constituency of Haslingden and Hyndburn, and I certainly am this evening, in presenting this petition for Fairfield Nursery in Accrington West. I visit Fairfield quite regularly. It is an outstanding nursery within a deprived community, and it provides high-quality provision to a very high standard. Like most Members who are presenting petitions on this issue, the nurseries in my constituency are excellent or outstanding and often cater for the most vulnerable children and children with needs—children who require the highest quality of support, which may be withdrawn from them. Fairfield faces numerous other problems. I want the Government to understand that this is about not just the unfair funding formula, but numerous other issues. I present this petition on behalf of the parents, careers, staff and governors of Fairfield maintained nursery school in Accrington, and there are 89 signatories to it.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of the parents, careers, staff and governors of Fairfield maintained nursery school in Accrington]

Declares that we are concerned about the future of maintained nursery schools in England after March 2020 as no guarantee has been given by the Government that adequate funding will continue when supplementary funding ends.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to urge the Government to take action to ensure nursery schools are financially sustainable for the future.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I rise to present this petition relating to the future secure funding of state-maintained nurseries on behalf of Great Coates Village Nursery School, which is one of two outstanding nurseries in my constituency. This is the second time in my two-year campaign to save those nurseries that I have presented a petition to Government. I have had meetings with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and Ministers to discuss funding for state-maintained nurseries. Children, former students, parents, staff and the local communities in Scartho and Great Coates place great value in these welcoming and cherished early years providers, which are sometimes the only settings that will take physically and learning disabled children and provide them with a high level of education in a suitable environment, where all children play and learn together, regardless of their background, ability or disability. I urge the Government to recognise that there is no time to waste when it comes to the funding of state-maintained nurseries. I present this petition, to which there are 81 signatories, on behalf of parents, carers, staff and governors of Great Coates Village maintained nursery school in Grimsby.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Great Coates Village maintained nursery school in Grimsby]

Declares that we are concerned about the future of maintained nursery schools in England after March 2020 as no guarantee has been given by the Government that adequate funding will continue when supplementary funding ends.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to urge the Government to take action to ensure nursery schools are financially sustainable for the future.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I would like to present a petition on behalf of my constituents about delivering a “Brexit which people voted for.”

The petition is so heavy and so many people—thousands—have signed it, that the Doorkeeper kindly brought it into the Chamber and took it out. It is the first time that a petition has had such a large number of signatures that I have had to do that.

The lead names on the petition are Andy Mercer, chairman of Wellingborough Conservative Association; Helen Harrison, chair of Corby and East Northamptonshire Conservative Association; and John Vickers, president of Wellingborough Conservative Association. They are all not only long-standing Conservatives but devoted to the local community. If I read the petition, Members will see why my residents are so enraged.

The petition, to the honourable the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled, states:

The Humble Petition of the residents of Wellingborough, Northamptonshire and the surrounding areas, Sheweth,

That the Petitioners believe that the Brexit that they voted for should be adhered to by Her Majesty’s Government. This includes, ending the free-movement of people from the EU and control immigration, stop sending billions and billions of £s each year to Brussels, make our own laws in our own country, judges by our own judges.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges the Prime Minister to take in account the concerns of petitioners and deliver a Brexit which people voted for.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.
The future of maintained nursery schools

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): As the former long-standing chair of the Campaign for Real Nursery Education, I am pleased to present a petition on behalf of parents and staff at the Portman nursery in Church Street, which is one of the most deprived communities in the whole country, with a long history of providing superb and integrated nursery education for children. The Portman, the Mary Paterson and the Dorothy Gardner nurseries in my constituency were prototypes for the original model of children’s centres, but they are now sadly again struggling with an undermining of their funding. That is doing so much to diminish the excellent quality of early years experience, which we should be cherishing, rather than diluting. I am pleased to support the parents, as I have done for a great many years, and to urge the Government to ensure that we cherish our centres of excellence and do not diminish the quality of education they provide.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The parents, carers, staff and governors of Portman Early Childhood Centre maintained nursery school in London
Declares that we are concerned about the future of maintained nursery schools in England after March 2020 as no guarantee has been given by the Government that adequate funding will continue when supplementary funding ends.
The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to urge the Government to take action to ensure nursery schools are financially sustainable for the future.
And the petitioners remain, etc]
Simon Hoare: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I will turn to diagnosis in a moment.

Let me return to the point I made a moment or so ago about fear. We will all have had family and close friends experience being given a diagnosis of prostate cancer or, indeed, other cancers, and the first thing is always to face that in a very black mood and think that there is absolutely no cure. However, we know that there are scientists—clever men and women—striving every day to find such cures. Indeed, life expectancy post an early diagnosis is of course getting better and better. Rightly, we place huge emphasis on breast and cervical cancers, but I suggest to the Minister that, in the shape of male cancers, we need to up the game in communication and education as well.

Some statistics on prostate cancer, provided by Prostate Cancer UK, may be of help to the House. Prostate cancer is the most common male cancer in our country: 47,000 men are diagnosed each year. One in eight men will get prostate cancer, and every 45 minutes one man dies of it in our country. Men over 50—I turned 50 this year, so I do not know whether—[HON. MEMBERS: “No.”] I know; it is almost impossible to believe. I am not sure whether she should therefore declare an interest, but men over 50 are more prone to it, particularly if they have a family history.

A statistic I have learned—I am yet to find any particular reason for it—is that black men are far more at risk of contracting prostate cancer: one in four will get it. Someone's risk of prostate cancer is heightened—again, this was a new fact to me—if their mother or their sister has had breast cancer. I wonder how many people recognise that and see that, if a female in the family is diagnosed with breast cancer, that should act as a spur for them to go and have a test. In 2016, 11,631 men died of prostate cancer in the UK alone.

At our party conference last year, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said:

“The key to boosting your chance of surviving cancer is early diagnosis… Through our Cancer Strategy, we will increase the early detection rate… We will do it by… investing in the very latest scanners.”

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important Adjournment debate. As well as early diagnosis, this is about people’s awareness that they themselves may possibly have the symptoms. When my husband was diagnosed, he just thought he had a chill. Unfortunately, his is incurable, but he thought no more about it than that he had a chill. An even more important issue than having screening is that we should be aware of our bodies.

Simon Hoare: The hon. Lady makes an incredibly telling point, because unless people know what the full range of symptoms are, they do not really know what they should be thinking and whether one of those symptoms or a combination of them should actually trigger a visit to their doctor in the first instance. I think she is absolutely right that we need a better understanding.

This goes back to a point I made a moment or two ago. Because this is a below-the-waist issue and we men get frightfully embarrassed about those sorts of things, we are inclined to say that it might just be something else or that it will pass, and so on. However, for too many people, it is left too late to have any meaningful, beneficial outcome as and when they eventually go to see their GP and then trigger the referral process.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we can concentrate on all the negatives, but we have to get across that people are surviving and, more than surviving, actually living well? We have to present that because, with some cancers, there is still the idea that if someone gets it, “Well, that’s it then”.

Simon Hoare rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I just read out the deferred Division result?

Simon Hoare: We wait with bated breath.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Absolutely.

I have now to announce the result of today’s deferred Division. In respect of the question relating to long-term investment funds, the Ayes were 302 and the Noes were 262, so the Ayes have it.

[The Division list is published at the end of today’s debates.]

I must inform the House that there were errors in calculating the number of votes of Members for English and Welsh constituencies and for English constituencies in Divisions yesterday on the police grant and the local government finance report. On the police grant, the figures for the England and Wales-only vote should not have been announced as 289 for the Ayes and 242 for the Noes; they should have been announced as—Ayes 289 and Noes 244. On the local government finance report, the figures for the England-only vote should not have been announced as 270 for the Ayes and 208 for the Noes; they should have been announced as—Ayes 270 and Noes 206. The results are unaffected.

Simon Hoare: A restless nation will sit easier in their armchairs knowing that, and we are grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for your public service announcement.

To respond to the intervention from the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), I think he is absolutely right that we—not just Ministers, but health practitioners and all of us in our communities—need to stress again and again the widening range of treatments, the recovery rates and the extra lifespan one can have after early diagnosis and treatment. I suppose it is a perfectly legitimate historical response to have to such a diagnosis, but we need to end once and for all people saying, “Well, that’s it. I’ve had my chips.” To say, “You know, let’s see what we can do with the rest of it”, and in effect give up, is absolutely the worst thing that one could do.

May I raise the subject of diagnosis with the Minister? To pause there, I am not saying this to ingratiating myself with my hon. Friend, but the understanding and sensitivity that he brings to these issues and, indeed, to his wider portfolio commands respect across the House. I think we are very lucky to have him, and I am particularly pleased that my hon. Friend is the Minister replying to this debate.
Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On that point, I had the privilege of attending an event that the Minister addressed a couple of weeks ago, and I was struck by the passion with which he spoke about this subject. I entirely endorse what my hon. Friend has said about the Minister’s commitment. In passing, I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this very important Adjournment debate, and may I assure him that, when it comes to fighting prostate cancer, this is something on which he and I see absolutely eye to eye?

Simon Hoare: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. I think we both stand at roughly 5 feet 6 or 7 inches, although I might be slightly taller than him when he is in his stocking feet. I get his reference and it is delightful to see eye to eye with him.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I wonder what you two want out of the Minister, given that you are giving him so much praise. Having said that, I am sure the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) will agree that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has sometimes been slow in making progress on treatments, as we have seen with other health problems. I echo his words that, simply put, men just do not like to tell anybody when they are not well. When people tell me that they have an illness like prostate cancer, they often say, “But don’t tell anybody.” The big problem is getting men to realise that they have to do something early, and the person who finds the answer to that very difficult issue will have done a great service.

Simon Hoare: I agree. In answer to the first part of the hon. Gentleman’s intervention, which I presume was rhetorical, I just want the Minister to carry on with the excellent work he is doing. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we need to blow away the cloak of secrecy and, sometimes, shame and embarrassment. No family represented in this House will not have heard an aunt or an uncle say, in slightly hushed tones and that silent mouthing way, best exemplified by Les Dawson, that they have the big C. It is as though they cannot quite bring themselves to annunciate the word, in case it might strike by the opportunities presented by the pre-biopsy multiparametric MRI scan. We have a problem, because while demand for MRI scans rose by 30% between 2013 and 2016, this country still has fewer MRI scanners per head of the population than other countries with comparable populations. The additional moneys available provide a golden opportunity to do something about that.

Of course, it is never just a question of cash and kit, so allied with that are the people who can use the kit. The workforce are key. In addressing the issue of money and the benefits it can provide, we should note that we will not realise its full potential if we are short on workforce. The 10% vacancy rate in the national health service cannot be allowed to become the norm. Prostate cancer patients need and would like more clinical nurse specialists, who have the empathy and expertise to provide comfort, hope and a guiding hand. It is difficult to recruit in any specialist nurse area, but that should not put us off the endeavour.

Likewise, we need a recruitment drive for more radiologists. Prostate Cancer UK estimates that an additional 23 to 31 radiologists are needed in the UK. The Royal College of Radiologists estimates that in the financial year 2016-17, a whopping £116 million was spent on the outsourcing and insourcing of radiological skills additional to core contracted hours. To put that in perspective, £116 million would buy about 1,300 full-time consultant radiologists.

As I have said, raising public awareness of prostate cancer—its signs, symptoms, diagnosis and treatment—is pivotal, but so too is the reinforcement of messages from the Department, NHS England and others to our general practitioners. We all know that there is a growing problem of finding people who are interested in and prepared to enter general practice. The myriad drugs that come on to market and myriad other conditions make the already demanding life of a GP ever more so.

I recently met Jim Davis, the chairman of the Dorset branch of the Prostate Cancer Support Organisation, a charity that covers Hampshire, Dorset and Sussex. It is run for men diagnosed with prostate cancer, by patients with prostate cancer. Last year, they held 23 free prostate-specific antigen testing events, which delivered those tests for 4,813 men. They have found that people are more inclined to go into that sort of environment than to their GP surgery. Their work involves—as a Hampshire Member of Parliament, the Minister may already know this—raising money, advertising the tests and hiring village halls and other places. Men then come and have the test, which is sent—in effect, the work is subcontracted—to the local hospital, which analyses it and sends back the results. I will not detain the Minister, but I could read out a whole legion of extracts from letters from grateful men who availed themselves of that opportunity and found their life chances and health much improved.

Although the national health service says that any man over 50 is entitled to a free PSA test, evidence suggests that some GPs—I stress the word “some”, but one is too many—are either unaware of that entitlement or express and demonstrate an unwillingness to refer. Last May, David Radbourne, the director of commissioning operations at NHS England South East, wrote in response to a letter from Jim, who had produced a list of affected patients:

“If there are individuals who feel they are being refused legitimate access to this test...please ask them to file a complaint through the appropriate NHS complaints process.”

I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that in those circumstances, people should not be forced to go through an NHS complaints process. Like other campaigners, I see a lacuna, or an information gap—call it what you will—among certain GPs, and I urge the Department to consider ways in which to plug it. That issue needs to be addressed quickly. The official in the Box is waving a piece of paper and the Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), is up on her feet with alacrity, as always.
The Public Health England advisory note, “Advising well men aged 50 and over about the PSA test for prostate cancer”, needs to be reviewed and updated. It states:

“GPs should use their clinical judgement”.

That is a pejorative term—it is an open term—so perhaps that language should be revisited. The approach needs to be a little more robust.

Nick Smith: The hon. Gentleman is making a really important point. I am over 50, but I did not know about the test. Does he know how many men over 50 as a proportion of the population have had the test?

Simon Hoare: I am sure that I have come across that figure in my research, but I do not have it to hand. However, as I mentioned in my introductory remarks, the platforms to inform, encourage and educate us all as health citizens, for want of a better phrase, that we seem to avail ourselves of very much relate to—this is not a criticism; it is perfectly correct—cervical cancer, breast cancer and other cancers. The opportunity presented by additional funding and by the very welcome cancer strategy should now allow us all to give—I do not know whether this is quite the right phrase—parity of esteem between male and female cancers. Cancer has a devastating effect on family irrespective of which member has it. I am afraid I cannot answer that query, but the Minister may have that figure. As it is an entitlement, I urge as many men over 50 as possible to see it as routine and regular as going to the optician or the dentist.

In conclusion, with the cancer strategy, fantastic levels of funding and the active commitment, energy and understanding shown by Ministers in the Department, now is the time to make positive progress.

3.1 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. Here we are again and for once we are not in a rush. It will be dark outside before we finish. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) on securing today’s important debate. He entertained us and educated us, and he set out his stall very well.

Let us start with a positive: cancer survival in this country has never been better. Survival rates are at their best ever, having improved every year since 2010. That is a hard-fought success, and we should celebrate it. Among men, prostate cancer is the most common cancer in the UK and the second most common cause of cancer deaths. However, prostate cancer survival has tripled in the past 40 years, with 85% of men surviving for five or more years.

It is worth stating at the outset—some people who are watching may not be familiar with this subject—that the prostate is found only in men. It produces some of the fluid in semen and is found below the bladder. It is about the size of a walnut and surrounds the urethra, the tube that carries urine from the bladder. The causes of prostate cancer are not that well known. The strongest risk factor is age, but about 5% to 10% of prostate cancer is thought to be due to family history. Black men, whether of black African or black Caribbean origin, are more likely to develop prostate cancer than white men. One in four will get the disease, as opposed to one in eight of all men. Asian and oriental men have the lowest chance of developing prostate cancer, which is interesting—we should always look at this sort of data when looking at prevention. I will come on to that point.

The way that prostate cancer develops is not fully understood. It is not a single disease, but a spectrum of diseases ranging from slow-growing tumours that may not cause any symptoms and may not shorten life at all to very aggressive tumours that can kill. We should remember that. As I said, the strongest risk factor is age, but younger people get it, too. I have a school friend who has recently contracted and beaten—I will come on to the use of language in a moment—prostate cancer. He may even be watching today’s debate; he may be mowing the lawn, who knows? We wish him well.

My hon. Friend raised some very good points in his speech, and I should be able to touch on them all. This is a timely debate for all the reasons he set out, but also because it was World Cancer Day on Monday. It was great to see Cancer Research UK light up the Palace of Westminster in pink and blue.

My hon. Friend’s point about language was very interesting. He may have seen a poll by Macmillan that came out last month. It showed how many people with cancer are fed up with the language of war. We often say “cancer stricken” or “victim”. We often call a person’s cancer diagnosis a “war” or a “battle”. We say that they “lost their battle” or “lost their fight” when they pass away. It is no surprise that articles in the media and posts on social networks were found to be the worst offenders. My advice is to be real and honest. Macmillan has launched the “Right there with you” campaign to highlight the challenges posed by a cancer diagnosis and the support that is available. As we all know, Macmillan does fantastic work, including in this House. I urge people to take a look at its campaign.

My hon. Friend also touched on the all-party group on male cancers, formed by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) who is a former nurse. It had one of its first gatherings this week. Orchid, the male cancer charity, will provide the secretariat for the group. It is not that well known as a charity, but it is growing fast. I met the charity at Britain against Cancer a couple of years ago, and it is now part of my cancer roundtable work here in the House every quarter. I pay tribute to its works and to the all-party group. I had a good conversation in the Lobby with my hon. Friend last night. We are going to do an awful lot together. The group is very important. If it did not exist, it would need to be invented, and I congratulate her on inventing it.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset raised early diagnosis, so let us deal with that. The biggest weapon we have in successfully treating cancer is early diagnosis. I have said many times, as did the former chair of the all-party group on cancer, that it is the magic key or magic bullet. That is true, but there are many cancers where early diagnosis is all but impossible. We do not see presentation of symptoms until it is very late and then it becomes incredibly difficult. They will be a big challenge for the cancer ambition that I will come on to talk about in a moment.
As my hon. Friend and others said, we men are notorious for not visiting the doctor at the first sign of a concerning symptom. I think that that is changing, but anything that can raise awareness of prostate cancer, where early diagnosis is indeed the magic key, is to be welcomed. I pay tribute to public figures such as Stephen Fry and Bill Turnbull from “BBC News” for speaking out so honestly about their own prostate cancer diagnosis. They provided an invaluable public service in raising the profile and awareness of the disease, giving some men the vital nudge they need to see their GP if they think something is not right. For some men, it can be a quick burst of symptoms that come on very quickly. They can go to a doctor, are seen and treated and have surgery in a very short space of time. For others, it can be a very slow burn.

I hope that the work that Stephen Fry, Bill Turnbull and others have done will have an impact similar to 10 years ago when the TV personality Jade Goody, following her cervical cancer diagnosis from which tragically she died, spoke out about how vital it was for women to attend their smear tests. We had an excellent debate in Westminster Hall last week on Natasha’s Army—there is that word again. Natasha was a 31-year-old mother from Newton Abbott who died of cervical cancer, leaving four young children just before Christmas. Natasha’s Army are her friends and family who campaign on awareness and smear tests. That is so important. The work Jade Goody did led to a huge uptake in screening, enabling the NHS to detect and treat more cancers early. I hope that, as more people talk about prostate cancer, something similar can happen.

Nick Smith: I join the Minister in congratulating people like Stephen Fry and the grassroots movements on doing such a good job in talking about the importance of early diagnosis. The hon. Member for North Dorset talked about the important PSA test. The Minister may not have the figures available, but if he does could he let us know the proportion of men over 50 who have had the test? That would be an interesting indicator as to what is going on.

Steve Brine: I do not have that figure with me today, but I will write to Members attending the debate and I will tweet it @BrineMinister—but enough of the advert.

Early diagnosis and the NHS long-term plan is where I want to turn next. Straight after the Christmas recess, we launched the NHS long-term plan, which is a seismic piece of work. I would be the first to say, along with many other people working clinically in the field, that we cannot rely solely on the celebrity cases that I mentioned to improve early diagnosis. The long-term plan included a comprehensive package of measures that will be rolled out across the country, with the aim of securing the Prime Minister’s promise, which my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset spoke about, from party conference back in the autumn: that three quarters of all cancers will be detected at an early stage—stage 1 and stage 2, when they are most beatable—by 2028. The plan will provide new investment in state-of-the-art technology to transform the process of diagnosis and boost research and innovation, with the aim of ensuring that 55,000 more people are surviving cancer for five years in England every year from 2028.

That ambition refers to all cancers, including prostate. When we came out with that ambition, a number of people, in the breast cancer community, for instance, said, “But what about us? We are already above 75%”, and some said, in relation to the rarer and less survivable cancers, “What about us?” It is very important for me to restate at the Dispatch Box that this ambition does refer to all cancers—not just those that afflict men or women, old or young, or that are easily treatable or more difficult and less survivable. We are clear that to achieve the five-year survival ambition, we have to improve outcomes for all cancers, and we will.

As I said, early diagnosis is key. Early diagnosis of prostate cancer is challenging, in truth, because the symptoms are similar to those of an enlarged prostate and very often, there can be no symptoms at all. As has been said, the most common method of identifying an increased risk of localised prostate cancer is the prostate specific antigen test. However, that is not perfect. The House will have seen press reports a year or so ago stating that a raised PSA level is not necessarily a sign of prostate cancer, and that a low PSA level is not necessarily a sign of it not being there either. That is not entirely helpful, but we must always remember in these debates—and I am not a doctor, as is clear—that medicine is not an exact science. I thought that story was a good example of that.

A raised PSA level can indicate prostate cancer, but in some cases it can miss indicating a cancer. It can also suggest a cancer when there is not one, or identify slow-growing tumours that may never cause any symptoms for a man or shorten his natural lifespan. This can all be very difficult in primary care. My hon. Friend talked about GPs, and there is a clue in the name. I sometimes get a lot of flak for saying this, but general practitioners are so called for a reason—they are general practitioners—and we should remember the devilish job that general practitioners have, given the huge variety in what comes through their door.

The prostate cancer risk management programme—the PCRMP; we love our acronyms in the health service—was established so that men considering a PSA test are given information about the benefits, limitations, which I have touched on, and associated risks. It supports GPs in giving and discussing information with their male patients. A pack of materials is available for primary care to help men to make an informed choice about the PSA test, which includes a leaflet that they can take away to discuss with partners. There is also an evidence booklet and summary sheet for GPs. These are all widely available online.

As I said, there are pros and cons of having a PSA test, but it is so important that men arm themselves with as much information as they can and speak to their GP or practice nurse, including when they go for their NHS health checks—I will be going for one of those at the end of this month. I know that it is hard to believe that I am old enough to be called for one, but they phoned me yesterday, so I have been booked in.

As has been said, men over 50 have the right to be given a PSA test free on the NHS once they have discussed the advantages and disadvantages with their GP. The PCRMP makes that very clear to GPs, and, having discussed the pros and cons, no one over 50 should be told “No”, as we have heard today. I will find those figures—I agree that they will be very interesting.
Simon Hoare: I am very grateful that the Minister is setting this out in his customary detail. In a circumstance in which all those conversations have taken place, if the patient says, “Thank you doctor, I hear what you say, but I am entitled to have this test, and I want to have this test done,” will the Minister confirm that GPs are obliged to make the referral, rather than saying, “Well, I’ve heard what you said, but I am your doctor and I am not going to let you have it done”?

Steve Brine: We do not often use the term, “No decision about me, without me” any more, but I always remember the former Health Secretary—now Lord Lansley—using that a lot, and that is still very true. A patient over that age has every right to request a PSA test, and certainly even more so if they believe that they have symptoms. I would be very concerned about a GP refusing it—I think it would be extremely unlikely for one to do so in such instances—but any patient has the right of travel. Every patient has the right to change GP if they are not satisfied with the relationship that they have. If my hon. Friend did know of an instance of that, I would be very interested to hear about it—as, I suspect, would the Royal College of General Practitioners—but I would be very surprised.

I want to touch on screening, which we talk about a lot at the moment, and I will come on to why. Because of the limitations of the PSA test, there is currently no national screening programme for prostate cancer. In 2016, Prostate Cancer UK, which has been rightly lauded this afternoon, began work to help to develop tests that could form part of a national screening programme. This would potentially involve better blood tests, which are currently in development, combined with more advanced scanning. It is hoping to make that happen in the next five years—nothing happens quickly with more advanced scanning. It is hoping to make that happen in the next five years—nothing happens quickly. Sir Mike Richards, who is an incredibly experienced and respected figure in this space, and I hope that his work will enable us to roll screening out of cancer among families and the black community. Public Health England has made all the materials developed for the campaign available online, so that groups and other organisations can use them locally if they wish. They are very striking and powerful, and we believe that they were very successful.

We also welcome the work that Prostate Cancer UK is doing with the Football Association to raise awareness through their “relegate prostate cancer” campaign. It is fronted by high-profile celebrity football figures, including the England football manager, Gareth Southgate, and includes the slogan: “One man dies every 45 minutes of prostate cancer”.

Anyone who can stay awake for “Match of the Day” on a Saturday night—thank goodness for the repeat on a Sunday morning—will see very many people, including the pundits and the managers interviewed afterwards, wearing the badge that I am wearing today. Members will be very familiar with that badge, which demonstrates the widespread support that Prostate Cancer UK has in continuing to raise awareness of this disease.

Let me turn to research, as I come to a conclusion. Research has played a crucial part in the advances that we have made in cancer survival over the past four decades. More than 15 years ago, the Department identified the need for further research into prostate cancer, and we have since worked closely with Cancer Research UK—it was here this morning; I was pleased to pop into its drop-in—Prostate Cancer UK, the Medical Research Council and others, through the National Cancer Research Institute, which is a strategic partnership of the major UK funders of cancer research. NCRI spend specifically on prostate cancer research increased from £17.1 million in 2011-12 to £26.5 million in 2015-16.

Mary Glindon: On research, does the Minister think that those who are diagnosed with cancer should be encouraged to take part in clinical trials that aid research and help us to find ways to halt or even cure these horrendous diseases? I think this is underplayed and that we should encourage as many people as possible to help with research by themselves getting involved in trials.

Steve Brine: I am happy to agree with the hon. Lady. In her work on brain cancer, the late Baroness Jowell made the point about stimulating new research projects, and that work has been incredibly successful, including subsequent to her death. She also spoke a lot about clinical trials. Anybody diagnosed with a cancer for which there is no significant treatment would want to load the gun with the trial bullet, but there are challenges there. There is only so much that one can do, and there is a toxicity issue with moving from trial to trial that patients do not always fully appreciate, but in consultation with one’s oncologist and physician absolutely it has a critical role to play. Without trials, we would not have any of the treatments we have today, so I thank the hon. Lady for raising that point.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset said that women’s cancers, such as breast cancer and the gynaecological cancers, perhaps get more Government
attention. I have to disagree. Last April, the Prime
Minister pledged £75 million towards clinical trials for
prostate cancer, which will focus on improving early
diagnosis and survival rates as well as exploring options
for different treatments for men affected by the disease.
We expect 40,000 men to be recruited to new research
projects with this cash boost. I hope this demonstrates
our ongoing commitment to male cancers as well as
female cancers.

I am the first guy to hold the post of Public Health
Minister in a long time, possibly ever, and it is true that
there is a lot of focus on female cancers, but I am
determined to raise the bar for men's health generally,
but for male cancers in particular, which is why I was
pleased to mention the all-party group earlier.

Alongside the £75 million for research, in 2016-17 the
NIHR clinical research network recruited patients to
over 90 trials—the hon. Member for North Tyneside
(Mary Glindon) raised the point about trials—and
other studies on prostate cancer, so there are a lot of
trials in this area. The NIHR biomedical research centre
at The Royal Marsden here in London and the Institute
of Cancer Research also have a five-year £3.1 million
prostate cancer research theme.

I started by saying that we do not know everything
about prostate cancer. We hope to see these projects
deliver more personalised diagnosis, treatment and care
of men with prostate cancer through better understanding
of the molecular and genetic pathways that determine
the non-uniform nature of prostate cancer. The prostate
testing for cancer and treatment—ProtecT—trial was
the largest publicly funded clinical trial ever to take
place in the UK. NIHR funding to date is £40 million,
which is quite a significant sum.

I agree with what my hon. Friend said about the
workforce. The NHS is nothing without the 1.3 million
staff on whom patients depend day and night, and for
no group is that more true than for cancer patients. We
will not achieve our cancer ambitions without an increased
cancer workforce, which is why the Secretary of State
has commissioned Baroness Dido Harding, working
closely with Sir David Behan, who used to lead the Care
Quality Commission, to lead a number of programmes
to engage with key NHS stakeholders to develop a
detailed workforce implementation plan. Baroness Harding
and Sir David will present initial recommendations to
the Department in March, and these will consider detailed
proposals for growing the workforce rapidly alongside
the implementation of the NHS long-term plan, including
that early diagnosis of cancer target I mentioned.

In connection with that, my hon. Friend mentioned
cancer nurse specialists. Health Education England is
working to expand the number of cancer nurse specialists
and to develop their competencies and routes into training.
This will mean every cancer patient having access to a
CNS or other support worker by 2021, which I think he
will agree is a very good thing.

I have covered today just some of the many initiatives
the Government are undertaking in our significant efforts
to tackle prostate cancer for many of our constituents,
including my friend. I hope I have given the House
some information today and a promise of some more.
The Government remain totally committed to maintaining
and improving cancer survival rates. Prostate cancer is
the second-biggest cancer killer among men and is right
at the top of our list of priorities.

Finally, I could not close without paying tribute to
Prostate Cancer UK, led by Angela Culhane, and the
work it does on research and early diagnosis and in
supporting men with prostate cancer and reassuring
them that they are not alone and that there is often a
way out. As cancer Minister, I have been told many
times by cancer patients that the cliff edge of an all
clear is every bit as bad as the original diagnosis. Owing
to our successes, people are living much longer and
perfectly normal and full lives after cancer, but we need
to support them better, so I pay tribute to the work of
Prostate Cancer UK. Its work is invaluable, as is that of
all those members of staff who make the NHS what it
is. I thank everybody for taking part in today’s debate.

Question put and agreed to.

3.27 pm

House adjourned.
Deferred Division

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES)

That the draft Long-term Investment Funds (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 17 December 2018, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 302, Noes 262.

Division No. 323]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Sim
Ali, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Mr Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
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Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
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Chishti, Rehman
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Jack, Mr Alister
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Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

New Trade Agreements: Human Rights

1. Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of including human rights protections in new trade agreements.

Dr Fox: As I said in answer to a previous question, we take such abuses very seriously. This country operates its international trade policy with one of the highest levels of ethics of any country globally, and the Government are always keen to ensure that those ethics are upheld in every way.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. It is open to the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) to seek to shoehorn Question 9 into the question with which we are dealing now. It is not obligatory, but his opportunity exists if he wants it, and it looks as though he does.

9. [909093] Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): I would be foolish not to accept such a generous offer, Mr Speaker. Fylde is one of the biggest exporters of any constituency in the country and, with Brexit fast approaching, trade deals are more important to the sector than ever. What has been done to ensure that future trade deals are processed with the least possible delay and with the best interests of business in mind?

Dr Fox: In terms of the continuity of our existing agreements, the best way to ensure full continuity is to have a deal. All those who talk about the pitfalls of no deal would do well to remember that in voting against the deal they make those pitfalls all the more likely. My hon. Friend is right to suggest that it is not only trade agreements that are important but trade itself, including trade promotion for our exports, and I congratulate him on the work he has done to promote this country’s interests abroad.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The persecution and mass incarceration of the Uyghur community in the Xinjiang province of China is facilitated by companies such as Hikvision, which manufactures and supplies much of the surveillance equipment that is used there. Hikvision has an expanding presence in this community in the Xinjiang province of China is facilitated by companies such as Hikvision, which manufactures and supplies much of the surveillance equipment that is used there. Hikvision has an expanding presence in this country. Can the Secretary of State assure me that the trade deals that we might have post Brexit will not encourage trade of that nature?

Dr Fox: As I have said, any future trade agreements that we have beyond the European Union will be subject to public consultation, to debate in this House and, I hope, to rigorous processes that I may set out in due course about how we can increase scrutiny of those agreements. Members across the House will place different types of emphasis on different constituencies and different sectors of the economy, but I think that the whole House will share those concerns about ethics. I hope that the design of the scrutiny of those trade agreements
that I will be able to bring to the House in greater detail soon will give the right hon. Gentleman the reassurance that he seeks.

**Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con):** Is not championing global free trade the best way of promoting human rights?

**Dr Fox:** We all need to remember that the great success of free trade over the last generation has been the truly historic achievement of taking 1 billion people out of abject poverty. That has been the benefit of free trade, and in this era of protectionism we should realise that economic nationalism is a way of rolling back what has been an enormously beneficial human trend.

**Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab):** Two weeks ago, the Joint Committee on Human Rights heard how the Canadian Government had to make a substantial pay-out and issue a public apology to a chemicals company after they were sued for taking a public policy decision to ban a chemical additive to protect human health. The Committee was told that investor-state dispute settlement provisions in trade and investment agreements can “impact very negatively on human rights.” Does the Secretary of State recognise that danger? If so, will he rule out such ISDS clauses in future trade agreements? If not, what counter-evidence will he present to the Joint Committee on Human Rights?

**Dr Fox:** I have made clear our concern about human rights, but the idea of banning such agreements is nonsensical. This country has £1.3 trillion of stock overseas. Our investors are important in providing development in a lot of these countries, yet they are not given sufficient legal protections, which they would normally get under systems such as the UK’s. That is why those provisions are put in—to protect our investors overseas.

### British Businesses Investing Overseas

2. **Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What support his Department provides to British businesses investing overseas.  

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade** (Graham Stuart): Supporting UK-based companies to invest and operate overseas is a key pillar of the Department’s work. In 2017, UK companies brought home £66 billion as a result of those investments. The Department provides market information and identifies investment opportunities and potential partners. We have developed a new suite of products to help UK businesses as a result of outward direct investment pilots in New York, China, Turkey, Brazil, South Africa and Ethiopia.

**Liz McInnes:** I thank the Minister for that answer, but people are quite rightly concerned that setting up overseas subsidiaries or acquiring foreign enterprises could lead to job losses or relocations. Will the Minister confirm the net number of jobs created in the UK as a result of his Department’s support for outward direct investment?

**Graham Stuart:** This Government’s job creation record speaks for itself. It is the protectionist instincts that run throughout the Labour party that so threaten the jobs miracles that my constituents and the hon. Lady’s have enjoyed over recent years.

**Mr Speaker:** I do not know whether the hon. Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) has observed that there is an opportunity for him now. He takes a grave risk if he waits for question 10, because we might not reach it.

10. **Rehman Chishti** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker. With regard to investment in the United Kingdom, having recently attended the opening session of the 116th United States Congress, it was clear that the US wants a free trade agreement with the United Kingdom. However, the US has legitimate concerns about whether the UK would be able to do that if it is tied into EU regulations in goods and services. What does the Minister have to say on that?

**Graham Stuart:** The Secretary of State recently led more than 100 innovative tech companies to CES, the world’s biggest trade show. The US is of course our largest trading partner and our largest overseas investor. As my hon. Friend rightly points out, there are real opportunities, which is why one of the first priorities on free trade agreements is one with the US.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): The Environmental Audit Committee has just started an inquiry into the role of UK Export Finance. We pledge to meet climate change targets at home, so why is it that nearly every penny of support for energy projects overseas goes on fossil fuels?

**Graham Stuart:** I do not think that that is accurate, but I do not have the exact numbers to hand. UK Export Finance is there to support UK business in meeting demands and needs as requested by overseas companies and, indeed, countries. I make no apology for saying that UKEF is there to try to promote that, and it has played a role in funding renewable technologies. Our record on that front is good worldwide.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): With UK Export Finance reaching its centenary later this year, what difference has UKEF made to exports? How does my hon. Friend intend to mark the occasion?

**Graham Stuart:** UKEF is yet another example of how this country has led the way when it comes to exporting. It was the world’s first export credit agency, and we should all be proud of its work to support British exports over the last 100 years. We will celebrate the centenary throughout this year, notably at the UK trade and export finance forum in June, and we will continue to promote UKEF’s world-class support so that even more UK companies can succeed abroad.

### UK Tech Sector Investment

3. **James Morris** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of investment in the UK tech sector.  

**Graham Stuart:** This is an area where the UK has been consistently strong. UK Tech Sector Investment makes a significant contribution to our economy through innovation and job creation.
7. Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of investment in the UK tech sector. [909091]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): We lead Europe in developing a sustainable tech ecosystem. Tech Nation’s latest release in 2018 shows that the UK attracted more venture capital investment than anywhere else in Europe, with $7.9 billion in funding from investors, ahead of Germany, France and Israel. We announced £1 billion for the artificial intelligence sector alone in last year’s sector deal, which will help to unlock further opportunities for AI investment in the UK.

James Morris: The UK tech industry has been one of the great success stories of the British economy over the last decade. Does the Minister agree that, as we leave the European Union, it is vital that we continue to retain that combination of innovation, entrepreneurial spirit and investment flows, which have put the rocket boosters under the UK tech industry, so that we stay on the leading edge over the decades to come?

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Tech is not only an enormously important industry in its own right, but it is vital to innovation and advances in so many other areas. The Government’s industrial strategy grand challenges seek to secure the country’s future in innovative technologies. FinTech, for instance, has raised nearly £12.2 billion in just the first half of 2018, with companies such as Revolut securing £190 million of investment. My Department will do everything it can to support innovators, including through the global entrepreneur programme.

Chris Green: As well as having immense strength in artificial intelligence, the UK is a world leader in medical research. Does my hon. Friend agree that the work being done to prepare for our post-Brexit future will deliver a superb collaboration with Israel that will help further strengthen the UK as a technological hub?

Graham Stuart: The industrial challenge’s grand challenge on ageing focuses on our world-leading pharmaceutical and health companies. We have a dedicated team in Tel Aviv actively promoting co-operation between UK and Israeli companies, and we have an established UK-Israel tech hub to enhance those partnerships between British companies and Israeli technology innovators.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): The Minister missed an opportunity in his answer to the supplementary question of the hon. Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris), in which he was invited to talk about a rocket. He should have said that this is the answer to Donald Tusk: to get out of hell, we are going to fly on a rocket.

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman, as a Member from a party so bereft of optimists, gives an example to the others. This country has a great future outside the European Union, and technology, in which we are the undisputed European leader, is fundamental to putting a rocket up not only our industry but many of the people with whom he shares the Opposition Benches.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is hard to follow that question. None the less, Northern Ireland has many companies that lead their fields in the tech and healthcare sectors, so what discussions has the Minister had with the Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment in Northern Ireland to partner and develop those Northern Ireland companies?

Graham Stuart: We work very closely with that Department. I would not say I am a natural industrial strategy sort of person, but the grand challenges have identified the big issues facing not only this country but humanity. By channelling our limited resources to those who make the most difference, we can support areas, not least agritech, in which Northern Ireland is a global leader.

Preferential Trade Agreement with India

4. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the potential for a preferential trade agreement with India. [909088]

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): India is an important part of our future trading arrangements. The UK-India joint trade review has enabled us better to understand the bilateral trade relationship by examining trade flows and barriers that could be jointly addressed. Collaboration is continuing to address barriers in the food and drink, life sciences and information and communications technology sectors. The appointment of Her Majesty’s trade commissioner in 2018 also provides a joined-up and co-ordinated Government effort to promote UK trade and prosperity in India.

Bob Blackman: I thank the Minister for his answer. He will be aware that the UK is the third biggest investor in India and India is the third biggest investor in the UK. What more can we do to ensure that we increase the trade as we leave the European Union and set out on our own free trade mission across the world?

George Hollingbery: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Crispin Simon, the aforementioned HMT, is leading the Department’s network to grow trade in key sectors. UK exports to India grew by 28%, to £7.9 billion, in the year ending quarter 2 2018, making that seven consecutive quarters of growth. Goods exports increased by 38% in the same period. Following the launch of the UK-India technology partnership by the Prime Minister and Indian Prime Minister Modi in April 2018, there have been many successes, including the healthcare AI catalyst programme. We have worked closely with many companies, such as BT, Rolex, Diageo, GlaxoSmithKline, Marks & Spencer and G4S.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister might know that, in the Leeds city region, which includes Huddersfield, we have many brilliant businesspeople from an Indian background and they of course have very good partnerships with India. They are totally demoralised at the moment, partly because of this Secretary of State. I would not wish him to go into hell, but they have no confidence in him and they have no confidence in shrinking the potential market for India from 650 million to 65 million people.
George Hollingbery: All I can say is that the hon. Gentleman is entitled to his opinions, but I happen to disagree with him fundamentally. We have a close trading relationship with India, and we are working extremely hard to grow trade there. The figures I have already given him this morning demonstrate that there is potential in India, which we are exploiting and will continue to exploit if and when we leave the EU.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): India of course is in the EU’s generalised scheme of preferences, whereas nearby countries such as Pakistan and Sri Lanka are in GSP+, with Bangladesh probably soon to join them. Does my hon. Friend agree that, if we were to adopt Labour’s customs union policy, we would have to accept EU trade preference policy without any say in its formulation? Does he also agree that that would lead to a big decline in UK foreign policy influence in south Asia and among diaspora communities in the UK?

George Hollingbery: One reason why the Prime Minister has put forward the deal that she has to the House is that it allows the flexibility for us to engage in the ways in which my right hon. Friend expects us to be able to—actively with the south Asia region, and India in particular—and to prescribe our own preference schemes such that we can control our own rules.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Is it not the case that the priority for the Indian Government is a trade deal with the EU and that the best way for the British state to have a trade deal with the EU is to stay in the EU customs union?

George Hollingbery: The Indian Government’s priority is likely to be trade with anybody with whom it suits. The hon. Gentleman simply needed to listen to the answer I gave a little earlier: there has been a 28% increase in UK exports to India, to £7.9 billion, in the year to quarter 2 2018, and a 38% increase in goods exports. We can conclude from that there is plenty of attention in India on UK trade.

Future Trade Agreements: Intellectual Property Rights

5. Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): What steps his Department plans to take to ensure the protection of intellectual property rights in future trade agreements.

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): The UK’s intellectual property regime is consistently rated as one of the best in the world. The Government are reviewing their future trade policy as we leave the EU. We will continue to consult widely with stakeholders on intellectual property provisions in future trade agreements to support inventors, creators, consumers, and food and drink producers.

Danielle Rowley: Scotland is one of the fastest growing regions in the UK’s creative industries, which are world leading and currently worth £91.8 billion to the UK economy. Can the Minister therefore reassure the creative industries in Scotland, and indeed across the UK, that professional equipment such as musical instruments will not be subject to the disruption of additional documentation requirements and tariffs at the border after Brexit?

George Hollingbery: Plainly, if the Prime Minister’s deal is accepted in the House of Commons, including by being supported by the Labour party, that will not be an issue. If we leave the EU without a deal, the regimes will be what they are. What I can say is that we are working incredibly hard on copyright, patents and enforcement to make sure that the creative industries, which are vital to the prosperity of this country, will be protected in the event of the UK leaving the EU.

UK Service Exports: European Single Market

6. Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): What recent estimate he has made of the value of the European single market to UK service exports.

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): In 2017, 46.8% of UK services exports went to the European single market—including the European economic area and Switzerland—worth around £130.5 billion. That represents around 21% of total UK exports. Leaving the EU gives us the freedom to pursue an independent trade policy with countries around the world that reflects our unique strengths in services.

Douglas Chapman: I thank the Secretary of State for his response, but last week the Office for National Statistics published the international trade and services statistics for 2017, which showed that financial services proved to be the largest service product exported globally by UK businesses and that the EU made up nearly half the UK’s service exports. A key part of this is the ability to travel freely, known as passporting rights. Has the Secretary of State made an assessment of what the end of freedom of movement, including for labour, will mean for services under the Prime Minister’s deal?

Dr Fox: Actually, the share of our exports to the European Union accounted for by services is less than our average exported to the rest of the world. In fact, the future of our services will be dependent on global services arrangements, and outside the EU we will have a golden opportunity to shape the global services agenda in a way that suits the United Kingdom’s best interests. It is time that we in this House started to reflect the optimism and confidence of the British public who voted to leave the EU.

Leaving the EU: UK Steel Sector

8. Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that the UK steel sector can continue to trade without disruption after the UK leaves the EU.

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): We are working closely with the UK steel sector to provide as much continuity as possible in trading arrangements after we leave the EU. This includes establishing the
Trade Remedies Authority to help to prevent unfair trading practices and identifying more than half a billion pounds’-worth of opportunities for UK steel producers.

Jessica Morden: When the all-party group on steel met key voices in the industry this week, it was made clear that there is a real lack of engagement from the Government on steel safeguard measures for the UK market in a no-deal scenario. Will the Minister commit to meet UK Steel urgently to discuss this critical detail for an industry that contributes £1.6 billion to the economy?

Dr Fox: I do not recognise that description; the Government are indeed involved in talks with the industry about safeguards. The hon. Lady will know that the best way to avoid the problems she identifies is to support the Prime Minister’s deal. Those who keep talking about the pitfalls of no deal but keep voting against a deal are making those pitfalls more likely.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that our future trade policies must protect UK businesses, including in the steel sector, against unfair competition from abroad? It cannot be right for Parliament to expect our businesses to respect high standards on the environment, workplace or welfare and then compete freely with businesses abroad that do not.

Dr Fox: That is exactly why, in the Trade Bill, the Government introduced the Trade Remedies Authority to ensure that we have protections against unfair global competition in future. It seems absolutely inexplicable that the Labour party keeps talking about protections but voted against the Trade Bill and the establishment of the Trade Remedies Authority.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): Currently, 15% of steel export consignments are subject to tariffs; in the event of no deal, 97% of export consignments would be subject to tariffs. If one considers non-tariff barriers and domestic concerns—the shortage of warehousing, for example—was reported yesterday—is this not the time to support the Trade Bill to prevent a deal that do not drag on for longer and at far greater cost than necessary, and we will want to cooperate with our European partners in that regard. Of course, the best way to ensure that we have the highest level of co-operation on the debates that are currently under way is to agree to the Prime Minister’s deal.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The very fact that the Secretary of State is even considering zero import tariffs threatens the survival of our steel, ceramics and tyre industries. There will be no incentive for our partners to negotiate new trade deals, or to renegotiate existing ones, as the Secretary of State will have given away the shop before negotiations start. Thousands of workers whose jobs will have gone will no longer be the consumers he says will take advantage of cheap imports. When is he going to admit he is wrong?

Dr Fox: The Government have made no decision on this. When we do so, we will communicate it to stakeholders, the public and Parliament. Of course, the best way to avoid any of this scenario is for us to have a deal with the European Union. Whipping up fear over people’s jobs is simply the humbug that has become the hon. Gentleman’s hallmark.

Topical Questions

T1. [909098] Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): My departmental responsibilities are to have foreign and inward direct investment, to establish an independent trade policy and to promote the United Kingdom’s exports. I am pleased to announce to the House this morning that UK Export Finance will provide £49 million of support for Darlington-based firm Cleveland Bridge to construct 250 bridges for rural Sri Lankan communities.

Luke Graham: International trade is a reserved power. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to engage MPs in the devolved nations to ensure both that they are helping to form policy and that the DIT is properly resourcing devolved nations?

Dr Fox: My hon. Friend is right that trade is a reserved power, but we work with parliamentarians across the House through our regular briefings with MPs, which MPs from all parties attend, our international events programme, online services and the Board of Trade, which I established, to ensure that the benefits of trade are equally felt across all the parts of the United Kingdom.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Many British companies are currently part of trade disputes put forward by the EU at the World Trade Organisation. After 29 March they will be able to continue those disputes, utilising the evidence already submitted, but only if the Government accept a regional approach of 27 plus one countries, which is specifically allowed for under WTO rules. That would avoid the time and cost for businesses and for the taxpayer of having to resubmit evidence in a separate case. Why have the Government refused to adopt that simple solution? Why will they not support British business and ensure that trade disputes do not drag on for longer and at far greater cost than absolutely necessary?

Dr Fox: We will not want to see trade disputes drag on longer than necessary, and we will want to co-operate with our European partners in that regard. Of course, the best way to ensure that we have the highest level of co-operation on the debates that are currently under way is to agree to the Prime Minister’s deal.

T2. [909099] Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): What progress on trade reform and WTO reform was made at the recent World Economic Forum annual meeting? In particular, was consideration given to continuity arrangements with countries such as Turkey so that Ford engines can continue to be fitted to Ford Transits built in Turkey?
Dr Fox: A number of issues were discussed with Trade Ministers in Davos, including those of continuity. They also included how complex global value chains will be dealt with in the future, because, as my right hon. Friend has said, when the WTO was created the global economy was not so dependent on them. We need to look at how we deal with the question of tariffs and multiple, repeated taxation in industries such as the car industry.

Mr Speaker: I call Lloyd Russell-Moyle. Not here—where is the fella? I hope that he is not indisposed; that would be most unfortunate. Well, who is here? Nic Dakin is here.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The steel industry is confronted with the possibility that the trade defence instruments currently in place at European level to prevent Chinese dumping will not come forward at UK level. We also face having to compete against quotas to sell steel into the EU when we are outside the EU. What is the Secretary of State doing to make sure that that does not happen?

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): I can say straightforwardly that the anti-subsidy and anti-dumping measures that are currently in place in the EU have been widely consulted on with British industry, and particularly with the steel sector, as the hon. Gentleman will appreciate. We will be transitioning the measures that are important to those industries. The same process has been gone through for safeguarding, and the same result will occur.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): Will the ministerial team update us on progress in seeking continuity of some of the other EU trade agreements, particularly those in Canada and in Africa, many of which, of course, the Opposition opposed in the first place?

George Hollingbery: I simply say what I have said to the House on a number of occasions: we are making good progress on many of those agreements. I have already signed three of them very recently and deposited them with the House. We will continue to update the House as progress is made, and we will bring forward a report in the next week or two, which will help elucidate the matter further.

Dr Fox: Food and drink is one of this country’s most successful export sectors, but a lot of areas of it, particularly those such as spirits—I had discussions with the Scotch Whisky Association just a couple of nights ago—face very high tariffs in countries such as India and Brazil. They are enormous markets for us, but we face disproportionate tariffs, and that is one of the key areas where we seek unilateral reform in such countries so that they can show that they are genuinely committed to free trade.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Secretary of State has shared with business a progress report on trade deals. I have been trying to obtain that information from him for months; is he willing to share that information with Members of the House as well as with business?

Dr Fox: I dealt with this extensively at the International Trade Committee yesterday; the right hon. Gentleman might have wanted to attend.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Can the Secretary of State update the House on the ongoing trade negotiations and discussions he is having with the United States Administration, not least because the US is our single largest export market?

Dr Fox: Our working group with the United States on future trade has met a number of times. There is broad agreement that we should have a free trade agreement with the United States. That would open up huge possibilities for the United Kingdom. There has been a lot of talk in the news this week about the ceramics industry; it would benefit from a free trade agreement with the United States, not least by the removal of the 27% tariffs that it currently faces for UK exports.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): May I congratulate the Secretary of State on signing a trade agreement with the Faroe Islands? Those must have been tough negotiations. Is he seeking an extension to article 50 to complete the negotiations on the 40 trade deals he promised us he would sign?

Dr Fox: The hon. Gentleman mocks the agreement with the Faroe Islands; how typical that is of the Labour party when so many jobs in the fishing and fish processing industry are dependent upon it. He may want to know that when I go to Switzerland on Monday I will be signing the largest of the EU agreements of all.

Mr Speaker: Order. Before we move on, as Humphrey Bogart said, “I don’t mind if you don’t like my manners, I don’t like them myself”, but just because the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) is sporting a rather splendid and garish Bogart tie, that does not mean that he should descend to that level himself. He is chuntering from a sedentary position with predictable regularity—

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): For my constituents against that man.
Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman says his constituents have a particular view about the Secretary of State; that is quite possible. The Secretary of State’s constituents might have a particular view about the hon. Gentleman, too—who knows?

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

HPV Vaccination for Boys: Catch-up Programme

1. Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on launching a catch-up programme for the HPV vaccination for boys.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): It is the view of Public Health England that a catch-up vaccination programme for boys is not necessary, as evidence suggests that they are already benefiting from the indirect protection known as herd protection, which has been built up from the 10 years of the girls’ programme.

Mrs Hodgson: I thank the Minister for her answer, but the boys who will be vaccinated in the first cohort are at the same risk of HPV infection and related diseases as older boys who will not be eligible for the vaccination, and the Government are therefore missing an opportunity to protect more boys. The herd immunity the Minister spoke of does not apply to boys who may go on to have sex with men or with women who have not been vaccinated. Will the Minister therefore urge her colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care to reconsider this policy on equality grounds?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this important question. There are additional programmes specifically for the groups that she mentioned. For example, a vaccination programme is being rolled out for men who have sex with men. Obviously the broad principle of the wider screening programme is to do the most good, and not to do any harm. That is the basis on which decisions are being made.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming a catch-up programme? The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

HPV Vaccination for Boys: Catch-up Programme

2. Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to regulate the use of non-disclosure agreements in cases of (a) sexual harassment and (b) maternity discrimination.

Penny Mordaunt: As I said, these decisions are taken on a clinical basis by people who are looking closely at the evidence, and they keep the policies under review.

Non-disclosure Agreements: Regulation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): The Government share the concern that non-disclosure agreements have been used to hide workplace harassment and discrimination, or to intimidate victims into silence. That is clearly unacceptable. We will be consulting on measures to improve the regulation of non-disclosure agreements, including how best to ensure that workers understand their rights when they have signed a non-disclosure agreement.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Thanks to changes brought in by this Government, local authorities are subject to very limited scrutiny. A scan of responses to freedom of information requests shows that the use of NDAs in local authorities is prolific and out of control. Given that the Prime Minister’s planned consultation has yet to materialise, will the Minister confirm that the Government have no idea at all how widespread the use of NDAs is anywhere?

Kelly Tolhurst: Non-disclosure agreements have a legitimate place in the workplace and can cover matters other than harassment or discrimination. For example, they have a legitimate use in the protection of trade secrets and when a settlement has been reached. As I have outlined, we will be consulting on the issue, and we are determined to make matters easier for workers.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): We should be very clear that employment NDAs are being used to cover up lawbreaking. Maternity discrimination and sexual harassment are against the law that this place has put on our statute books. Therefore, as well as considering the future of NDAs, will my hon. Friend consider the future of the Equality and Human Rights Commission? It should be enforcing our laws, but it has failed to use its extensive enforcement powers.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my right hon. Friend, the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, for highlighting the issue; she is quite right. It is true that
there has been a tailored review of the effectiveness and work of the EHRC, and the Secretary of State has met the commission. We are looking at its delivery and effectiveness, but we will welcome any suggestions from my right hon. Friend and her Committee.

**Domestic Abuse Legislation and Immigration Status**

3. **Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment she has made of the potential effectiveness of provisions in the draft domestic abuse Bill to support women and children who do not have secure immigration status.

9. **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment she has made of the potential effectiveness of provisions in the draft domestic abuse Bill to support women and children who do not have secure immigration status.

11. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential effectiveness of provisions in the draft domestic abuse Bill to support women and children who do not have secure immigration status.

The **Minister for Women** (Victoria Atkins): The Home Office operates an immigration policy that supports women and children with insecure immigration status. Victims of domestic abuse who entered the UK as the partner of a British citizen, settled person or person with refugee status are eligible to apply for settlement in their own right. Those who are destitute can also apply for crisis support under the destitute domestic violence concession. We are funding a project conducted by Southall Black Sisters to pilot support for women and children who are victims in these circumstances.

**Mr Sweeney:** If the system is so effective, why does the Ubuntu women’s shelter in my constituency have to be the first charity in the UK to provide short-term accommodation for women with no recourse to public funds? Fleeing gender-based and domestic violence, they are denied access to homelessness, social security and housing support. These are non-EEA women with limited leave to remain. Women who have settled status or leave to remain face delays in processing their status. Any situation where women fleeing domestic violence, torture or persecution have no recourse to public funds is unacceptable. Does the Minister agree, and what is she going to do about it?

**Victoria Atkins:** I would ask the hon. Gentleman to advise those working in the refuge to help the women he describes in seeking the destitute domestic violence concession. The point of that concession is to provide immediate crisis support to women and children who are victims of domestic abuse, giving them three months’ leave to remain so that they can find new homes and reflect on their situation, and also have access to public funds.

**Alex Norris:** As the Home Affairs Committee, we have expressed concern that the police, having helped an individual who is a survivor of domestic abuse, are then sharing their details with the Home Office for the purposes of immigration control. This has a chilling effect on the likelihood of reporting abuse. Will the Minister give an assurance that when the domestic abuse Bill has made its way through this place, the only thing that will matter is a woman’s welfare, not their immigration status?

**Victoria Atkins:** In those circumstances, the response of the state is always led by the needs of the victim. We must be careful to recognise that the immigration system operates in and of its own right. That is precisely why we have the destitute domestic violence concession to help women in these desperate circumstances by giving them a three-month break period to seek help and build a future for themselves and for their children, if appropriate.

**Liz Twist:** What steps are the Government taking to ensure that police forces are not sharing information on victims of domestic abuse with the Home Office for immigration purposes?

**Victoria Atkins:** This is where there is a tension between the immigration system and the needs of victims of domestic abuse. That is precisely why we have the destitute domestic violence concession to give those women three months’ leave to remain and recourse to public funds. But we must be clear that people who do not enjoy settled status in the UK must not have recourse to public funds in the same way that a British citizen would expect.

**Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Support for domestic violence victims is devolved to different tiers of government right across the United Kingdom. What is my hon. Friend doing to support different levels of government to make sure that victims get consistent support across our United Kingdom?

**Victoria Atkins:** My hon. Friend raises an important point that we are seeking to address through the domestic abuse Bill with the appointment of a domestic abuse commissioner. I am very grateful to my colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government who are in the process of conducting a review of services nationally. The role of the commissioner will be to hold local and national Government, and stakeholders, to account as to the provision of services in areas across the country so that there is no possibility of a postcode lottery.

**Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): A constituent from Larkhall suffers psychological, emotional and financial abuse from her husband, with whom she ran a business for seven years in the UK. She held a spousal visa. Due to the length of time it took to be approved for indefinite leave to remain, she had a choice to remain in that marriage or to leave the UK. This was due to Home Office bureaucracy. Does the Minister accept that the Home Office needs to be sensitive to cases such as that?

**Victoria Atkins:** I do; I hope the hon. Lady understands that I cannot comment on a particular case at the Dispatch Box, but that is why we have the destitute domestic violence concession—to give immediate crisis support to victims of domestic abuse whose residency status depends on the partner who may well be abusing them.
Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): The Women's Aid “No Woman Turned Away” project can only find refuge accommodation for fewer than one in 10 women who have no recourse to public funds. The Government’s proposed measures in the draft domestic abuse Bill are not good enough for migrant women. Can the Minister offer assurances that more will be done to ensure that migrant women can have full and equal access to specialist services?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Only last week, when I visited a domestic abuse refuge in the area around Preston in Lancashire, I heard for myself the particular needs of women in the area who have no recourse to public funds. The Bill’s purpose is to provide a statutory definition and so on, to help all victims of abuse, regardless of their immigration status, but of course this matter may well be scrutinised by the pre-legislative Joint Committee of both Houses. We very much welcome that.

Female Firefighters: Fire Station Facilities

4. Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of provision of facilities in fire stations for female firefighters.

[909063]

12. Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of provision of facilities in fire stations for female firefighters.

[909072]

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): We all enormously value the work of women and men employed by fire and rescue authorities who work to protect their communities. It is unacceptable that outdated practices exist such as shower facilities being unavailable to female firefighters. My hon. Friend the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service has been clear that we look to the National Fire Chiefs Council and local fire and rescue service leaders to address those concerns.

Emma Dent Coad: To quote former firefighter Lucy Masoud:

“I remember my first fire station. There was a tiny cramped dorm with three beds though it was meant for one. There was a massive dorm for the guys, yet we were stuffed in like sardines.”

At other stations, female firefighters had to sleep on the floor. A “solution” is proposed of having gender-neutral dorms, toilets and washing facilities, which is overwhelmingly opposed and could cause women to leave the service. Will the Minister agree to demand audits at fire stations across the country related to facilities for female firefighters?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady knows that 14 fire services were recently inspected by Her Majesty’s inspectorate, and that of the 14, two were found not to have adequate shower facilities for female firefighters—Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. I name them, and I very much expect that they will improve their services. We know that there are issues with sleeping accommodation, too.

I would, however, note that although the Fire Brigades Union does sterling work for its members, it is a very great shame that its executive council has not yet managed to appoint a woman to put forward the views of female firefighters in a national and consistent way. I hope that it will put pressure on fire chiefs and others to ensure that they do better by their female firefighters.

Mary Glindon: In addition to working with the Home Office to ensure that there are better facilities, what steps is the Minister taking to encourage more women to take up a career in firefighting?

Victoria Atkins: I am so grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this subject, because women are just as capable as men at firefighting. I hope that we at some point see a revised version of Fireman Sam, because we know from social media campaigns that children grow up expecting firefighters to be male, which limits their expectations and perhaps cuts their career opportunities as they go through school and into training. The message from this Government is very clear: we absolutely welcome female firefighters, and we will work with Women in the Fire Service to ensure that we get more women helping to protect our communities.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): As a former member of the national fire service management committee of the Local Government Association, it has been a pleasure for me to see how the culture in the fire service has changed over recent years, but there is still a need to tackle the perception that being a firefighter is a job for a man. Will the Minister therefore welcome the efforts being made by fire authorities such as Devon and Somerset and the West Midlands to promote the message strongly that it is a job that anyone can do?

Victoria Atkins: Very much so—I welcome the work of the fire authorities that my hon. Friend mentioned. I note that we have five fire and rescue services headed by women, including, of course, here in London, where Dany Cotton has had to deal with extraordinary events in her tenure as chief. That, I hope, is another piece in the jigsaw of evidence that proves that women can be just as good at fighting fires as men.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for the answers she has given thus far. Clearly, in order to encourage young women to take up the opportunities of firefighting, there need to be role models. What action is she taking to encourage female firefighters employed right now to act as role models to encourage others to follow?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. As I say, the organisation Women in the Fire Service does great work at local level in encouraging women to join the fire service. Again, as role models, we have the five women we know are heading fire and rescue services currently—of course, of the 45 fire and rescue services in England and the three fire and rescue services in Wales, that is a tiny fraction, but they are very positive role models. I also hope that the Fire Brigades Union will manage to bring a woman on to its executive council in the future. It is through that sort of positive work that we will get women into these services.

Workplace Equality: Flexible Working

5. Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on improving access to flexible working to increase workplace equality.

[909065]
The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): Flexible working is crucial to support women and men in balancing work and caring responsibilities. That is why the Government Equalities Office is working with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the flexible working taskforce in using our research programmes to develop evidence-based guidance for employers.

Penny Mordaunt: We have announced our intention to consult on these very matters, but I would also say that, as that will take a little while, employers should not wait for it. We know that by offering flexible working they are going to have a bigger pool of talent from which to pick their employees.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Shared parental leave is as much about cultural change as it is about legislation. What is my right hon. Friend doing to help parents better understand and access shared parental leave?

Penny Mordaunt: We are doing a huge amount of work to look at what additional obstacles there might be, such as the bureaucracy in accessing provision, and we are also looking at the experience of those who have taken up and made use of shared parental leave. It is incredibly important that we change the culture and it will take time, but there are still some further things we can do to encourage that, and we are looking at them.

13. [909073] Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is almost a year now since Labour launched its diversity charter challenge to embed diversity, including flexible working, in all sectors. Since then, the aerospace industry has launched its charter, techUK is working on a charter and the accountancy body the Association of Accounting Technicians is calling for charters for all business sectors. Will the Minister join these illustrious bodies, including the Labour party, and commit to making diversity charters a requirement for all sectors?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that there is some great work out there: 97% of businesses offer some form of flexible working—to tie this back to the original question—but only 68% of employees for whom that situation is available are taking up this option. I think this is changing, but there are further things we can do to encourage it. Sharing good practice is one of those things, and I think the charters have played a good role in that.

14. [909074] Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Will the Minister join me in commending Chwarae Teg in Wales for its work to encourage more flexible working through its “FairPlay Employer” status, and will she encourage more Government employers to seek this status, as has been achieved by the Intellectual Property Office in Newport?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for putting another example of good practice out there. I absolutely would encourage that. It is only by sharing good practice that we are going to be able to encourage employers that are not doing that to raise their game.

Apprenticeships and Work: Fair Access

6. Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on ensuring fair access to (a) apprenticeships and (b) work in all sectors for the most marginalised people in society.

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): I agree with my right hon. Friend, and we are at one in thinking that apprenticeships can be a powerful force for social mobility. We want the advantages of apprenticeships to be available to all, and I am in regular contact with my ministerial colleagues. For the smallest employers we meet 100% of the costs of apprenticeship training for apprentices aged 16 to 18, 19 to 24-year-old care leavers, and 19 to 24-year-olds with an education, health and care plan. As my right hon. Friend knows, and indeed welcomed, last year we introduced a £1,000 bursary for care leavers who are starting an apprenticeship, to support them as they transition into training.

Mr Speaker: Unless I am much mistaken the Minister has just elevated the hon. Gentleman to membership of the Privy Council, for which I am sure he will want to thank her. Who knows? It may be a straw in the wind.

Robert Halfon: Mr Speaker, I was very honoured to be made a member of the Privy Council after the 2015 election.

Mr Speaker: That is why I said “unless I am much mistaken”. I am sorry that I had not noticed the right hon. Gentleman’s status, and three years late, may I congratulate him?

Robert Halfon: Mr Speaker, you did call me right honourable yesterday during questions to the Prime Minister.

May I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for coming to Harlow this afternoon to see Harlow College, which is one of the finest colleges in England? Will she consider using the apprenticeship levy to provide an apprentice premium and transport costs for disadvantaged young people, so that they can climb up the apprentice ladder of opportunity?

Anne Milton: My right hon. Friend is frequently right, and most definitely honourable. Targeted financial support is available for young apprentices and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, including the care leaver bursary. The Department for Transport is introducing a railcard for 16 and 17-year-olds this year, and we continue to work together on further options. I am very much looking forward to visiting Harlow College later today.

Nas Sah (Bradford West) (Lab): Can the Minister explain how a young person under the age of 19 from a low-income family, who works 35 hours a week on the minimum wage earning £3.50 an hour on an apprenticeship scheme—less than £122.50 a week—and who is barely able to pay for their own meals, travel, and basic work garments, can be classed as being “employed” by this Government?

Anne Milton: I point out to the hon. Lady that we take the advice of the Low Pay Commission on wages for apprentices, and that rate will be going up. I have
spoken about the targeted support available, and whenever I meet apprentices I ask them about their wages and how they travel to work. We are very aware of some of the problems faced by those young people, and as I have said, the railcard for 16 and 17-year-olds is available, and colleges have discretionary bursaries to support them.1

Topical Questions

T1. [909075] Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): I am pleased to announce that organisations supporting people who have been out of work due to caring responsibilities and have additional barriers to returning to work can apply for a new £500,000 fund from the Government Equalities Office. More widely, the GEO is liaising with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to support people with little or no work history in the five integration areas. That funding is in addition to the £1.5 million fund launched last year, which will help us to gather evidence of good practice, and reflects the GEO’s absolute commitment to ensuring that all women realise their full potential.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Will the Minister challenge businesses that exclude guide dogs?

Penny Mordaunt: Under the auspices of the Office for Disability Issues, and subsequently the assistance dog sector, all those fantastic organisations and charities have come together to harmonise their standards, so that the owner of a café or pub, or a taxi driver, can identify legitimate assistance dogs more easily. There is absolutely no excuse for excluding people who have assistance dogs. We are considering what further measures we can introduce to ensure that that can be enforced, and in particular whether the rules on licensing of venues and premises can help with that issue. The Home Office is setting out its plans for a formal consultation with disabled people’s organisations and other representative groups in due course.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): This week I had a phone call with regard to a young man who tried to commit suicide and a mother who felt that she did not want to burden her children any more, all because of the Windrush scandal. They say that to educate a woman is to educate a nation; therefore, to humiliate a nation is to humiliate a nation. Will the Minister assure the House that the Government will provide urgent and necessary help, support and assistance to women and vulnerable people affected by the Windrush scandal?

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): May I again set out the Government’s apology to those who have suffered through this terrible incident and reflect on the fact that this was not just one Government who got it wrong, but many Governments of all political colours? I welcome the fact that colleagues across the House are bringing individual constituency cases to our attention. We can then feed them into the system that has been set up so that we can provide help and support. The hon. Lady must, of course, let us know of any cases she wishes to raise, but the Government must learn from mistakes, which was why we set up the review. We are pleased that more than 4,000 people have been helped through the scheme—not just Windrush victims, but people from other countries. It is very much a work in progress, but we welcome Members across the House continuing to raise these issues in the Chamber.

T2. [909076] Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Many disabled people and pensioners rely on accessible Crown post offices, so will the Minister tell us what discussions Ministers in the Government Equalities Office have had with colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department for Work and Pensions about the equality impact of closing, privatising and relocating to WHSmith 41 post offices, including in Cambridge?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): I would first like to point out that our franchise programme with the Post Office is not a closure programme, but a sustainability programme. On the franchising with WHSmith for the 41 post offices that the hon. Gentleman refers to, accessibility is key to the delivery of our 11,500 network of post offices in the UK. I personally make sure that that is covered when any new post office branch is being worked on.

Mr Speaker: We will hear from the right hon. Gentleman again—I call Mr Robert Halfon.

T6. [909089] Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): You are too kind, Mr Speaker.

Essex County Council is preparing to close over a third of libraries in Essex, with three out of five libraries in deprived areas in Harlow at risk of closure. Will my right hon. Friend acknowledge the importance of free library services, particularly for the vulnerable and for equality in society and education? Will she talk to Essex County Council and keep our libraries open?

Penny Mordaunt: Local authorities have a statutory duty to provide a comprehensive and effective library service. Libraries are clearly more than a repository for books. They can be community hubs through which services
can be provided. I encourage my right hon. Friend to respond to the county council’s ongoing library consultation so that we can connect organisations in his community that could be able to ensure that services are not just maintained, but made better.

T3. [909077] Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm that victims of caste-based discrimination will have full legal protection under the existing law, including if their legal grounds for such discrimination do not meet the Turley v. Chandok principles?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman will know that we have consulted on this and are acting on the basis of our legal advice and the enormous number of responses to that consultation. We have confidence that those protections are there for individuals, but we also want to ensure that people understand those protections really well. We will therefore issue guidance and consult groups on its production.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I warmly welcome the publication of the draft Domestic Abuse Bill. Will the Minister provide assurance about what the domestic abuse commissioner will do to share best practice across the country?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend, who has done so much work on this issue for his constituents. The Bill will introduce a domestic abuse commissioner, whose sole focus will be on tackling domestic abuse and holding local and national Government to account to ensure that services are provided well and consistently across the country, thereby helping all the 2 million people who we know are victims of these terrible crimes.

T5. [909079] Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Ministers may have seen, as I did, the article by the actress Samantha Renke about how the lack of accessibility in housing adversely affects the ability to be independent. Will the Minister make a statement on the provision of accessible housing, given that only 7% of properties currently have accessibility features?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and pay tribute to all the work that Sam has done. Many hon. Members will have met her; she has been to Parliament to raise the profile of this issue. The hub—based on the Olympic park—is looking at good design. It has set a challenge to demonstrate that we can build accessible homes for no more cost and with no greater footprint than other homes that are being built. We know that this is possible and we need to do much more to ensure that developers are following the good design guidelines and that we are making housing stock across the country more flexible.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Last week, we saw the first conviction in UK courts for female genital mutilation—a landmark, albeit an awful one, in the campaign to end this abhorrent practice. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to end FGM in this country and around the world?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for her question. Indeed, yesterday, I was with the Vavengers, a community group that is doing a tremendous amount in the UK to raise awareness of this issue and tackle it. We are absolutely committed to ending this practice globally by 2030. Both my Departments—the Government Equalities Office and the Department for International Development—are doing a tremendous amount. The advice that our team in Ghana gave was critical to the conviction to which my hon. Friend refers. This is a cross-Government effort and our ability not just to assist the many thousands of girls who are at risk in the UK, but to support the Africa-led movement to end the practice, is a good thing.

T7. [909081] Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): Will the Minister indicate what discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on improving access to flexible working to improve workplace equality?

Penny Mordaunt: I have frequent discussions with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. We are doing further consultative work, but my message to business is, “Don’t wait for that.” An exemplar of flexible working is our civil service, which offers flexible working from day one. As a consequence, it has a wider pool of people to pick from. So do not wait for us, but we are going to do some further things.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Further to the earlier question about caste, can my right hon. Friend confirm that she still intends to introduce legislation to remove caste as a protected characteristic from the Equality Act 2010?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his consistency on this issue. Yes, it is, and my timetable has not changed since the last time he asked the question. In addition, as I said earlier, we will be issuing guidance.

T8. [909082] Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Reporting on the gender pay gap has named and shamed companies into being proactive and closing that gap, but a recent study by the Food Standards Agency found that food insecurity rates were higher for women than men, so why will the Government not implement my Food Insecurity Bill and help to close the gender food gap?

Penny Mordaunt: On the gender pay gap, I have had discussions with the Equality and Human Rights Commission about how we can ensure that the requirement to report is enforced, but I hope the hon. Lady will welcome the shift we have seen in the GEO. As well as all the things we are known for—women on boards, looking at the FTSE 350—we need to look at women at the other end of the socioeconomic scale. In April, we will bring forward a new cross-Government economic empowerment strategy for women that will consider women who are trapped in low pay, often for decades, and what we can do together to raise their incomes.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): One barrier to accessing skills, training and apprenticeships is sometimes just knowledge of them in the first place. What more does my right hon. Friend believe that we can do to help to spread the word so that more people across our country can access those opportunities?

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is about understanding the possibilities. We are running two
projects: the 5 Cities project is aimed at increasing the diversity of those seeking apprenticeships; and the other one works with young people in more disadvantaged areas to make sure that they have the opportunity to get into higher-paid professions that they would not normally consider. We therefore are doing more, and it must not be forgotten either that an apprenticeship is a paid job—it is a job primarily. We are encouraging employers to advertise vacancies and embedding apprenticeships in all the careers advice we give to young people.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I apologise to disappointed remaining colleagues. This part of Question Time was scheduled to run for seven minutes, and I have run it for 15. I say as gently as possible to the Ministers that, although we appreciate their comprehensive replies, some of their answers were incredibly long, and as a result colleagues have lost out. I extend the envelope, but I cannot do so indefinitely, and we must now move on.
Leaving the EU: Mobile Roaming Charges

10.47 am

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on mobile roaming charges abroad in the event of a no-deal Brexit.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): Delivering a negotiated deal with the EU remains the Government’s priority, and that has not changed, but I am sure the House will agree that we must prepare for every eventuality, including a no-deal scenario.

For that reason, we have taken a number of steps as a Government, working with businesses, consumers and devolved Administrations, to make sure that we deliver the best possible outcome in the event of no deal. The Government intend to legislate to make sure that the requirements on mobile operators to apply a financial limit on mobile data usage while abroad is retained in UK law. The limit would be set at £45 for each monthly billing period, which is the same limit that is currently in place. We would also legislate to ensure that customers receive alerts at 80% and 100% of their data usage so that all users can carefully manage that data usage. These would mean ongoing clarity and certainty for consumers.

I know that there is also a concern on the island of Ireland about the issue of inadvertent roaming. This is when a mobile signal in a border region is stronger from the country across the border. The Government intend to retain through UK law the EU roaming regulation provisions that set out how operators must make information available to their customers on how to avoid inadvertent roaming.

The Government are working hard to make sure that everyone is prepared and ready for all outcomes, and I encourage all businesses to read our technical notice, which we published last summer, on mobile roaming in the EU as it does now, based on operators’ commercial arrangements.

Leaving without a deal would not prevent UK mobile operators from making and honouring commercial arrangements with mobile operators in and beyond the EU to deliver the services that their customers expect, including roaming arrangements. The availability and pricing of mobile roaming in the EU would be a commercial question for the operators, and many of them, including those that cover more than 85% of mobile subscribers, have already said that they have no current plans to change their approach to mobile roaming after the UK has left the EU.

I hope the steps that I have set out today will reassure the House that the Government are committed to a smooth and orderly transition as we leave the EU. In our telecoms sector, as in all sectors, we are making plans for all outcomes as we leave the EU. That is the role of a responsible Government, and that is what we will continue to do.

Tom Watson: Yesterday, while my team was mapping out a potential cross-party approach to tackling the online harms caused by surveillance capitalism, what was the Secretary of State doing? He was trying to slip out a policy change of national significance that clearly warranted an oral statement to the House. We must thank the HuffPost website that the Government did not manage to sneak it out without scrutiny at the Dispatch Box, and we must also thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question.

When mobile roaming charges were scrapped in 2017, it was a great day for consumers. Tens of millions of British holidaymakers travelling to EU countries were told that they were able to “Roam Like Home”. Before then, many had been burnt by huge and unexpected bills for trying to access their emails or sending pictures to their families back at home. As a nation, we were spending a third of a billion pounds just to use our mobiles on holiday. It was so bad that in 2016, the then Minister for the Digital Economy, the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), said that “by realising these changes, we’re going to save British consumers millions of pounds a year.”

Today’s announcement shows once again that this particular Secretary of State and this particular Government will cave in to the lobbying might of telecoms companies rather than listening to the voice of consumers who are set to lose out. He said that mobile phone operators had said that they had “no plans” to raise roaming charges, but he and I know—and, more important, voters know—what that phrase really means.

The reason the EU introduced free roaming in the first place was the fact that the telecoms companies could not be trusted to give consumers a fair deal, so let me ask the Secretary of State some questions. Why has he decided that the price of no-deal Brexit is better paid by consumers than telecoms companies? What binding commitments has he asked companies to give to ensure that consumers are not hit by high roaming charges in the event of a no deal? Can he guarantee that if, by luck or by skill, the Prime Minister gets her deal through, consumers will not pay roaming charges in future? When has he summoned the telecoms chief executives to talks at the Department, and if he has not done so, will he do so this weekend to ensure that consumers can receive their guarantees?

This is how holidaymakers have been hit by Brexit chaos. First, the value of the pound has plummeted, thus increasing the cost of family holidays. Secondly, we will have to pay for visas to travel to the EU. Thirdly, we will be hit by a Brexit bill to use our mobiles abroad. If the Secretary of State does not want to go down in history as the Minister for the Tory triple whammy tourist tax, I suggest that he adopts a different course.

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman expressed a commendable interest in my diary for yesterday. Let me remind him that I was having meetings on the subject of online harms, which he and I had discussed on what I thought was a cross-party basis some time before he made his speech yesterday. I was also spending some time discussing problem gambling with the banks and with the all-party parliamentary group on gambling related harm, which is led by his hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris).
I know that the hon. Gentleman cares about both those subjects and would wish me to spend time on them, but he need not worry, because I have also been spending some time on this subject. Having done so, I can tell him that it will be discussed by this House because this is an affirmative statutory instrument. The Government have set out their view that it should be an affirmative statutory instrument, which will give the House an opportunity to debate this subject, so the hon. Gentleman or one of his colleagues will be able to discuss the matter in some detail when that debate is reached.

The hon. Gentleman says that we are caving in to the mobile phone operators, but the reality is that when we leave the European Union—that is what is going to happen, because the Government and the Opposition, if I understand their current position correctly, intend to respect the outcome of the 2016 referendum—it will not be possible for the UK Government to force our rules and expectations upon EU mobile phone operating companies. So if those companies choose to charge British mobile network operating companies at a wholesale level, one of two things will happen: either that cost will be passed on to those who are using their mobile phone abroad, or it will be spread across all mobile phone users on that network. That is the choice.

The decision we have made is to ensure that consumers are given the best possible protection in the event of leaving the EU with no deal. I have made it quite clear that that is not the Government’s intention, however. We worked very hard to get a deal, and we would be grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s help on that, but it is important to recognise what we can do and what we are doing. We are making sure that those elements of the current EU regime that can be transferred into domestic law are transferred into domestic law. Making sure that consumers cannot spend more than the amount that is currently provided for in EU law without understanding that they are doing so is an important consumer protection, as is letting people know how much of their data they have already used. That is what we can do, and that is what we should do in the event of no deal.

If the hon. Gentleman is concerned, as I am sure that we all are, to avoid some of the unpleasant consequences of no deal, the good news is that he can help. He and his colleagues can vote for a deal. We are still waiting for the Opposition to take a responsible position on avoiding the no-deal consequences that they come to the House to complain about.

Jeremy Wright: Of course, we have a competitive market, but that is perfectly compatible with providing consumer protections. Where there are sensible consumer protections in place under EU law and we can transfer them into domestic law, that is what we should do. In this case, that is what we are doing.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The other thing we could do to avoid these charges is not to have Brexit at all. What the Government’s 85% statistic tells us is that 15% of customers will definitely be charged extra while roaming in the EU. Last week, Money Saving Expert said that just two out of 12 major mobile firms have committed to keeping roaming free and that two thirds of people think it important to have no roaming charges when they go abroad. The Government’s impact assessment focuses on the cost for mobile operators rather than the cost for consumers. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the additional cost to consumers as a result of this change?

The Government have not been upfront about this. They have not made a statement on the Floor of the House without being dragged here to answer the urgent question tabled by the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson). I am glad that he has asked this question, but the Government could have been more proactive in explaining to consumers what they expect to happen. The Secretary of State has said that this will be done by an affirmative statutory instrument that will require debate, so will he ask the Leader of the House to make time for such a debate on the Floor of the House, rather than it being debated in Committee? If this is such an important issue and if the Government are not trying to duck and dive, he should agree to it being debated on the Floor of the House.

Lastly, what is the Secretary of State’s understanding of the position of people who live in Northern Ireland and work in Ireland, or vice versa, in relation to roaming charges? It seems to me that there is almost no way for them to avoid roaming charges unless they choose to have two mobile phones. Have the Government considered those people when making this decision?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Lady accuses us of attempting to hide the matter, but, as I said, the Government intend to conduct a debate on the statutory instrument using the affirmative procedure. That does not represent hiding. The provision will appear in all the normal processes of the House, and the House will have the chance to discuss what should be done through that Delegated Legislation Committee.

As for whether 15% of mobile phone customers will inevitably pay roaming charges, that is not quite what I said. I said that mobile network operators that cover 85% of consumers have said that they have no plans to introduce roaming charges. It does not follow that the operators covering the other 15% have specifically said that they do. They may have said nothing at all.

Turning to Northern Ireland, I said that there is a legitimate concern about inadvertent roaming, and there are measures that can be taken. Those measures are already reflected in the EU regulation, the key parts of which we can replicate we seek to replicate. We will ask operators to do all that they can to prevent inadvertent roaming, and there are several ways in which they might do so. Exactly how they do so will of course be a matter for them.

Finally, I suppose that I should give SNP Members some credit. At least they are clear about what they think of Brexit. They do not want it, and I understand that. Unfortunately for them, however, the people of the United Kingdom, voting as the United Kingdom, decided in the majority that they wanted to leave the European Union. This Government intend to honour their decision, as Parliament said that it would, but there are consequences to a no-deal exit from the European Union that the Government seek to mitigate, and this is one of the instruments by which we seek to do so.
John Howell (Henley) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that consumer protection is behind his announcement today and that that has been the great strength of the way in which he has approached this issue?

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is right. The Government have a responsibility, where we can, to continue consumer protection measures that currently reside in European law but that we think are sensible and desirable and that we will transfer into our own law in the event of our departure. Of course, as he will know, if there is a deal that includes an implementation period, the position will continue exactly as it is now during that period, which is one reason why such an implementation period and such a deal are desirable and one reason why it would be good for the Opposition to take their responsibilities seriously in this regard.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that the Government intend to lay the provision as a statutory instrument and that it will therefore be debated in the normal way. However, he will surely know that an enormous backlog of statutory instruments must be passed by 29 March and that appropriate levels of scrutiny will be challenged. Knowing that we lack the time to scrutinise every single statutory instrument in time for Brexit, what words of comfort can he possibly have for consumers in my constituency?

Jeremy Wright: I am unsure what the hon. Lady is suggesting. Is she suggesting that the Government should operate by fiat and pass the measure without consulting Parliament at all? I do not think that that would be the right way forward, even if it were feasible. This matter can be addressed by statutory instrument, and the Government intend to do so. We chose to use the affirmative procedure so that the House will have the opportunity to discuss the matter. It would seem that I am being criticised by the SNP for not allowing enough debate and by Labour for allowing too much.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): There is a sense of groundhog day when Members on the Treasury Bench who voted for the deal face complaints from those who voted against it about the prospect of no deal. Will the Secretary of State update the House on what discussions the Government have actually had with mobile network operators about getting a resolution to this issue, rather than just playing politics?

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, because I forgot to say in response to the hon. Member for West Bromwich East, who was concerned that the Department had not had such conversations, that we have had discussions with network operators to ensure that we understand their intentions and to talk about what they will do next. Of course, what they decide to do will in the end be a matter for them because, as I have explained, it is not possible for the UK Government to restrict the activities of European mobile network operators. However, they have made their views clear, and the Government are doing what we can to smooth the path of a no-deal exit, but we would all agree that it is better to avoid one. The best way to do that is to vote for a deal, and that is what my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) is doing. Let us have a bit of company from Opposition Members.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): If there is no deal, it will be because the Government have made a conscious choice to go down that route. Has the Secretary of State attempted to assess the cost implications if some of those companies that say they have no plans at present to introduce roaming charges do, indeed, do so? Has he assessed the associated costs of losing the European health insurance card, of difficulties in securing travel insurance and of the visa charges that have been mentioned? How much will that cost British consumers going on holiday?

Jeremy Wright: The costs of health and travel insurance are a little beyond the ambit of this urgent question, but I repeat the point that what the Government can do is to ensure that any additional costs to consumers that occur as a result of a no-deal Brexit—we fervently hope to avoid that eventuality—are limited in any way that the Government can properly limit them. The best way we can do that is to make sure that consumers know when they have reached a certain point of spending so that they can make their own judgment on whether they wish to go beyond that point. The real concern that consumers generally express is that they do not know when they are running up these very large bills while using their data abroad, which is precisely what we seek to avoid. We have chosen exactly the same point at which to make that notification as already exists in the EU regulation.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend will be aware that, across the world, many companies are monopolies. Despite that, roaming charges have been abolished across the world—it is not limited to the European Union. Does he agree that, actually, this is an opportunity for consumers in the UK to get an even better deal as we leave the European Union?

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend makes the fair point that by the operation of the market that exists in this country, even if it may not exist everywhere else, consumers will be able to make a choice. It may be that some mobile network operators will choose not to impose mobile roaming charges and others choose to do so, in which case the consumer can make a judgment about the importance of this matter.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Have the Government not already had an opportunity to put their deal to the Commons and failed dismally to get the support of even their own Back Benches? Why do not the Government look seriously at the Leader of the Opposition’s proposal today to seek consensus and avoid no deal?

Jeremy Wright: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the invitation to the Leader of the Opposition to engage in constructive discussions was offered some considerable time ago. Of course the Government will consider what the Leader of the Opposition says, but if we are to avoid no deal, the way to do it is to get a deal. We will continue to discuss how we might do that with the Leader of the Opposition, but in the end, every single Member on both sides of the House, if they dislike the consequences of no deal, has a responsibility to decide that they will personally take responsibility for doing what they can to prevent it.
Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I know my right hon. and learned Friend will not be tempted into offering legal advice on the Floor of the House, but what protection might be available to consumers and businesses who entered a contract on the basis of free calls, texts and data while roaming if operators are tempted to change the terms of those contracts mid-term?

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend is right that I have a natural reluctance to offer legal advice not only on the hoof but for nothing. My understanding, and I will write to him after making sure my understanding is correct, is that changes in contractual terms during the term of a contract give the consumer the right to exit that contract.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Secretary of State needs to remember that the Government’s deal was voted down across this House, by two thirds, so it is no good coming here to lecture the Opposition alone. He also needs to understand that the best way to protect consumers who use mobile phones abroad is to look at what is in the letter from the Leader of the Opposition today, because it offers the best way forward to come to a deal and protect consumers in the future.

Jeremy Wright: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman, that we should all do what we can to avoid no deal, but I hope that he also accepts that it would not be responsible for the Government to make no preparations whatsoever for a no-deal eventuality. What we are discussing here, at the request of the hon. Member for West Bromwich East, is a proposal the Government are making, through a statutory instrument, to make provision to ensure ongoing consumer protections in a no-deal scenario. It does not in any way suggest that that is the Government’s preferred option, but it does suggest that responsible Governments prepare for possible outcomes.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I commend the Secretary of State for his calm and rational approach to this issue. When I renew my mobile phone contract, I am bombarded with various offers about how cheaply I can use my mobile phone abroad, both in and outside the EU. When I arrive in a foreign country, I am bombarded with text messages from my provider about various packages to make things cheaper. Why would they possibly want to price their customers out of a lucrative market by not continuing these customer-friendly arrangements?

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend is entirely right about that, and this is exactly why many of those mobile network operators have said that they have no intention of doing as he describes.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Given the disaster of no deal and the apparent inability of this Government to ensure that our holidaying constituents have the same benefits as they do at the moment, does the Secretary of State agree with Alex Neil, the director of home services at Which!, that companies must be “absolutely clear” about the extra costs they are going to pass on to the consumer? How much notice should they give, as we are only a few weeks away from the Easter holidays?

Jeremy Wright: Again, the hon. Gentleman will get agreement from me that it is better to avoid the consequences of no deal. I cannot accept that it is not sensible to prepare for them in case they happen. If he wants to avoid them, there is a sure-fire way to do so. I grant that he is responsible only for his vote, just as I am responsible only for mine, but we should all take responsibility on an individual basis for making sure those consequences do not come about.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I know we are all worried about roaming overseas, but may I ask my right hon. and learned Friend to look at the signal at home, because too many people do not get a mobile phone signal in our country? Indeed, we cannot even get one in many places in the House of Commons. Will he examine access to roaming charges, as his predecessor, the current Home Secretary, did, and allow people who cannot get a signal to roam on to other domestic networks?

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his calm and reassuring approach to this issue. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, did, and allow people who cannot get a signal to roam on to other domestic networks?

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I have quite a lot of time for the Secretary of State, but if our Front-Bench team had not asked this urgent question, we would not know what was going on. He may not know this, but I am very popular with my Whips; I spend a lot of time in Committee Rooms upstairs dealing with statutory instruments relating to the withdrawal from the EU. These are little rooms, where measures are quickly pushed through; Ministers gabble through as fast as they can and the scrutiny is deplorable. Let me mention two issues we dealt with recently. The first was insurance for uninsured drivers, where the measure went through the other day and people will not be insured when they go to Europe. The second was air safety, and the Minister gabbed through without knowing the details. This is about parliamentary sovereignty. Today, the Secretary of State says the backdrop is that we all have a vote, so why is the rumour running around Westminster today that the Prime Minister has reneged on the vote next week?

Jeremy Wright: First, let me say that the respect is entirely mutual, not least because the hon. Gentleman has a well-deserved reputation as a scrutiniser of legislation in this House; as he says, he does it a lot. The point here is that there has been no attempt to hide this; we are talking about a statutory instrument presented to the House so that it can consider it in the usual way. When it gets to the point of considering the statutory instrument, the House will of course have to decide how long it wants to take over it, but the objective is not to hide it; the objective is to make use of the powers in the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, which Parliament decided we should have, to correct deficiencies that arise as a consequence of our EU departure. We are doing it here to make provision for what would happen in a no-deal exit and to make sure that consumer protections we can roll over, we do roll over. I hope that will command the support of the House.
Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): May I press the Secretary of State on no deal? What binding commitments has he demanded of telecoms companies so that our consumers are not ripped off this summer by higher charges?

Jeremy Wright: Again, I should set out what I think the position is. Were we to say to mobile network operators in this country, “You may not impose roaming charges on your customers who travel to the European Union,” that could not prevent European mobile network operating companies from charging UK mobile network operating companies money, and that money would have to be paid by somebody. If we say to the mobile network operators in this country that they may not pass that charge on to their roaming customers, they will undoubtedly pass it on to all their other customers instead. The problem is that, when we are outside the European Union, as we will be, we are no longer beneficiaries of the European Union regulation. We are taking as many elements of the regulation as we can and transferring them into domestic law. That is sensible planning and I hope that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues will support it.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The Secretary of State just said that we are no longer beneficiaries of EU regulation. It was not until the EU acted that the mobile companies got rid of the dreaded mobile roaming charges. How many mobile companies have come to the Secretary of State and said that they will voluntarily not put these charges on to consumers?

Jeremy Wright: On the hon. Gentleman’s last point, I said that 85% of consumers are covered by mobile network operators that have said they have no intention of reintroducing charges. What he says is undoubtedly and self-evidently true: if a country is not a member of the European Union, it does not benefit from provisions that cover members of the European Union. The hon. Gentleman will recall that there was a debate in 2016 that took us some time, and these arguments were deployed on both sides. The UK electorate made a decision and we are enacting that decision. In the process, if there are consumer protections that we can and should continue, that is what we intend to do. That is what the measure is about.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Will there be an EU vote next week and an opportunity to discuss mobile roaming charges?

Jeremy Wright: As far as I can tell, we are discussing an urgent question about whether mobile roaming charges will apply after our departure from the EU. I will repeat what I have said already: we should all want, when we have the opportunity, to exercise our democratic rights to prevent no deal and vote for a deal instead. If that does not happen for any reason and no deal occurs, the Government intend to be ready for it. We intend to give consumers the protection that we still can and look forward to the Opposition’s support in doing so.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The abolition of roaming charges was just one of the ways in which the European Union stood up to the tech giants in the interests of ordinary consumers. Given the Government’s absolute reluctance to do the same—they are only now looking to address online harm and are still completely ignoring algorithms, control and data exploitation—will the Secretary of State commit to matching evolving European Union tech regulation, or explain why not?

Jeremy Wright: I am afraid I do not accept the hon. Lady’s premise. It is not true that the Government have only now started to talk about online harms: we produced a Green Paper on internet safety some considerable time ago and we have talked about it repeatedly. The hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) and I have discussed exactly the tone of the Government’s likely response and the hon. Lady will see a White Paper shortly. I am sure she would expect that we approach this subject in the proper way, so that when we produce the actions that we intend to take they stick, have effect, are robust and achieve what she and I both want to see.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Given that an affirmative statutory instrument can allow only a vote for or against it, will the Secretary of State give the Opposition early notice of what is in that SI to see how the Opposition can improve on what is being put forward?

Jeremy Wright: As the hon. Gentleman knows, SIs are laid before the debate so that Members of the House can consider them. In this instance, he has had a fairly substantial sneak preview because much of what I have said will be the content of that statutory instrument, but he will certainly be able to see it before the debate occurs. I hope that that will give him the opportunity to see that it is sensibly based and demands his support.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Is it not the case that this Government are, yet again, trying to hold Parliament to ransom by threatening a no deal when it is in their gift to rule it out immediately, and they should do that, as it would be an act of criminal negligence on their part to proceed with a no-deal situation? That is the reality that we are facing. No one in this country— or certainly a majority in this country did not vote to roll back the European Union’s progress on abolishing roaming charges. This Government should immediately look to compromise with Parliament to reach an agreement that is practical, instead of prioritising the integrity of the Tory party over the national interest. Is that not exactly what this Government are doing?

Jeremy Wright: No.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, let me thank the Minister for his answers. Norway and Liechtenstein have so-called free roaming agreements in place already, so it can happen. He referred to steps taken to address roaming charges for consumers in Northern Ireland and the close proximity of the Republic of Ireland. Will he confirm the steps that consumers in Northern Ireland must undertake, and are the Republic of Ireland and the EU open to finding an agreement?

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. As he says, this is a real concern, but it is one that other places have also wrestled with and found practical solutions to. I believe that the same
thing can be done on the Northern Ireland-Republic of Ireland border. It will be up to each of the mobile network operators to speak to their customers about exactly how this should be done. What we can do in government, and seek to do through this statutory instrument, is place on them the obligation to do so, so that people are not accidentally caught by what would be, again, an undesirable scenario in which this kind of accidental roaming might take place. If he will forgive me, I will not set out the details for each individual mobile network operator. We set the expectation and then each operator must speak to their customers about it.

**Business of the House**

11.22 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for next week is as follows:

**Monday 11 February**—Second Reading of the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill [Lords].

**Tuesday 12 February**—Remaining stages of the Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill [Lords].

**Wednesday 13 February**—Tributes to the Clerk of the House, followed by a motion relating to the Securitisation Regulations 2018, followed by a general debate on connecting communities by supporting charities and volunteers.

**Thursday 14 February**—Debate on a motion relating to the UK’s withdrawal from the EU.

**Friday 15 February**—The House will not be sitting.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said to the House on 29 January, we will bring a revised deal back to this House for a second meaningful vote as soon as we possibly can. Should that not be possible by 13 February, the Government will table an amendable motion for debate on 14 February. Hon. and right hon. Members will know that the Prime Minister is currently negotiating a revised deal for the UK’s departure from the EU. She will provide an update to this House next week and I will make a further business statement if necessary as a consequence of her statement. I will make my usual business statement next Thursday confirming the business for the week commencing 18 February, which will include key Brexit-related statutory instruments.

February is LGBT History Month, during which more than 1,500 events will be taking place across the country—an opportunity to raise awareness and to promote equality and diversity. Finally, for those who follow closely the activities of regular pizza eaters, may I wish everyone a very enjoyable National Pizza Day for Saturday?

Valerie Vaz: I am not sure who was eating pizza yesterday at 3.29 pm when the House rose, but I thank the Leader of the House for the business—as I keep saying every week, I think I should thank her, but I am not sure, because there is nothing for the week after, apart from Brexit SIs.

On Wednesday, there will be a general debate, so I am going to ask the Leader of the House if we can have an Opposition day; we certainly deserve one and we could have had one yesterday. But I also want to pay tribute because next Wednesday we are all going to pay tribute to Sir David Natzler, Clerk of the House, and thank him for his 43 years of public service. We welcome the news that our Gracious Sovereign has agreed to the appointment of Dr John Benger as the 51st Clerk of the House. I know that Dr Benger’s commitment and that of all the senior Clerks will continue the good work of Sir David in bringing Parliament into the 21st century.

I agree with the Leader of the House: on 29 January, the Prime Minister said:

“If we have not brought a revised deal back to this House by Wednesday 13 February, we will make a statement and, again, table an amendable motion for debate the next day.”—[Official Report, 29 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 671.]
The Leader of the House has not quite confirmed this—she could have mentioned it in the business statement. Could she say whether the Prime Minister will be coming back on Wednesday to make a statement? Will this motion be amendable and voteable on?

I am not sure what happens when the Prime Minister is away because they get up to all sorts of Brexit chaos. On zero tariffs, we had the Secretary of State for International Trade saying first that he was going to lay an SI, then he didn’t, then he said he was going to discuss it with the Cabinet, then he decided he wasn’t going to lay the SI, then he suggested it was going to be added to the Trade Bill. This is the Trade Bill that gives powers to Ministers but there is no policy framework set out in that. The Business Secretary said he would not welcome zero tariffs for all industries, so the two Secretaries of State are saying two different things. Can we have clarity? Which Secretary of State is right? The shadow Secretary of State for International Trade said: “the Secretary of State appears not to understand the basic logic of trade” negotiations.

“If you have already reduced all your tariffs to zero you have nothing to negotiate with.

Which Secretary of State is right? Could we have a statement from both, or either, on what exactly the Government policy is?

Mr Speaker, I was here earlier and listened to the urgent question you granted on the SI on mobile roaming. I think there is a change in policy because the SI has been laid and the Government impact assessment says that, unless there is a deal, the UK Government cannot unilaterally guarantee surcharge-free roaming for UK consumers travelling to the EU without exposing UK operators to the risk of being obliged to provide roaming services at a loss. So this Government are listening to the mobile phone operators, not to the consumers. I do not recall seeing that on the side of the bus. This is the important bit because there is a slight change of policy. Given that the SI comes into effect the day after exit day, or the day after it is made, can the Leader of the House ensure that the SI is debated on the Floor of the House, and can she guarantee that, if there is no deal, mobile phone operators cannot instigate charges immediately?

It is Time to Talk Day. Everyone should be able to have a conversation about mental health. A YouGov survey for the Prince’s Trust has found that the number of young people in the UK who say they do not believe that life is worth living has doubled in the last decade. In the first analysis of its kind, a study published in the journal Psychiatry Research found that young people were three to four times more likely to have depression at 18 if they had been exposed to dirtier air at the age of 12. For their sakes, we must act on air quality, which even in Walsall South is over the limit. And may I just ask if the Leader of the House could ask the ministerial cars not to keep their engines running—not to idle while they are waiting for Ministers? This is alarming as 75% of mental health problems begin in childhood or adolescence.

On Monday, we celebrate the International Day of Women and Girls in Science. Both Rosalind Franklin and Jocelyn Bell Burnell made important contributions to science and they were not awarded Nobel prizes, even though they did the work. It is LGBT History Month and those of us who were councillors in 1988 remember section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, under which we could not publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality. That was repealed in 2003. At the same time, members of Sinn Féin had to have their voices dubbed by actors when they were interviewed. We have moved on since then, which is why I agreed with the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, when he said:

“The EU itself is first and foremost a peace project”,

and guaranteed the peace process and the Good Friday agreement. Over the last 21 years, a generation of young people have lived in peace in Ireland. There is a special place in heaven for those who want to promote peace—blessed are the peacemakers.

I do not know whether you know this, Mr Speaker, but there is a space on the Government Benches for the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes). He is not in his place because he is at the palace, receiving his knighthood. It is a fantastic story because he started life on a council estate in Woolwich and will now become a knight of the realm. We wish him and his family a very happy day.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) is unfaithfully courteous. He has, in fact, written to me to explain—movingly and manifestly with some regret—his absence from business questions today. He felt that he would have been able to provide the House with a question that was important in terms of substance and beautifully delivered—something that I would not for one moment contradict. We wish him well today, but we hope that he will be back with us next week. I am not sure that we can bear his absence much longer.

Andrea Leadsom: I think that everybody would concur; we cannot possibly miss my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) for a further week. I also pass to him our very best wishes and congratulations on becoming a knight of the realm. He is a very good fellow in this place, and a very loyal attendee at business questions.

The hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) asks about the general debate next week. She will have observed that I announced business on the Securitisation Regulations 2018 next Wednesday. That was a request from the Opposition, so I hope that she is pleased that I have been able to find Government time for that debate in the Chamber.

I also congratulate John Benger on his appointment. I was delighted, along with Mr Speaker and the hon. Lady, to be part of the selection panel. We all agree that he will do an excellent job.

The hon. Lady asks about the next steps on Brexit, particularly whether the motion next week will be amendable and voteable. I do want to help the House on this, so let me be absolutely clear: if a deal is brought back for a meaningful vote, yes, the vote to approve the deal with be a motion under section 13(1)(b) of the EU withdrawal Act, and it will be an amendable motion, as it was in January. If we are not able to bring back the revised deal for that second meaningful vote, the business for Thursday, as I announced earlier, will be a debate on a motion relating to the UK’s withdrawal from the EU.
The Prime Minister will provide an update to the House next week. If necessary, I will then make a further business statement as a consequence of her statement. As the Prime Minister has said, the motion next week will not be brought back under section 13—there is not a legal requirement to do so—but it is a commitment that the Government have made outside the statutory framework of the EU withdrawal Act. The Government always take seriously the views of this House, and that remains the case on the motion next week, whether it passes with or without amendments. I hope it is clear that, as of now, we will be providing for the House to have a debate next Thursday, whether it is on a meaningful vote or on an amendable, neutral motion.

The hon. Lady asks about the issue of tariffs in a no-deal Brexit. We have just had International Trade questions. I am sure that she will have raised her questions there via Opposition colleagues and received a response. She also mentioned the urgent question on roaming that just took place and has put in a request for that statutory instrument to be debated on the Floor of the House. As always, if she wants to make her request through the usual channels, the Government have been very keen to provide time where there is a reasonable request.

The hon. Lady mentioned the appalling problem of mental health issues among the young, and she is absolutely right to do so, with issues ranging from clean air to excessive use of social media—we have seen only recently the appalling effect that that can have on young people. The Government are committed to doing everything possible to try to resolve the problem of spiralling mental health problems in young people. She specifically asked about ministerial cars’ engines running. Ministerial cars’ engines are not meant to be kept running, and if hon. Members find that they are, then they should challenge that.

The hon. Lady mentioned that the EU is committed to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. I would say to her that the United Kingdom is absolutely committed to strengthening further the bonds between all of the four nations of the United Kingdom, and it is this Government who are determined to do everything possible to maintain the Belfast/Good Friday agreement.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I thank the Leader of the House both for her opening statement and for her response to the shadow Leader of the House. I think the position is clear, but this is of course very important in relation to Brexit business, and the right hon. Lady has been, I think, most solicitous in trying to attend to the concerns of the House. Last night, I received notice of the draft business for next week, and I noted with dismay that the scheduled debate on an amendable motion had been removed and that we were in fact due to have a debate on Back-Bench business on Thursday the 14th. I confess that I was very alarmed by that. In so far as that has now been reversed, as in the statement that the Leader of the House has announced, and the debate on an amendable motion will take place, I am greatly heartened by that.

I just want to say to the House, because I think it is very important that there is clarity, that I hope the position reflects—I think it does—the commitments made in the Chamber. On 29 January, at column 671, the Prime Minister said:

“Furthermore, if we have not brought a revised deal back to this House by Wednesday 13 February, we will make a statement and, again, table an amendable motion for debate the next day.”—[Official Report, 29 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 671.]

Two days later, at the business question, the Leader of the House—responding, I believe, to the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan)—reiterated the position by saying:

“We will, of course, have the opportunity to enjoy the Prime Minister coming back for a second meaningful vote as soon as possible. Just to be clear, if we have not brought a revised deal back to this House by Wednesday 13 February, we will make a statement and again table an amendable motion for debate the next day.”—[Official Report, 31 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 975.]

As recently as yesterday, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington), deputising for the Prime Minister, said very specifically:

“She”—

the Prime Minister—

“said that the meaningful vote itself would be brought back as soon as possible, and if it were not possible to bring it back by the 13th, next Wednesday, the Government would then make a statement and table a motion for debate the next day.”—[Official Report, 6 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 322.]

So I think we have the commitment that had previously been made, and I believe that it is the full intention of the Government to honour that commitment. But the dependability of statements made and commitments given, whatever people’s views on the merits of the issues, is absolutely critical if we are to retain or, where lost, to restore trust, so there can of course be no resiling from the commitment which I think is explicit and which has been made: no dubiety, no backsliding, no doubt. I think that is clear.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): It seems clear to me that we are simply not going to be able to get the primary and secondary legislation required through by 29 March. However, could we, as soon as time allows, have a debate on the operation of Home Office rules on TB certification and access to approved testing clinics? A young family in my constituency are facing imminently being torn apart because of entirely illogical and unreasonable application of these rules. Despite my constituent having had an X-ray and obtained a TB certificate, at her expense, at a UK hospital, she has been told that we are simply not going to be able to get the necessary TB certificate at an approved centre, but the Home Office is telling her that there are no approved centres within the United Kingdom. To add further illogically, if she returned to her home country of Canada to reapply, she would not need a TB certificate because it is more than six months since she was in a TB-prone country. I am very grateful to a Home Office team for agreeing to meet me to look at this case in detail. However, I do think that it raises a wider issue about applications and access to TB centres in the United Kingdom.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a very concerning case on her constituent’s behalf, and I have great sympathy for her constituent in that situation. I understand that my hon. Friend has rightly written to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration, asking her to look into the matter. I understand that my right hon. Friend is seeking an urgent clarification of the situation, and of course if I can be of any help, my hon. Friend can always write to me.
Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. Unusually, there has been quite a bit of excitement about the contents of today’s business statement, with the expectation of an announcement of what happens next in this chaotic Brexit process. The Leader of the House has not disappointed; we will now have the motion on Thursday.

However, I share your concerns, Mr Speaker, because my expectation would be that there would be a statement on Wednesday leading to an amendable motion and a meaningful vote. It is almost certain that that will not be that case—that there will be a general debate, unless the Prime Minister returns with new commitments, as she said, from the European Union. There is as much chance of that happening as of a snowball in hell, so the expectation must surely be that there will be another one of those amendable motions where the Government will simply accept outcomes and decisions of this House that they like and ignore decisions and outcomes that they do not like.

The question therefore is, when will we have meaningful vote 2? When will we be deciding on this? We are out of the European Union in 50 days’ time, and we do not know on what basis and whether we are going to have a deal at all. So it is incumbent on the Leader of the House to be abundantly clear today: when is meaningful vote 2, and when will this House decide?

Such were the demands on the working arrangements of the House that yesterday we finished before half-past 3. The rest of next week’s business is a curious assortment of uncontentious legislation and general debates. The Leader of the House cancelled the February recess because of what she said were the demands of critical Brexit legislation. Where is the critical Brexit legislation? It is beginning to look more and more as though the cancelling of the February recess was nothing more than a stunt. Countless Tory MPs have been slipped to go on their mid-term holidays. So can the Leader of the House tell us what we will be considering in the week when we were supposed to have the recess?

Lastly, may we have a debate about hell—specifically, on what basis parts of it will be reserved for certain people? If a special place in hell is to be reserved for clueless Brexiteers, Satan is seriously going to have to get into the real estate business. Does this not all just show that the infinite patience demonstrated by the EU in the face of this cluelessness is running out, as the Prime Minister is certain to find out today? We are now 50 days from the departure date and we do not know on what basis we are leaving. No wonder Satan is sharpening those pitchforks.

Mr Speaker, that you somewhat muddied the waters by unresponsive to the Business of the House statement. I had made it perfectly clear what was the case, and I am perfectly able to do that for myself. I will set it out again for the hon. Gentleman. The Prime Minister is currently—[Interruption.] If hon. Members wish to know, they might like to listen. On the other hand, if they want to just yell, that is also fine. The hon. Gentleman asked a question. The Prime Minister is currently negotiating a revised deal, and she will update the House next week—okay? Is that clear? Next week. If necessary, I will make a further business statement, but today’s statement is clear that we will meet our commitment—the Prime Minister’s commitment—to deliver a debate on an amendable motion next week. If the hon. Gentleman listened to the business statement, he will know that that will be on Thursday.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about this week’s business and said that we did not discuss anything. I would just like to point out to him that we had an excellent debate on Monday, when 39 individual Members talked about the importance of sport right across our country in relation to issues such as mental health, reducing obesity and general wellbeing, which are all important matters. On Tuesday, the House debated the police grant and local government finance reports. He may not consider that to be relevant business, but we voted on them and those extremely significant motions have an impact on people in England and right across the United Kingdom. We also discussed some vital subjects in relation to compensation payments for those suffering from mesothelioma and pneumoconiosis. The hon. Gentleman is simply not right to say that we did nothing this week.

The hon. Gentleman is also not right to say that we will be doing nothing during the recess week. He asked again what we will be doing during the period that would have been recess. As I have already said, the business includes some key statutory instruments that are to be debated in the Chamber. He will be aware that Brexit legislation is not a matter only of primary legislation; there are up to 600 pieces of secondary legislation. The House is dealing with those in good order. Over 400 have now been laid, and we remain confident of getting all the statutory instruments that need to be finalised by Brexit day done by then. He should take reassurance from that.

Mr Speaker: Colleagues—I address my remarks to colleagues—for the avoidance of doubt, I have not muddied any waters. What I have done is to quote the factual position. Very specifically, I have quoted statements from the Treasury Bench on 29 January, 31 January and 6 February. I know the Leader of the House will be interested in this, because she has just talked about the importance of treating colleagues with respect, which presumably applies to listening to them when they are speaking. The position is extremely clear. I do not try to tell the right hon. Lady how to do her job. I treat her with great courtesy, and I will continue to do so. Nobody is going to tell this Speaker how to stand up for and persistently champion the rights of Parliament. I have done it, I am doing it and I will go on doing it. I could not care less who tries to obstruct me. That is the fact, that is the reality and that is the mission and responsibility of the Speaker of the House of Commons.
Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Now for something completely different, Mr Speaker. [Laughter.]

Eastgate, Blackbrook and Holway are names that will not be known to the Leader of the House, but I can tell her that they have the most appalling crime statistics in Somerset, and they come within the county town of Taunton. We need to have a debate on this. There were 5,000 recorded crimes last year, of which very few were cleared up. Half of those crimes are violent and sexual crimes, and the other half involve antisocial behaviour. This affects my constituency enormously. Having had the police figures out this week, may we please have time to debate hotspots that are turning into crime-ridden ghettos before it is too late?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has raised an incredibly important issue. There is a debate this afternoon on antisocial behaviour, during which I certainly hope he will share his concerns directly with Ministers. He will be aware that there are very concerning rises in certain types of crime, while in other areas the police are doing an excellent job in reducing some of the traditional crimes. Nevertheless, what is important is that the police grant settlement for next year is a significant one, and I hope that he will welcome that news.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I hope I can crave your indulgence, Mr Speaker, because as you will be aware, Back-Bench business and the debates secured by Back Benchers are a highly delicious but very moveable feast. Given the constraints of time today, the second debate scheduled for today on beer taxation and pubs, sponsored by the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood), has unfortunately had to be withdrawn in order to create time for the first debate.

I would like to give the Leader of the House advance notice that a debate application has been submitted for the 20th anniversary of the publication of the Macpherson inquiry report on the murder of Stephen Lawrence, which is on 24 February. If the House is sitting, a debate on 21 February, if possible, would be very welcome. Additionally, may I remind the Leader of the House that 28 February is the day before St David’s Day? If possible, a debate on Welsh affairs on 28 February would be very welcome. Also, 7 March is the day before International Women’s Day, and we have a very heavily subscribed application for an International Women’s Day debate.

Mr Speaker, the Backbench Business Committee has been forced to press the pause button. This is not about article 50; this is about applications for debates on supplementary estimates. The supplementary estimates have not yet been published, and we can hardly invite people to apply for a debate on something that has not yet occurred. We anticipate that the supplementary estimates will be published on 11 February, and we are therefore extending the deadline for applications on supplementary estimates debates to 15 February.

May I crave the indulgence of the House, and the Leader of the House, again? I have a constituent with a complex variety of significant health issues. Her name is Ms Christine Carr of Dunston, Gateshead. On 14 January, I wrote to a Minister at the Department for Work and Pensions about Ms Carr not having received any benefits since 9 January, and she is still not in receipt of those benefits, despite the DWP being subject to a court order ordering it not to bother her any more for at least a year after her previous employment and support allowance assessment. She has all those complex medical needs, and has been without money since 9 January. Please will the Leader of the House intervene with the Minister of State at the DWP on my behalf?

Andrea Leadsom: First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman, because he always comes to the Chamber with a clear and marshalled list, which is incredibly helpful when trying to decide on the business. I am incredibly sympathetic to his request for a debate on the Macpherson report, and for debates on Welsh affairs and International Women’s Day, and I will certainly try to accommodate him.

The hon. Gentleman raises an incredibly important constituency issue. He will know that oral questions to the Department for Work and Pensions are next Monday, but if he wishes to write to me with the details of his constituency case, I will be happy to take it up with the Department.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Leader of the House referred to a statement next week from the Prime Minister, followed by a brown, supplementary business statement on an amendable motion. I guess that the Business of the House motion could not be moved until Wednesday afternoon, which gives very little time for amendments to be tabled for debate on Thursday. Will there be other arrangements so that amendments can be tabled in advance?

Andrea Leadsom: I always listen carefully to the views of right hon. and hon. Members, but as people will appreciate, we have set out that there will be an amendable motion, and we will bring that forward as soon as possible to enable amendments to be tabled.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Can the Leader of the House elaborate further on the good point raised by the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone)? She will know that, to be frank, there have been trust issues with the Government on this, and opportunities for debate have been tabled and then pulled. Can she pin this down precisely? She is not saying that this will be a 90-minute motion in the standard form of a normal Government motion, so presumably the debate will be all day on 14 February. If so, will she confirm that the business of the House motion necessary to enable that will be tabled on Wednesday 13 February? If not on Wednesday, then when?

Andrea Leadsom: As I have tried to set out, if we are able to bring back a second meaningful vote, the vote to approve the deal will be on a motion under section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, and it will be an amendable motion, as it was in January. Any business motion that may be necessary will be tabled in the usual way, and will be debatable and amendable in accordance with the usual rules of the House. If there is no revised deal, the Prime Minister has set out that she will provide an update to the House next week, and if necessary I will provide a revised business statement. If there is not a meaningful vote, the debate next week will not be on a motion under section 13, but because of a commitment that the Government have made outside
the statutory framework of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. Any motion brought forward then will be tabled in good time for right hon. and hon. Members to amend it.

**Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con):** At the recent British Education Awards, a student from Harrow College in my constituency, Venelina Urlachka, was awarded one of the top prizes. She achieved an Access to Higher Education Diploma in Business with a distinction. She has now not only gone on to an internship but a job. May we have a debate in Government time on the importance of further education in encouraging and enabling young people, who possibly do not want to go to university, to further their careers and ensure that they get a decent education and good job opportunities in later life?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I congratulate my hon. Friend’s constituent. That sounds like an excellent achievement. He is absolutely right. The Government want to support those who wish to go on to university and those who prefer to go on to an apprenticeship or further education in an FE college. It is fantastic to see that not only are there record rates of 18-year-olds getting into university, but that we are committing millions of extra money to help teachers and leaders prepare to deliver T-levels, which will give young people the choice of a more academic or technical-based education.

**Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op):** Last night there was a very substantial explosion in Batley, resulting in the attendance of 10 fire engines and a tri-service response. Five people are currently in hospital receiving treatment. Is it possible to have a debate on the tri-service response. Five people are currently in hospital resulting in the attendance of 10 fire engines and a tri-service response?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am sure all hon. Members were very sorry to hear about that explosion. We should all pay tribute to those who go out and deal with the consequences, and send our very best wishes to those still recovering from that explosion. The hon. Lady is absolutely right. We owe a great debt to our fire and rescue services. They do a fantastic job. She might like to seek an Adjournment debate so she can talk about the specific requirements in her fire and rescue area.

**Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con):** My constituency is just down the road from Birmingham. It has very strong links with the West Midlands Combined Authority, the wider region and the city of Birmingham. May we have a debate about the regeneration of the area under the Conservative Mayor, Andy Street? Can we include in that debate the role of the Commonwealth games? I am a newly elected vice-chair for the all-party group on the Commonwealth games, and we want to see how the games can advance this agenda.

**Andrea Leadsom:** First, I wish my hon. Friend every success with the new all-party group. I think there will be great interest in it. It is fantastic that in Birmingham company formations have risen by 10%. The city is thriving under the new Conservative Mayor, Andy Street.

**Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab):** May we have a debate on Facebook? This week we learned that the brilliant political comedian Matt Forde had his ads banned from Facebook because his show is called “Brexit through the gift shop”. Should Facebook not be more concerned with blocking the fake news and Russian bots that are undermining our democracy, rather than being a slave to an algorithm that cannot recognise a simple joke?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman raises a really important point. We are all so deeply concerned about the way that social media giants are pushing harmful content to those who really must not see it. They should be doing the exact opposite to that. Yet, at the same time, because of the technical way in which these things work, they are unable to tell the difference between a joke and a piece of serious content. The Government are clear that much more needs to be done to tackle online harms. We are committed to introducing legislation. He will be aware that we will be bringing forward a White Paper soon to look very closely at what more needs to be done. In the meantime, the social media giants are being told very firmly that they need to take more responsibility for what they allow.

**Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con):** Since 2010, the national ophthalmology database has analysed the outcomes of cataract surgery—the most commonly performed operation in the NHS. The NOD enables a cataract surgeon to compare performances and allows the patients to do the same, while driving continuous improvement. The funding for that, from the Healthcare Quality Improvement Partnership, will cease in August 2019. The NOD currently costs £400,000 per year and requires an additional £100,000 to include age-related macular degradation and glaucoma. Will a Minister come to the Dispatch Box to answer the request from the Royal College of Ophthalmologists for direct funding from NHS England to allow the NOD to deliver on the aim of the NHS’s big data, driving the transformation of healthcare in the United Kingdom?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend raises a very important subject. He will be aware that more than 300,000 cataract operations are carried out every year in England alone. He will appreciate that NHS England’s funding decisions are a matter for it, but I certainly welcome all action to improve outcomes for patients, including in the very important area of eye disease. I strongly recommend that he seeks an Adjournment debate so that he can raise this really important issue directly with Ministers.

**John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab):** Further to the question from the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger), I and others were granted a Backbench business debate in Westminster Hall two weeks ago on knife crime, but the demand for time way outstripped supply. There were lots of speakers who could not be called or who could not attend the
debate. Like the hon. Gentleman, I think that there should be a full debate in Government time specifically on violent crime and knife crime, but failing that, could we have a statement from the Home Secretary on this wave of violent crime, which has swept London and the rest of England?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises one of the most significant issues that is raised at Business questions every week, and he is absolutely right to do so. The appalling problem of knife crime is something that the Government are absolutely committed to tackling. He will have seen that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins)—the crime and vulnerabilities Minister—has just taken her place and has heard what he had to say. I know that she has undertaken to update the House on a regular basis.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government have published the serious violence strategy and established a serious violence taskforce, and that the Offensive Weapons Bill is passing through Parliament in order that we can do much more to try to keep young people away from a life of gang and knife crime, which leads to such appalling outcomes for them and their families.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I understand that the Government will shortly be publishing their proposed schedule of tariffs in the event of no deal. Does my right hon. Friend anticipate that that would be accompanied, if not at least by an oral statement, by a proposed schedule of tariffs in the event of no deal. Whatever one thinks of the desirability

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that this is an incredibly important area. He will be aware that we have just had Department for International Trade questions at which the subject was raised. There will be a further opportunity next Thursday, when we have the debate on withdrawal from the European Union, and I encourage him to raise it again then.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I understand that the Leader of the House’s job is to look after Government business and represent the Government’s view in the House of Commons, so will she guide me? I want an early debate where I can vote on the future existence of the Bank of England, because I have tried in two Question Times to get the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade even to mention the fact that the Bank of England has done a really thorough report stating that every region—every town and city in this country—will be dramatically poorer outside Europe. I want a debate on that so that we can grassroot the penalties of leaving Europe and have that clear, and have a Minister who would talk about the Bank of England. If it is not good enough to write independent reports, we should get rid of it.

Andrea Leadsom: First, I think the Bank of England is an incredibly valuable and valued institution. Its role, of course, is to prepare for all eventualities, as indeed is the job of Government—to be prepared for all eventualities. What the Bank of England does in its forecast is look at different outcomes in order that it can take measures as necessary to protect the UK economy and UK jobs and prosperity, and it is right that it does that. The hon. Gentleman will, of course, have the opportunity to raise the question of Bank of England forecasts in the debate next Thursday.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): A couple of years ago, Bolton Council’s Labour leadership handed over £300,000 of taxpayers’ money to now bankrupt Asons Solicitors. For the second year running, Labour has chosen to dodge auditing that handover of cash and a vast swathe of other moneys. Can we have a debate on the council’s lack of openness over how it handles taxpayers’ money?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the need for local authority finances to be properly interrogated and for councils to take swift action to address any issues raised by auditors, but, as he will be aware, internal audit arrangements are a matter for each council to consider as part of its own governance arrangements. I am sure that all elected councillors must be transparent about financial arrangements, which are integral to local accountability, and I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate or to raise his concerns directly with Ministers in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The Government’s negative resolution statutory instrument on human medicines contains a serious shortage protocol to allow pharmacists to dispense a completely different drug in times of shortage but—critically—without consulting the prescriber, as is the rule now. It is clearly to prepare for drug shortages after Brexit. Does the Leader of the House not agree that such a radical change of medical responsibility requires debate and scrutiny?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an important point, and I am aware of this long-standing protocol. She might be aware that the official Opposition have prayed against the human medicines regulations 2019 and that therefore there will almost certainly be the opportunity to debate them. She could also raise the matter at Health and Social Care questions on Tuesday 19 February.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Last week, the Harlow Star newspaper closed its doors for the last time, meaning that for the first time since 1953 our town does not have a local newspaper. Can we have an urgent statement on the support for and revival of local newspapers? Thousands of elderly people will now be disfranchised from local news, despite there being an excellent online newspaper called Your Harlow.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises an important matter on behalf of his constituents, and I am sure many hon. Members will have a lot of sympathy. High-quality journalism is vital to our democracy, and I am very sorry to hear about the closure of the Harlow Star. He might be aware that the Government have commissioned Dame Frances Cairncross, supported by an expert advisory panel, to conduct an independent review of press
sustainability, and we expect the report to be published soon. Once it has been published, the Government will respond in due course.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): When we finish early, as we did yesterday, it raises the question of whether the Government are using the time available effectively. Can we have a statement on how the cancelling of the recess has affected staff and impacted on their caring responsibilities and other reasonable plans? What support and mitigation are the authorities putting in place to support the staff who do so much to support us?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise that question. I am assured that the House staff—those who provide us with a range of support in this place, from Clerk advice and digital support to support in the Tea Rooms, cleaning and so on—are almost all unaffected. If they have holidays booked or childcare or other arrangements they need to make, they will be able to continue to fulfil their responsibilities, so I am reassured by the House authorities that it will not impact significantly on the day-to-day work of those who support us.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): At the recent Council of Europe meeting, we heard details of how sharia law courts are being used in the UK to dispense alternative dispute resolutions, which particularly disadvantage women. Can we have a debate on that to determine how to deal with it without driving them underground?

Andrea Leadsom: That sounds very concerning. I encourage my hon. Friend to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise the issue directly with Ministers.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): On Tuesday evening, a 19-year-old was fatally stabbed on the Surrey Lane estate in Battersea. That was another life lost, and another tragic example of how our young people are being failed. Figures published today by the Office for National Statistics show that the level of fatal knife crime is at its highest since records began. We cannot escape the fact that cuts in police, youth services and education budgets are feeding this rise in knife crime. In Wandsworth, the Tory council has cut youth services by just under £2 million. These cuts have consequences. May we have an urgent statement from the Home Secretary on the record rise in violent crime?

Andrea Leadsom: First, let me say how sorry I am to hear about yet another tragic knife-related death. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise it here, and she will know that the Government are doing everything possible to try to tackle the increase in knife crime. She will be aware of, for example, the recently announced £200 million youth endowment fund to support children and young people at risk, and the significant new early intervention youth fund to encourage young people away from a life of knife crime and gang membership. However, she also raised the issue of police funding. She must ask herself why she did not support the additional funds—up to £970 million—for police budgets. If she feels that this is such a significant issue, she and her party must support increased resources for policing.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Given the pressures on today’s Order Paper to which the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) referred, might the Leader of the House find an opportunity—the earliest opportunity—for a general debate on beer taxation and pubs?

Andrea Leadsom: I believe that my hon. Friend chairs the all-party parliamentary beer group, so I well understand his disappointment at the decision to postpone that debate. I assure him that I will seek another opportunity for a debate on the subject.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): Delays in pension reforms will mean that low-paid workers, typically women with multiple part-time jobs, will be worse off in retirement by tens of thousands of pounds. In 2017, the Government promised to boost the pensions of low-paid earners by scrapping the lower earnings limit, but they have given no concrete date for the change. May we have a debate in Government time on bringing forward that change?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that the Government have sought to improve the incomes of pensioners and those on fixed lower incomes. She will also be aware that questions to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will take place on Monday 11 February, and I suggest that she raises her point then.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Yesterday, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), was unable to tell the Procedure Committee whether we would scrutinise 50 or 100 affirmative procedure statutory instruments. The front page of the Financial Times says that businesses are up in arms because the Government have failed to get the trade treaties through. And where is the Agriculture Bill? Its Committee stage ended before Christmas, and massive uncertainty is being created for farmers.

Andrea Leadsom: As I explained to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), we have laid more than 400 of the up to 600 statutory instruments that need to be delivered by 29 March, and we are confident that all of them will be completed by Brexit day.

The hon. Lady also asked about Brexit primary legislation. All the Bills that need Royal Assent by the date of our leaving the EU will achieve it, and the Bills that do not will achieve it within the timescales that are required for them. All those Bills continue their passage through both Houses, and I remain confident that we shall have passed all the necessary legislation by the date of leaving the EU.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): There have been several major and, indeed, tragic fires in recent days. Has the Leader of the House had any indication from Ministers at the Home Office, which is responsible for fire policy, or at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which is responsible for building regulations, that they may wish to make a statement or, better still, find time for a debate on the value and advantages of fire sprinkler systems?
Andrea Leadsom: As the hon. Gentleman will know, we have had a number of debates in which the merits of fire sprinkler systems have been discussed, and there is no clear picture. In some cases they are incredibly helpful; in others they are not. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek an Adjournment debate so that Ministers can update him on exactly what the thinking is now.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): Last month I secured a Westminster Hall debate on social mobility to which the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), responded. During that debate, it became increasingly clear that if we are to transform the life chances of people in my town and others, there must be a whole-system, whole-Government approach. Social mobility is not just about schools; it is relevant to the remits of the Department for Transport, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. May we have a debate in Government time on the cross-departmental organisation of social mobility to help areas to develop their local action plans?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady has raised the incredibly important—if not the most important—issue of how we can tackle and improve levels of social mobility. I am currently chairing an interministerial cross-Whitehall group that is considering the early years—the period between conception and the age of two—which is often held to be one of the most critical periods in which subsequent social mobility can be determined. The hon. Lady raises a valuable issue, and I encourage her to seek a Westminster Hall or Back-Bench debate so that all Members can present their own proposals.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): As the House will know, I have never shied away from dealing with issues that some people might consider taboo, and today I want to talk about incontinence. Last Friday, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), I met Martin Kilgallon, who represents The Whole Autism Family. He told us that some parents face severe hardship because if their children need to use incontinence pads, they are allowed a maximum of four per day. There are limits to the number of pads that people can receive, largely owing to funding constraints. May we have a debate in Government time on that issue, and on maintaining the dignity of people who need incontinence aids?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an issue that is critical for those who suffer from incontinence—it is the most awful thing to experience. She is absolutely right to say that we need to do everything we can to support those people. As she will know, Health and Social Care questions will take place on 19 February. I urge her to raise the issue directly with Ministers then, or perhaps to seek an Adjournment debate.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I often refer to matters of worldwide importance in the House, sometimes during business questions. It seems that every week we bring to the House something new and, unfortunately, something very tragic.

On Monday morning, Amnesty International reported that Boko Haram had killed at least 60 people in a “devastating” attack on the north-eastern Nigerian town of Rann. Fighters on motorcycles drove through the town setting houses on fire, randomly shooting and killing people who had been left behind. Amnesty described the attack as one of the deadliest assaults by the extremist group in its almost decade-long insurgency. Given the importance of the matter, may we have a debate or a statement?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has raised a horrifying problem. He often refers to the abuse of people across the world for their racial or religious beliefs, and he is absolutely right to do so. I pay tribute to Amnesty for its work in highlighting such problems, and I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise this awful situation directly with Ministers.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Leader of the House will know that I have been pressing her on missing legislation. My hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) has already mentioned the missing Agriculture Bill, and the Fisheries Bill is also missing, but what about those statutory instruments? The right hon. Lady says that she is confident of getting through 200 of them before Brexit day, but even with my simple mathematical skills, I can work out that that would involve getting through about seven per sitting day. The SIs are overwhelmingly concentrated in four Departments, and as Opposition Whip for one of those Departments, I can tell her that I have several box files of SIs that have yet to be scheduled. Why is she so confident that we are going to manage to do this, with proper scrutiny, in time for 29 March?

Andrea Leadsom: I say again that we have up to 600 Brexit SIs. In this Session we have introduced a whole new system of monitoring, specifically to ensure that we are in control of the order and flow of SIs, that we get the job done in time, that the quality of impact assessments and explanatory memorandums is absolutely right, and that the SIs get the required scrutiny of this House. I can only reiterate that we are confident that we will be able to get the necessary legislation through by 29 March.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): It is worrying but necessary that all horse-racing in Britain has been cancelled today after vaccinated horses were found to have equine influenza. Will the Leader of the House join me in commending the British Horseracing Authority for its swift action, and can she assure me that Ministers at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport are treating this as a priority and will come to the House to make a statement if necessary?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to pay tribute to the British Horseracing Authority. It has taken swift action following this concerning development, and it was right to cancel all horse-racing today. I can tell him that DEFRA is of course monitoring the situation carefully, and I will certainly pass on his view that a Minister might need to make a statement to the House, should there be any further developments.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): An increasing number of my constituents are contacting me to express their concern about the potential disruption to essential medical supplies post Brexit. The Leader of
the House will be aware that there are now only 50 days until our exit date, so will she make a statement on what contingency plans are in place if supply chains should fail, and on what steps are being taken to ensure that pharmaceutical companies are adequately prepared?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady is quite right to raise this issue. She will be aware that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health has made it clear on a number of occasions that measures are in place to deal with all outcomes, including a no-deal Brexit on 29 March. We have Health questions on Tuesday 19 February, and I encourage her to seek to have her question answered directly by the Minister again then.

**Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): Can the Leader of the House confirm that the only reason for the light business and the extremely early rising of the House yesterday was that she and other Ministers had somewhere else to be—namely, going cap in hand to the dodgy Russian oligarchs and City hedge fund billionaires who are now the main source of finance for the Conservative party?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman is denigrating this House. Yesterday, we were talking about compensation payments for people who have suffered from asbestosis and other appalling conditions. The Government seek to provide adequate time for such debates, but we do not then take people by the scruff of the neck and insist that they speak in them. If individual Members choose not to contribute to those debates, that is not the fault of the Government. The Government provided time for some very important statutory instruments to be debated yesterday. I also think that it is extremely offensive of the hon. Gentleman to make the assertions that he does. I can tell him that I was in a meeting until 7 o’clock last night.

**Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): Is the Leader of the House aware that 150 job losses at Babcock in Rosyth have been announced today following the Queen Elizabeth contracts coming to an end? Would she consider granting a debate in Government time on the issue of the allocation of time for these important bread-and-butter debates that Members want to have in the House? Like many other Members, I was disappointed when the House rose early yesterday. I thought it might have happened because people had to go and get their posh frocks on for the event that has already been mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), but I am reassured by the hon. Member for City of Chester that that was not the case. Will she, however, ensure that sufficient time is made available for Members to debate these important issues? We know that Brexit is important, but these other issues that we want to debate are important as well.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am incredibly sympathetic to the hon. Lady, and I pay tribute to her because I genuinely think that she is one of the hardest working Members in this place. She raises many varied and vital issues in business questions and at all other opportunities, and she is quite right to do so. I want to reassure her and the House once again that yesterday’s business was a function of the number of Members who wanted to speak in those debates, and that there was certainly no attempt on the part of the Government or anyone else to try to finish the business early. It is vital that Members should be aware of that. I was also disappointed to see that today’s second debate had been postponed, and, as I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South, I will seek a further opportunity for it to be held.

**Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby) (Lab): May we have a debate on financial barriers to accessing continuing healthcare? My constituents who receive cancer treatment have to travel for nearly an hour and pay for their toll-free crossings until their chemo or radiotherapy ends, but when they go for all their follow-up checks, they have to travel for nearly an hour and pay for their petrol and parking, and they also have the additional cost of the bridge toll, which does not seem very fair or equitable for residents across the Humber area.

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady raises an important constituency issue, and she is absolutely right to do so. I was not made aware of that particular concern in advance, but I encourage her to raise it with Health Ministers at oral questions on 19 February.

**Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Leader of the House recognise the amazing work of Donnie Shaw, the butcher in Wallacewell Road in Balornock in my constituency? He has fundraised with the community to install a community defibrillator
on his premises, and it was installed in September last year. It has already been put into action, in January, in response to a 999 call when someone took unwell outside his shop, and it potentially saved that person’s life. Community defibrillators can make the difference between life and death in many situations, as they can make a vital difference in those seconds before the first responders come along. The butcher is at the heart of the wider community activity, and the defibrillator is named in memory of a 19-year-old man, Marc Hegarty, who died in June 2018. This has been an amazing initiative, so may we have a debate in Government time on the vital role that community defibrillators can play and on what Government funding might be available to support such initiatives?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has raised the importance of defibrillators; he is absolutely right to say that they can save lives. The more community and school-based defibrillators we have, the better, and I should like to join him in congratulating Donnie Shaw on his work to make this happen. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we have Government time for a debate on connecting communities by supporting charities and volunteers on Wednesday afternoon next week, and I hope that he will raise this issue then.

**Colleen Fletcher** (Coventry North East) (Lab): The Coventry and Warwickshire year of wellbeing 2019 is now very much under way and was inspired by a unique partnership between Coventry and Warwickshire’s health and wellbeing boards. The aim of the joint initiative is to emphasise the importance of positive action to safeguard health and wellbeing and of working collectively to address the challenges that affect us all, such as the rise in mental ill health, physical inactivity and less tangible problems, such as loneliness and social isolation. We are all guilty of taking the importance of wellbeing for granted—especially in this place—so may we have a debate in Government time on how to inspire everyone to recognise, celebrate and improve wellbeing?

**Andrea Leadsom:** All colleagues can be reassured by the hon. Lady’s commitment to general wellbeing. She has previously asked for a debate in Government time on sport, which I was pleased to grant, and mentioned wellbeing and the health of the nation in so doing, for which I commend her. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport will be greatly interested in her thoughts on how the new initiative will help with general wellbeing, so I encourage her to raise the matter directly with Ministers.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Has the Leader of the House seen the early-day motion 2025 in the name of the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), signed by me and 58 other Members, about rates of pay for security staff on the parliamentary estate?

I understand that the value of contract workers in the parliamentary estate is being taken to reduce the concerns of members of staff. I am confident that we will have the necessary legislation in place by Brexit day.

**Dr David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): While kicking and screaming, Gloucestershire County Council has had dragged out of it the true cost of the incinerator to be imposed on my constituency at Javelin Park. It now appears that there was some impropriety in the way in which the information was brought forward. Will the Leader of the House organise an urgent debate on how local authorities handle big contracts to ensure that proper checks and balances are in place?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman has raised this matter in the Chamber before, and I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can find out from Ministers whether some rules may have been breached.
Points of Order

12.34 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You will not have heard my earlier exchange with the Secretary of State for International Trade when I asked him to provide the House with the information provided to businesses that was referred to in the Financial Times. As I understand it, businesses have been provided with a report on the progress being made on all the different trade deals that the United Kingdom is seeking to secure. The Secretary of State claimed that if I had only been at the International Trade Committee yesterday, I would have heard the answers there, because the matter was covered “extensively”.

I have now been able to listen carefully to the hour’s worth of evidence that the Secretary of State gave during that excellent inquisitorial exercise led by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), and the Secretary of State made no reference whatsoever to the information that was provided to business, nor did he offer to provide it to the Committee. Madam Deputy Speaker, what can I do to ensure that the Secretary of State comes back to the House at the earliest opportunity to put the record straight and, perhaps more importantly, to provide the House with the information that he has been willing to give to business but is apparently unwilling to give to Members of this House?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. He will appreciate that a difference of opinion between a Minister and a Member is fairly routine. That is what we are here for. It is all about argument, accountability and so on, so it is not a total surprise to the House that there has been a difference of opinion about whether information was given or not given. The right hon. Gentleman knows very well that the Chair happily can take no responsibility for what a Minister says when he is at the Dispatch Box or, indeed, in a Select Committee.

The right hon. Gentleman asks me how he might remedy the situation. He has partially remedied it by raising his point of order which, although not a point of order for the Chair, has allowed him to draw the matter to the attention not only of the Chamber but of the Treasury Bench. I am sure that his concerns will be repeated to those whom he criticises. There will of course be other opportunities for the right hon. Gentleman to ask questions about the matter, and he knows well, as a former deputy Leader of the House, just how to do that.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In a good introduction to business questions this morning, the Leader of the House mentioned in passing something about National Pizza Day. She did not say anything else about pizza, and it was not an advertisement, but it could have led people to believe that she was extolling the virtues of something that is closely linked to obesity. In addition, many pizza delivery companies utilise cheap labour, and people on unlicensed motorcycles are being killed. I just wanted to ensure that the Leader of the House was not endorsing a product that is linked to obesity.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has raised and listened to many points of order over many decades of service in this House. As I have just explained to the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), the Chair has no responsibility for what Ministers say, and the Chair definitely has no responsibility whatsoever for pizza—although my teenage son would say that I quite often have some responsibility for pizzas in a personal or maternal capacity. The hon. Gentleman has drawn to the attention of the Chamber and of the Leader of the House his concerns about the effects of pizza not consumed in moderation. I fear that I can give him no further comfort than that.
Legal Aid: Post-Implementation Review

12.39 pm

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement to inform the House that we have concluded our post-implementation review of parts 1 and 2 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012—better known as LASPO—as well as the outcome of our inquests review.

Earlier today, I tabled all three reviews for consideration by both Houses alongside a new legal support action plan, which sets out how we will build on those findings. After an extended period of expansion that resulted in an annual spend of over £2 billion, the coalition Government brought in part 1 of LASPO to make significant changes to the scope of, eligibility for and fees paid under legal aid. This was essential to bring spending under control and to target the limited resources available at the most vulnerable and the highest priority cases.

The extent of the changes introduced by LASPO meant that the Government committed to carrying out the comprehensive review I have published today. Throughout a year-long process of extensive evidence gathering and analysis, we have engaged with more than 100 different stakeholders, professionals, providers and, of course, many in this House and the other place, drawing together a wealth of research and evidence to inform this detailed review.

We have heard that the legal aid system has, for too long, focused solely on delivering publicly funded advice and representation, at the expense of understanding how we can help people to find early resolutions and avoid court disputes. Legal aid is, and will remain, a core element of the support on offer, and last year the Government spent £1.6 billion on legal aid funding.

We want to move forward with a new vision, focusing on the individual and their needs, whether that be through legal aid or otherwise. We will provide a breadth of tailored support that increases our ability to intervene earlier and catch people’s problems sooner, before they escalate. We must deliver a system that enables people to receive the type of legal support that is right for them and at the right time.

I am therefore delighted to publish, alongside this review, our new legal support action plan. The action plan responds to the evidence and includes immediate action to ensure vulnerable people, particularly children, can access legal aid when it is needed. We will launch a review of the legal aid means-testing framework, specifically focusing on the thresholds and criteria in place for a person to qualify for legal aid; simplify the exceptional case funding scheme to ensure it works effectively; expand the scope of legal aid to include immigration matters for unaccompanied and separated migrant children, and to cover all special guardianship orders in private family law cases; and reinstate immediate access to face-to-face legal advice in discrimination, debt and special educational needs cases.

However, we also need to collect further evidence on what works and at what stage. We will invest up to £5 million of funding to encourage and support providers to develop new and innovative services; double support for litigants in person to £3 million for the next two years; launch several support pilots that will test how effective legal support at an early stage can help people avoid the escalation of problems; and test and evaluate the benefits of early advice in an area of social welfare law.

Elsewhere, I am also announcing today that we will continue to support dedicated criminal legal aid practitioners by completing a comprehensive evaluation of the criminal legal aid fee schemes and structures. Separately, I have published the Government’s review of the changes made by part 2 of LASPO, which introduced a number of changes recommended by Sir Rupert Jackson aimed at reducing costs in civil litigation. The evidence gathered indicates that those objectives have been met. Fewer unmeritorious cases are being taken forward and access to justice at proportionate cost is generally being met.

Today I have also published the outcome of a separate year-long review of the provision of legal aid for inquests. The review was commissioned in response to a number of key independent reports and their recommendations. This final report is the culmination of that thorough review, which was undertaken with senior coroners, the legal profession and other key stakeholders, as well as, most importantly, bereaved families themselves. It considers a number of specific concerns and looks to where we can make further improvements, including improving guidance and advice; ensuring that the inquest process is more sympathetic to the needs of bereaved families; looking into further options for the funding of legal support at inquests where the state has state-funded representation; and working closely with other Government Departments.

The publications I have launched today mark not only the completion of hard work already undertaken but the beginning of doing more to meet our challenges. I place on record my thanks to everyone who has contributed evidence and expertise to these three reviews. It is essential that this engagement continues, that we collect more evidence, exploring with our partners and stakeholders innovative ways of supporting people to access the justice system, and that we place early intervention firmly at the heart of legal support.

I commend this statement to the House.

12.45 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the advance copy of the report. It is regrettable that journalists were briefed on the report’s contents this morning, with new articles appearing on websites before this statement and before the report was available to me.

The Government announced their LASPO review more than two years ago, and it has since been delayed time and again, which is simply unacceptable given the human costs and suffering caused by legal aid cuts. The question is whether this report has been worth the wait. Sadly, the answer from the Opposition has to be a clear no. It has been a wasted two years.

Some of the review’s conclusions call for more reviews. Does the Secretary of State fully appreciate that the measures outlined today will undo the damage done by his predecessors? LASPO set out to make savings of £410 million and, according to the Department’s figures, it has saved almost £200 million more than that since
April 2013. Does he regret that his Department has cut even more than planned? Will he explain why it has happened? Will he confirm that the Government are going to provide just £8 million in extra legal aid investment?

Beyond the budget figures is the very real human cost behind these cuts. In the last few weeks alone, there have been yet more shocking press reports on the social damage they have caused. The number of people who have been refused legal aid to secure court orders against abusive ex-partners is at a five-year high. The number of parents forced to represent themselves in child custody battles has doubled in six years, and new analysis shows that up to 1 million people live in areas with no legal aid provision for housing. How will this report help people in such situations? Can the Secretary of State give more detail about how this review will offer legal help to those faced with a rogue landlord, a difficult family break-up or the Prime Minister’s hostile environment?

Legal advice on welfare benefits cases has been cut by an eye-watering 89%. The UN special rapporteur labelled the legal aid cuts as a denial of those people’s human right to a remedy. Does the Secretary of State believe that the very limited pilot outlined today for just one area of social welfare law will do anything substantial to reduce this inhumane suffering? Does he really think that a little investment in Skype services is the way to restore access to justice?

From the outset, the Opposition have sought to make reasonable demands of the Government’s review. Labour initiated the extensive Bach review to inform how legal aid will be turned around under a future Labour Government. We accept that this Government will not deliver the widespread change recommended by the Bach review, so why does the Secretary of State not have a constructive relationship with the criminal Bar, and we have been able to take steps and prioritise this area to see whether there is a case that early intervention can make savings and we can build that case. That is precisely what I want to do.

There will continue to be areas of disagreement with the hon. Gentleman. I am sorry that he has not been more welcoming of what has been put before the House, because this is a constructive attempt to address this issue, in an environment where there are not unlimited resources. I point the House to the comments made by the Law Society this morning about how there is much to be welcomed in what we have announced.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I welcome the action plan. Particularly on the civil side, the Government seem to be improving the situation for those who need help. I welcome the extra help for litigants in person and the further reviews that are to take place. A lot of money was taken out of legal aid and it is right to see a building back, which is certainly happening on the civil side, with further reviews to come.

I note there is to be an evaluation of criminal practitioners and the way forward. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important to our justice system to have a good pipeline of talented criminal lawyers? That is one of the strengths of our system and the fact we have that is widely admired around the world. In the evaluation, will he look to see that there is an adequacy of income for people as they come through the pipeline, so that we can continue to have the high-quality criminal lawyers we have in this country?

Mr Gauke: My right hon. and learned Friend raises an important point. It is important that we have a strong and vibrant criminal Bar and I want to do everything I can to support that. I make it clear that it is important that we have a vibrant situation for solicitors as well. He will be aware that last year we announced changes to the advocates’ graduated fees scheme. I hope we have a constructive relationship with the criminal Bar, and we have been able to take steps and prioritise this area. We are also undertaking the review, which we anticipate will report in mid-2020.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. As others have remarked, at the core of this discussion is access to justice, a principle enshrined not only in the common law of England and Scotland, but in the Human Rights Act that applies throughout the UK. The House will be aware that these matters are dealt with differently in Scotland, as they always have been, with the Scottish Government responsible for the provision of legal aid in Scotland. Not for the first time, people in
Scotland have reason to be grateful for this differentiation because in Scotland, despite cuts to the block grant available to the Scottish Government, they have maintained a system of legal aid that is more generous in its scope and application than any part of the UK. Some 75% of all civil cases in Scotland are eligible for some form of legal aid, whereas the corresponding figure in England and Wales is 25%. So although I am sure Members will welcome this as a step in the right direction to widening the scope of legal aid, I make the observation that there is still an awful long way to go. Will the Secretary of State consider emulating the targets that have been set in Scotland?

On the question of fees for those who provide legal aid, the Secretary of State will be aware that the Scottish Government have recently approved a 3% increase in fees across the board, whereas in England fees are to be increased by only 1%, and I believe that is just for barristers in the legal aid service. Will he consider bringing England and Wales into line with the more generous provision of fees in Scotland?

**Mr Gauke:** As I said a moment ago, we announced reforms to the AGFS last year, which see the biggest increase for some time in those fees. Let me make a point about the wider issue of access to justice. Access to justice is very important, but we should not consider that the test of that is purely about legal aid in the form that it has been. We need to be more innovative and to think ahead. I regret the dismissive tone taken by the shadow Justice Secretary about the potential for new technology in this area. To ensure that we can expand access to justice, we have to be prepared to innovate and make the best use of technology.

**Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I welcome the considered and balanced tone that the Secretary of State has adopted, which is what the subject deserves. This is a substantial and thoughtful review, which the Justice Committee will wish to examine in some detail, along with its proposals. I wish to raise a couple of points. The additional funding is welcome, as is the extension of eligibility in a number of areas, which the Committee has highlighted in its reports, among other things. We also welcome the changes in relation to inquests and the approach to criminal legal aid. I know he will understand that there will be a concern in some quarters that, as this review has taken some time to prepare, the further review, for example, in relation to the means-testing framework and the setting up of the pilots, although all justified from the evidence in the text, might delay necessary changes even further. Will he assure us that those will be proceeded with in a timely fashion, that they will be sharply focused, and that there will be very full practitioner and judicial involvement in making sure that they are brought to an early conclusion and acted upon wherever necessary?

**Mr Gauke:** I thank the Chair of the Justice Committee for his characteristically thoughtful comments. It is worth pointing out that the means test was not fundamentally changed by LASPO, as he knows, but we do want to look at the evidence. We need to crack on with that straightforwardly, but this is a complex area and we are going to need to consider it properly and ensure that we end up with a sustainable position.

**Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s acknowledgement that early advice is an issue, but I am disappointed that the pilot on social welfare law does not go far enough. It should go further and consider immigration law, family law and housing law. The report outlines how people with protected characteristics may not be able to access online or telephone help and signposting well enough. Will the Minister consider extending the pilot to cover the areas I have mentioned?

**Mr Gauke:** The technology pilots could apply to any area of law, so that certainly does not preclude their applying to the areas the hon. Gentleman mentions. The early intervention pilot is looking at social welfare law as the right place to start. That is where the case for early intervention making a positive difference is strongest, so we are looking into that area. The hon. Gentleman mentioned immigration; we are extending the scope to unaccompanied minors and immigration. I hope that is helpful to him.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The Lord Chancellor did not specifically mention the Legal Aid Board exceptional cases fund, although he did refer to inquests and the possibility of guidance, advice and support for bereaved families. He will know that I have raised the Shoreham air show inquest with the Prime Minister as well as with him and his Ministers. The inquest still has not happened. Hopefully it will happen this autumn, but that will be more than four years since that tragic accident. As it stands, the families have still not had official confirmation that legal aid will be available for their representation at the inquest, while all 18 other interested parties have legal representation. What among the changes the Lord Chancellor has announced will make it much easier for clearly exceptional cases with a clear wider public interest to gain legal aid funding? Is the Lord Chancellor able to confirm what I hope is the case, which is that those families will get the legal representation that they absolutely need and deserve for the inquest this year?

**Mr Gauke:** I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work in this area. We are changing the process for the funding for exceptional cases to make it easier to apply. Fundamentally, I believe the inquest system should continue to be inquisitorial, but it is very important that bereaved families do not find themselves excluded or disadvantaged—my hon. Friend has made that point with great persistence. That is partly about ensuring that coroners and their staff are properly trained to protect the position of bereaved families, but we are also working with other Government Departments to ensure that there is not unfairness in the system. We continue to engage with other Departments to make sure that bereaved families are not put at a disadvantage.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Lord Chancellor knows of my long-term interest in this policy area. Let us be humble: no party or Government have got this right. It is a very difficult nut to crack. I welcome many of the things the Lord Chancellor has been saying this morning. We look forward to digesting his announcement and commenting and being helpful on this matter.
The central thread must surely be access to justice for all, not just the wealthy, privileged and well educated. That is of course the principle that we must have, and that is what I think about when I look at my struggling constituents in Huddersfield. The fact is that there are issues in particular areas of law. The Lord Chancellor will know that I and the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), are involved in cases of miscarriages of justice, which is one area in which the lack of help in the form of legal aid has been really debilitating. I understand that the Ministry of Justice has had more cuts than any other Government Department, and he has my sympathy, but will he look in particular at the impact on miscarriages of justice? We have just launched a commission on miscarriages of justice and hope to publish a report to help the Lord Chancellor shortly.

Mr Gauke: I very much look forward to receiving that report. I thank the hon. Gentleman for the work he does in this policy area, which he and I have discussed in the past. As he says, he has a long-standing interest in this matter, and I hope we can continue to engage in a constructive way to address it. I agree with him about the importance of access to justice, but I stress that that access does not end with legal aid. There are other aspects to consider, and it is important that any sensible Government look into what can be done.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I once worked in a criminal legal aid practice, so the reference to that area of law in the Secretary of State’s statement was particularly welcome. Will he outline how he will ensure that the evaluation takes into account the needs and views of those who provide criminal legal aid in places such as Devon and Somerset, where the challenges may be different from those associated with providing it in central London?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is of course right. I believe that the process we have undertaken in the past year has been a thorough engagement with stakeholders from throughout the country, and that is very much the feedback I have been getting. It is important that we continue to engage. As my hon. Friend makes clear, there are different challenges in different parts of the country, and that needs to be reflected in our approach.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): One consequence of the Government’s deep cuts to legal aid has been the emergence of an unregulated legal advice sector, which has stepped in to fill the gap. What work have the Government done to look into the quality of advice and redress in the sector?

Mr Gauke: Of course, we have to keep this matter constantly under review to ensure that citizens are not misled or taken down a wrong approach. Innovation and competition should be part of the context, but the hon. Lady is quite right that we must ensure that citizens get the correct advice and that we are not in a position where the unscrupulous are able to take people in the wrong direction.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): To what extent was the review able to consider the concerns raised at the time of LASPO about the impact on the diversity of the legal profession? He will know that in particular younger lawyers, those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds and women were more likely to undertake legal aid work; what is the situation now?

Mr Gauke: We have had a welcome from Young Legal Aid Lawyers, which said it would look positively at what has been set out and look to engage with it. I share the hon. Lady’s desire to ensure that we have diverse legal professions in this country.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): There is a paucity of legal advice in family law, which is complex, difficult and emotional. Is there any comfort in the Lord Chancellor’s proposals that will address the difficulties caused by the blanket removal of such advice?

Mr Gauke: Let me highlight a couple of points in the review. I have already mentioned the proposals on unaccompanied minors in immigration cases. It is also worth pointing out that with special guardianship orders, we are extending the scope of legal aid. Those are all steps that go some way towards addressing the hon. Gentleman’s concerns.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Will the Lord Chancellor confirm what everybody involved in legal aid knows, which is that the post-LASPO cuts have led to expenditure in other service areas, specifically the courts service? Does the report quantify that expenditure? Will he confirm that the report confirms that the Department does not know whether the reductions in legal aid have resulted in the service being targeted on those in greatest need? Finally, will he confirm that, welcome though it is, the extra money provided today represents less than 2% of the total reduction in the budget since 2013?

Mr Gauke: First, I pay tribute to the hon. Lady, who is among those who have worked tirelessly in this policy area and who, as ever, brings great expertise to this matter. In respect of evaluating the overall impacts, we do need more evidence, which is why we want to have pilots to bring in more evidence and test the system to see whether we can reduce costs on the system as a whole through, for example, greater and earlier intervention. I want to build up an evidence-based business case to see how we should move forward. In respect of evaluating the impact on particular groups, one has to consider the system on an area by area basis. It is important that we continue to engage and look at the evidence that emerges.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Wales has seen the largest decline in legal aid providers over the past five years, with a decrease of some 29%. How will the Lord Chancellor ensure that citizens in Wales, particularly those in rural areas, are not put at a greater disadvantage and are able to access legal aid without having to travel prohibitive distances?

Mr Gauke: For rural areas as a whole, this review underlines the need to ensure that we are prepared to look at technology and innovation so that access to justice is greater and we have the ability to point people in the right direction. There is a real opportunity here, and it is important that we embrace it. The innovation
fund of up to £5 million will encourage investment in this area so that we can find new and better ways of ensuring that, wherever a person is in the United Kingdom, they are able to access justice.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Although I welcome the inclusion of separated children in legal aid for immigration cases, the plan otherwise does little to deal with the many problems faced by people in the asylum and immigration system in getting good quality advice. Inadequate legal advice has a damaging impact on people with a right to sanctuary, but no advice is worse, so will the Lord Chancellor please reconsider the decision to keep legal aid for refugee family reunion out of the scope of civil legal aid?

Mr Gauke: As I have said, the change that we have announced today in the context of unaccompanied minors is an important step. I am grateful to the hon. Lady for welcoming that. We do spend money on the legal aid system—I think it is something like £40 million on immigration and asylum—and it is important that we provide support in this area. There is a wider point that must be accepted: there are limited resources available, and we need to ensure that they are targeted in the best way possible. It is right that we have announced changes today in the particular context of unaccompanied minors and immigration.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): May I ask the Lord Chancellor two things? First, will he use his considerable influence to get us a whole-day debate on these reviews? The Act took about a year to get through. We have had three reviews and an action plan—almost 500 pages today—and this review has taken two years. With the best will in the world, I do not think that this statement will do justice to that.

Secondly, can we look at the overall cumulative effect on his Department of the 40% cuts that will take place in legal aid and the courts? Will he sit down with the profession and the judiciary to discuss that? I was the shadow legal aid Minister during the passage of the Act. We did warn about many of the consequences, but we probably underestimated the overall effect on the court system. This is very important to individuals who are seeking redress. There is also a dysfunctionality in the courts now, particularly in areas such as the family courts, and we have to sit down seriously and address those issues.

Mr Gauke: First, on the matter of a whole-day debate—it sounds as if this were a continuation of business questions—the hon. Gentleman has made his point. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), has been replying to Westminster Hall debates on this matter fairly regularly, but I am sure that his point has been noted, and we will of course give consideration to it.

On the overall effect on the courts and justice system, let me make two points. First, it was widely accepted that, after the financial crash, there was going to be a need to bring public spending under control, including in this area, and any responsible Government would have had to make some difficult decisions, including in this area. Secondly, the Government are investing £1 billion in a court reform programme, making sure that we bring our system up to date. In ensuring careful stewardship of public money while also ensuring that we have a world-class legal and justice system, we will have to embrace innovation and technology and do things differently, and I do not shy away from that in any way.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab) rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The prize for patience and perseverance goes to Louise Haigh.

Louise Haigh: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. In the past six years, there has been a shocking 134% increase in the number of parents facing child custody cases without legal representation. Surely the Secretary of State agrees that no parent should find themselves forced into that situation, so what steps is he introducing today to remedy that?

Mr Gauke: We are taking adoption cases out of the means test, so that is a change. I have already addressed points about special guardianship orders and unaccompanied minors, so there are steps that we are taking in this area. We already spend considerable sums of money in this field, and I hope that when the hon. Lady has an opportunity to look in detail at some of our proposals, she will see that we are trying to address those concerns. We do not have unlimited sums of money—there is no bottomless pit—but we are taking steps to ensure that the system can work as effectively as possible.
Venezuela

1.15 pm

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The House will now be familiar with the plight of Venezuela. It is suffering from economic devastation, starvation and malnutrition. The flight of more than 3 million Venezuelans to neighbouring countries is the largest migration crisis in Latin American history. The systematic dismantling of freedom, liberty and justice by the kleptocratic regime of Nicolás Maduro has marked it out as a country where people’s rights have been stolen.

In the past few weeks, the overwhelming majority of us in this House have condemned the political repression and electoral malpractice of a regime that is increasingly desperate to cling on to power. On Monday, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary announced that the UK will now recognise Juan Guaidó, the president of the National Assembly, as the constitutional interim President of Venezuela. The UK is one of 19 EU member states to have done so after the deadline for new elections to be called passed on Sunday.

It is worth reminding ourselves how events have rapidly changed the situation in Venezuela and have led the UK and our international partners to take action. Last May, Nicolás Maduro claimed a victory in a presidential election that was widely considered to have been deeply flawed. In January, a day after his so-called presidential inauguration, which was boycotted by the international community, the Venezuelan National Assembly declared Maduro’s tenure illegitimate. The Venezuelan people have shown their discontent in massive protests across the country. They have been demonstrating against the continued trashing of their country by the grossly incompetent, criminal and corrupt governance caused by Maduro’s warped version of socialism.

On 23 January, the president of the National Assembly, Juan Guaidó, announced, with constitutional authority, that he will act as interim President of the country until free and fair elections take place. He spoke with the full backing of the National Assembly which, as an institution, is the sole legitimate survivor of Maduro’s systematic dismantling of the country’s democracy. This moment saw Venezuela’s democratic leaders taking courageous steps to set things right and to put the needs of the people before themselves. It was legal and gave the international community a responsibility to act immediately, as the US, Canada and the Lima Group countries did by supporting Juan Guaidó and Venezuela’s legitimate representatives.

For our part, the UK worked closely with our EU partners shortly after Juan Guaidó’s announcement. On 24 January, the Foreign Secretary said that Nicolás Maduro was no longer the legitimate leader of Venezuela. Two days later at the UN Security Council, where I represented the UK, I set out our position, which is his imposter alternative and which has no equivalent legitimacy.

The arrogance of Nicolás Maduro is such that those calls have not been answered. He has instead called for early new elections for the last remaining democratic institution, the National Assembly, supposedly so as to “bring peace”, which we can assume actually means to snuff out the remaining source of challenge to his grip on power, so this was a false promise. The National Assembly has already been duly elected and Maduro wants it to be overseen by the Constituent Assembly, which is his impostor alternative and which has no equivalent legitimacy.

The international community has taken significant steps in response to these events. As I said, I represented the United Kingdom at the UN Security Council when I set out the UK’s call for elections and made clear the responsibility of Council members to demonstrate the UN’s leadership on this issue. We look forward to further discussions there. On Monday, I went to Ottawa at the invitation of the Canadian Foreign Minister to join the meeting of the Lima Group countries, where I discussed the situation with Foreign Ministers from across the region. We also discussed the importance of getting humanitarian aid into Venezuela and also to the neighbouring countries which are bearing the brunt of receiving over 3 million migrants. It was during my trip to Ottawa on Monday that the Foreign Secretary formally announced that the UK recognises Juan Guaidó as interim President of Venezuela, in accordance with the Venezuelan constitution. The UK was one of 19 EU member states, including France, Germany, Spain and the Netherlands, to take similar simultaneous action. So we are not alone in our views of the Maduro regime. We continue to work in concert with the Organisation of American States, the Lima Group, the United States and like-minded European and international partners.

Our thoughts now turn to the next steps. First, we remain clear that Maduro is illegitimate and that we now recognise the National Assembly president Juan Guaidó as constitutional interim President of Venezuela until credible, free and fair elections are held. We are providing support to multilateral organisations such as the UN, the EU and the Red Cross Movement through our existing contributions. Last year, the UK was the largest donor to the UN’s central emergency response fund, which has allocated $26 million to the region, including $9 million for emergency health and nutrition support.

We must also keep up the pressure on Maduro with one united voice. The UK has taken a lead in the EU by calling for a tougher response to the regime in the light of the failure to call new elections. This may include further targeted sanctions, in co-ordination with recent steps taken by the United States. The UK also stands closely alongside our Lima Group partners. Outside Venezuela, they have borne the brunt of this crisis, and earlier this week their Ministers made clear to me in no uncertain terms the severity of the situation for them.

In speaking with one voice, I sincerely hope that this House proves united in expressing its condemnation of Nicolás Maduro and in asserting its support for the Lima Group’s determination to design a better future for Venezuela by working with Juan Guaidó and the National Assembly. I commend this statement to the House.

1.22 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement.
I hope that the Minister will today rule out the prospect of military intervention or some other form of outside interference, whether from the United States or anyone else, in Venezuela. I agree with him that the economic and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela is all the more unacceptable because it has been so utterly avoidable. The United States has enforced devastating economic sanctions on the country and has constantly intervened to support opposition forces. The former UN rapporteur Alfred-Maurice de Zayas called these sanctions “crimes against humanity”.

None of this means blind support for the Maduro Government. It is true that between 2012 and 2016, the oil price collapsed. That was clearly a problem. Mismanagement by the Government has totally compounded it, leading to hyperinflation, the collapse of the currency and desperate shortages of food, medicine and other essentials. As a result, there is malnutrition and more than half a million cases of malaria, and refugees in their millions are leaving the country—more than 1 million have gone to Colombia, which puts at risk that country’s peace process.

If the Maduro Government’s response to all that was to work tirelessly to resolve the problems with assistance from the international community, I might have our sympathy and support, but instead their response has been to answer rising public anger at the crisis with increased repression, violence and abuse of human rights. Amnesty reports the widespread excessive use of force against protestors and the torture of detainees.

So, it seems clear to us on this side that the essential starting points in resolving the crisis in Venezuela, and in restoring peace, democracy and stability, must be: first, for all parties to engage in dialogue to overcome the crisis; secondly, in the interim, for all parties to respect the rule of law, human rights and democratic processes; and ultimately, in due course, to allow the Venezuelan people themselves to decide the way forward through free and fair elections. As I have said, the way forward for Venezuela must not be military intervention or some other form of outside interference, whether from the United States or anyone else. The future of Venezuela must be a matter for Venezuelans.

We have all heard Donald Trump say repeatedly that all options are on the table when it comes to Venezuela. Indeed, the Minister of State used similar language himself in October, so can he give us some clarity today? Do the UK and the President of the United States include in their list of all options the possibility of military intervention in Venezuela? Has that been discussed with the Trump Administration, and has the UK promised any support in the event that the US takes action? I hope and trust that the answer will be no, but it would be useful to hear that directly from the Minister of State.

May I ask four further questions? First, we all appreciate the huge challenges for neighbouring countries in dealing with the influx of refugees from Venezuela, especially in Colombia, so will the Minister tell us what efforts are being made to ensure that those refugees receive the humanitarian support they need? Secondly, can he tell us what plans he has to use the Magnitsky powers that we gave him several months ago and impose targeted sanctions against those who are abusing human rights in Venezuela? Thirdly, in our recent proceedings on an urgent question about Venezuela, the Minister of State gave a somewhat blithe answer to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) about the need for a Marshall plan for Venezuela in any post-Maduro era. The Minister said it would not be necessary because Venezuela is sitting on such large oil reserves, but does he accept that it is not oil it needs reserves of, but foreign currency, which has been the main cause of the food shortages and hyperinflation that has left the Venezuelan economy so crippled? If, as he says in his statement, he wants to see a new Government in place in Caracas, can he say again what economic and humanitarian support there would be from the international community to help to resolve the current crisis? [Interruption.] I am glad the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) finds this so amusing.

Finally, it was also interesting when we considered the recent urgent question that the shadow Foreign Secretary asked the Minister of State why he was speaking out against human rights abuses, rigged elections and repression of political protests in Venezuela, but had absolutely nothing to say about exactly the same issues in Honduras, where the British Government are selling arms and surveillance equipment to the Honduran Government and sending them trade delegations. The Minister failed to answer the shadow Foreign Secretary’s question, so I am going to ask him now to explain that double-standard between Venezuela and Honduras? Why are the Government not consistent, as we are on this side of the House, in condemning all Governments that abuse human rights?

Sir Alan Duncan: I can only say to the hon. Lady that when she sits down and reads the record of the response that she has just offered the House, she will look upon it with a high degree of embarrassment. She has been given the words to speak by her party, but those words are, to a large extent, not shared by most Members of her party. Let me just go through what she said and answer her comments.

First, the hon. Lady said, in a rather weak turn of phrase, that this was not just avoidable. No, it was avoidable; but, more than that, it was actually created by one man and his cronies who have destroyed the prosperity and wellbeing of an entire country and its people.

Secondly, let me turn to the question of sanctions. The hon. Lady may wish to be aware that, as a former oil trader, I do know a little bit about oil. Anyone who does not will know enough to know that what she has been saying this morning simply does not hold together. US sanctions on oil cannot be blamed for destroying the country when they have only just been announced, so blaming the collapse of Venezuela on US sanctions is absurd and wrong. The person to blame for the collapse of the Venezuelan oil industry is Nicolás Maduro himself. He has destroyed the greatest foreign currency-earning resource, which the country could be benefiting from had he not completely destroyed it.

Yesterday, the shadow Foreign Secretary endeavoured to make a wide-ranging speech about her party’s approach to foreign policy generally, within which she said that she was a great believer in sanctions. Yet, not only does the shadow Minister seem to disagree with that, but the Leader of the Opposition also seems to disagree with that policy statement.

This is not about outside influence, although the supportive pressure from the Lima Group is welcomed by all Venezuelans. This is about empowering the legitimacy
of Venezuelans themselves inside Venezuela. We want to empower Venezuelans, not tell them what to do from outside. Help, yes—instruction, no.

I am also rather perturbed that the hon. Lady appeared very weak and feeble in her support for the Lima Group. This group of neighbouring countries, led by the previous and current Foreign Ministers of Peru, have been very courageous and thoughtful in designing their support collectively for the legitimate forces of Venezuela. We should give them our full support, and that is what the United Kingdom has been doing in the United Nations and in Ottawa on Monday.

There are many countries around, including the United Kingdom, who are doing their utmost to supply humanitarian aid into Venezuela. But what could be more disgusting than what we saw yesterday—pictures of the Maduro regime having blockaded the way into Venezuela, and streets within it, in order to stop humanitarian aid getting into the country? That man is in denial about aid even being needed, even though he has driven that country to total destitution.

On the question of the Marshall plan, I fully understand the concept behind the idea. Very honestly, it is too early to say whether that is appropriate for the country or able to be pieced together. I was part of many pledging conferences for Yemen and for Syria when I was the Minister for International Development, and I have no doubt that there will be a high degree of international support for Venezuela. But one of the great advantages of Venezuela compared with the other two countries that I have mentioned is that those millions who have fled will want and, we hope, be able to go back. The country also has the largest oil reserves in the world, which—if they are properly organised and managed—can give a massive inflow of the foreign exchange and resources that the country so desperately needs.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Some of us will remember a Venezuelan MP at November’s Women MPs of the World conference who spoke in this very Chamber about her battle for her country, and specifically for the rights of women and transgender people there. Her words are very much in my mind as I ask my right hon. Friend this question. Will he give us his view on the prospects for a peaceful transition to a new democratically legitimate and economically literate regime in Venezuela?

Sir Alan Duncan: Perhaps I can answer my hon. Friend with the words used by a female Venezuelan politician, María Corina Machado, this morning on BBC Radio 4. She said:

“On behalf of the Venezuelan people, I ask and demand every single democrat around the world to understand that this chaos and tragedy we are living in Venezuela stopped being an ideological discussion between left and right a long time ago. It’s between life and death. It’s between a criminal state and justice. It’s between oppression and freedom. Being indifferent amounts to being part of the regime that wants to impose silence, death and violence in Venezuela.”

With those words in our minds, I totally agree with my hon. Friend that we want to see the return of legitimate government, and women are going to play a very important part in taking Venezuela on that new journey.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the Minister for providing an advance copy of his statement.

The situation is deeply concerning, and I want to make it clear that we condemn the violence and the regime that is carrying out the violence. The political and economic crisis gripping the country is spiralling into a regional humanitarian disaster, and we are at risk of allowing a lost generation of Venezuelans I am pleased that the Minister discussed the importance of getting humanitarian aid into Venezuela and the neighbouring countries when he was in Ottawa. Will he please give us some more information around the specific measures that are in place to ensure that the aid does reach the right places? As he says, 3 million people have had to flee, and many of them have had to flee on foot—over 1 million to Colombia, for example. It would be helpful if he could give us some more information on that.

The right to self-determination is one owed to people in every country in the world. In the end, it will be for the Venezuelan people to choose their own political future, and there is a need for there to be free and fair elections in that regard. Will the Minister tell us what steps he has taken to support the Venezuelan people in strengthening their democratic institutions, so that they can have a democracy that is actually a democracy in reality, not just in name?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am very happy to say that I agree with the hon. Lady in all respects. On humanitarian aid, while I was in Ottawa I spoke at some length to my right hon. Friend the Secretary State for International Development, and I will be meeting her again next week. We are discussing how we can anticipate the way in which aid might be delivered once the country is, as we hope, again opened up. We are planning to try to work with multilateral organisations for when Venezuela can be properly assisted. I rather think that, although we know there is a humanitarian problem, when we lift the lid and look more deeply into what has been brought upon the Venezuelan people, we are likely to find out that it is far more severe than we even contemplate at the moment. We need to be ready for that eventuality, and I know that the International Development Secretary and the whole Department for International Development apparatus are now looking at this very deeply.

On the question of helping Venezuela to get up and running in a legitimate way, I would make one simple point, which is that the country does have a constitution. The problem is not the constitution, but that Maduro has not upheld the constitution. He holds up the little book and then bends all the rules that are written inside it. All we need is to uphold the proper process and principles of that constitution. That is exactly what Juan Guaidó and the National Assembly are doing, and they are now the foundation for reasserting the proper workings of the constitution through free, fair and effective legitimate elections.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), which was regrettable. I am afraid, ill-judged in both its tone and content.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), which was regrettable. I am afraid, ill-judged in both its tone and content.
Will he assure me that we are doing everything we can to condemn the persecution and intimidation being meted out by this socialist regime to opposition activists?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am sure the House will hope that I do not get into a semantic argument about the use of the words “Marxist”, “socialist”, “Leninist” or “Trotskyist”. I am not as great an expert on such words as some Opposition Members are. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The freedom of journalists who are getting in is absolutely essential. We will do our utmost to uphold human rights there, but also to bring to account those who have abused them.

Let me say two things. First, on the use of the Magnitsky clause, I apologise to the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) for not answering her question about that, but let me do so now. We would like to be able to do this now, but the process of getting the application of the Magnitsky clause workable within the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 will take a few more stages of parliamentary approval. It needs to go through certain statutory instruments and things like that, so it is not yet up and running, but we would like it to be. We would obviously like to do that as soon as we can, within the broader snowstorm of Brexit SIs.

Secondly, the Lima Group countries have referred Venezuela—the state and not just individuals within it—to the International Criminal Court, citing some 18,000 extra-judicial killings and many other such instances that they believe create a very strong case against Maduro and his entire regime under the rules of the ICC.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I very much welcome the Minister’s and the UK Government’s recognition of Juan Guaidó as the interim President of Venezuela. I think that the response by the shadow Minister was frankly astonishing in almost seeking to absolve the Maduro regime of the responsibility that it should have for this crisis in the country that is causing misery to millions.

Will the Minister tell the House a little more about how further sanctions might be invoked, both in making sure that they are so finely targeted as not to have a negative impact on the people who are already suffering, and in using them to put pressure on individuals, particularly senior members of the military, to stop their backing for the corrupt and illegitimate Maduro regime, as that is what is enabling it to maintain its stranglehold on the country?

Sir Alan Duncan: I welcome the hon. Lady’s welcome, if I may put it that way. I am glad that so many in this House find themselves in agreement. She is absolutely right. If we can apply some more targeted sanctions against individuals at the top in a way that does not undermine the wellbeing, such as it is, of the people themselves, we will of course want to pursue that.

At the moment, that still requires EU sanctions. We do not yet have our autonomous ability to impose sanctions in that way. I hope that we will discuss further EU sanctions. We are not quite there yet because there are one or two elements within the EU who are resisting such pressures, but I hope we can overcome that.

The other respect in which we might be able to be more effective is to try to make sure that the money dries up. At the moment, the ever more isolated Maduro regime is held together by the support, primarily, of the military. In order to maintain that, he needs the money with which to pay them. I hope that in the coming weeks we will see the gradual erosion of support within the military for this increasingly isolated President. I hope that they will peel off and that we can help them to do so by making sure that the money flows that allow him to buy their support disappear as quickly as possible.

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): The economic collapse in Venezuela has left 90% of its population in poverty. Will my right hon. Friend join me in condemning those in this House who have actually praised the Venezuelan regime for conquering poverty?

Sir Alan Duncan: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. This goes back a long way. Indeed, the Leader of the Opposition was an enormous fan of Maduro’s predecessor, Mr Chávez. He went out of his way to praise him for his inspiring leadership and “for showing that the poor matter and wealth can be shared.” That sharing of wealth allowed Chávez to amass a fortune of over $1 billion while his people pretty well had to go and lick the streets in order to feed themselves. This allows me to point out, I hope very clearly, that anyone who says that Venezuela’s plight is down to the action of the Americans and their sanctions ought to read my Chatham House speech from last November, which maps out in great detail the steps that Chávez and Maduro took, over many years, that have led to the complete collapse of the Venezuelan economy, almost all of which had nothing whatsoever to do with the United States.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister understand that the problem with those on the political extremes of the spectrum is that they tend, in an ideological way, to see the world in terms of black and white, oppressor and oppressed? There is a real problem in seeing Maduro and his regime as the victim of others—America or whoever it may be. The truth is that the direct cause of the mass starvation and the 3 million refugees is the Chávez-Maduro corrupt communism that has been pursued in that country. A better illustration we could not get than the picture of the blockaded bridge that is still leading to starvation in the country. The doctors, by the way, are not allowed to designate people who die from malnutrition as having done so because they are banned from putting that on the death certificates.

What can we do to influence and put pressure on the regime? Can we get the Russian Administration to do more, or the Chinese or the Cubans? Are there individuals, perhaps even the leader of the Labour party, who have a close relationship with Maduro who could at this stage pick up the telephone and implore him—beg him—to stop this appalling approach and to leave government immediately?
Sir Alan Duncan: If that were to work, we would all absolutely welcome it. Any influence that can be brought to bear should be used, out of basic human decency. This is not an ideological conflict, although some who seem to be more inclined to support Maduro than is the rest of the world have been accused of guilt on a number of counts—of supporting economic insanity, of indifference to intense human suffering, of a refusal to accept any measures to alleviate it, of an adherence to an ideology and a hatred for any leadership that is offered by the United States and the western world. Those attitudes have to be set aside. If there can be a practical course of action along the lines that the hon. Gentleman describes, we should encourage it. That is what is needed. We need this man to hand over power to the legitimate authorities in Venezuela so that his people can be rescued.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The Minister mentioned the fact that food aid is being blockaded. Are there any alternative plans to get the food aid through to the Venezuelan people? There is also the issue of Venezuela’s gold reserves in Turkey that has been mentioned in press reports. What is the position in relation to that?

Sir Alan Duncan: I hope that pressure from neighbouring countries can have some effect in getting humanitarian aid in. Looking at the pictures we saw on our screens yesterday, I think it inevitable that there will be ever-deepening popular outrage in Venezuela itself that is likely to express itself increasingly strongly if Maduro remains in denial about humanitarian aid to the point of blocking it and forcing his people to starve in front of the world’s television cameras at the border.

On gold, there are gold reserves held by the Bank of England. It holds them under a contract; it is entirely down to the Bank, as an independent Bank of England. It is nothing to do with this Government. We are not empowered to, nor should we in any way attempt to, influence the decision of the Bank of England. I am sure that the Bank will be looking at unfolding events in Venezuela to work out who is legitimate and who is not.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I start by distancing myself from the remarks from the Labour Front Bench in relation to the blame for the crisis that Venezuela is suffering, which is destroying the fabric of the country. The responsibility for that does absolutely lie with Maduro and his predecessor, Chavez; most of us in this House are certain about that.

What worries me at the moment is the blockade on the border between Venezuela and Colombia. The people of Venezuela need that aid urgently, so what are the UK Government doing to bring pressure to bear to ensure that it can get through? Will the Minister convey a message from the vast majority of the Members of this House that we will not tolerate efforts by the Venezuelan regime to stop aid getting through to its people? It is deplorable.

Sir Alan Duncan: I absolutely and totally agree with the hon. Lady, and totally share her decent human concern for the plight of Venezuelans, who are being denied the offer of desperately needed aid. May I make it absolutely clear that I, and I think all on the Government side of the House, are actually far less interested in pointing out the absurdity of some of the views held by those on Labour’s Front Bench than we are in wanting to find unity across the House in a way that can make the United Kingdom’s voice strong and loud in trying to help the people of Venezuela at this critical time. I therefore applaud what the hon. Lady and very many —indeed, the majority—of her colleagues have said, and are continuing to say, on this issue. When it comes to aid, we will do all we can. We have limited muscle, if you like, but the best way to do our best is to work with other countries, such as the Lima Group, which are there, as a strong neighbouring presence, to keep up the pressure on Maduro and Venezuela.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I thank the Minister for coming to the House today to make a statement. This is the second time that the House has debated the issue in the last 10 days. Really, we are talking about two different things here. First, this is being used as a subject to beat the Leader of the Opposition with for his defence of a Marxist regime. Secondly, it is being used by the Government side to increase the Government’s influence on the world stage. The Leader of the Opposition is not here to defend his Marxist views, and that is fine, but I would like to hear what the Minister has to say —where does he really think the role of the United Kingdom is upon the international stage —because anything we say about dialogue, empowerment and recognition of opponents will have no tangible benefit for the people of Venezuela, who are genuinely suffering.

Sir Alan Duncan: I do not wholly agree with my hon. Friend’s suggestion that our influence and efforts amount to so little. I actually think that the UK has managed to establish itself as a very strong voice within the European Union, and as the head of the “EU pack”, on this. I have been working with the Lima Group since it was led by the previous Peruvian Foreign Minister; it is now led by new Foreign Minister Popolizio. I think that has helped to galvanise world opinion in a way that is making a difference. The one thing it may show itself to have done is to have given Juan Guaidó the confidence to make the stand that he has in asserting the workings of the constitution and declaring himself the interim President. If that then leads to elections, we will look back and say that it has made a difference.

I urge my hon. Friend to be a little more optimistic about how effective international diplomacy can be when it is wrestling with an issue such as this.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Is the Minister as concerned as I am about some of the displacement rhetoric and nonsense that has been put about on TV stations in the past few days? It is simply anti-American. Does that not cause us a more significant problem when we look at Maduro using that anti-American nonsense and rhetoric—sanctions that do not exist, military invasion that is not happening; there are no troops there—as an excuse to stop US aid going in across the Colombian border to help those poor Venezuelans? Does the Minister agree that that nonsense rhetoric is damaging the poor people of Venezuela, and that we should be concerned and should be welcoming the United States’ aid getting in to help those Venezuelan people? That should be our priority—not anti-western, anti-American bashing.
Sir Alan Duncan: I echo the cries behind me and around the House of “Well said.” The hon. Gentleman speaks enormous sense because under the guise of anti-imperialism, those on the far left have made themselves useful for actual imperialists, as long as they are not American. They have used the spectre of western intervention to ignore or downplay real interventions on the part of other powerful imperial nations. “Displacement rhetoric”, as the hon. Gentleman puts it, is a good way of describing it, and it is culpable because it displaces the focus that we need to have on what positively can and must be done to rescue that poor beleaguered country.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): And finally, Mr John Spellar.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I would certainly have hoped that Andrew Neil’s recent demolition of Ken Livingstone had put to bed any claims that there had been general sanctions on Venezuela, rather than targeted ones on regime individuals. So I welcome Britain’s recognition of Juan Guaidó as the lawful President of Venezuela, and I welcome the announcement of the current aid effort. My hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development spoke enormous sense because under the guise of anti-imperialism, those on the far left have made themselves useful for actual imperialists, as long as they are not American. They have used the spectre of western intervention to ignore or downplay real interventions on the part of other powerful imperial nations. “Displacement rhetoric”, as the hon. Gentleman puts it, is a good way of describing it, and it is culpable because it displaces the focus that we need to have on what positively can and must be done to rescue that poor beleaguered country.

Social Media and Screen Use: Young People’s Health

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE
Select Committee statement

1.58 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We now come to the first of today’s Select Committee statements. Mr Norman Lamb will speak—

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD) rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am sorry; I have to give a little explanation, as these matters are still fairly new to the House, so we will make sure that we get the procedure correct. Mr Norman Lamb will speak on his subject for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement, and call Mr Lamb to respond to these in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions, and should be brief. Front Benchers may, if they so wish, take part in this questioning.

1.59 pm

Norman Lamb: I rise to make a statement on our report on the impact of social media and screen use on young people’s health. Before I cover our key findings, I want to pay tribute to Ian Russell, the father of Molly Russell, who tragically took her own life. The decision of Ian Russell to speak out and raise concerns about what Molly saw online, through Instagram, has had a profound impact in raising public consciousness of the potential risks, but also in galvanising the debate and the call for action to ensure that children are protected from harm.

I thank the 174 organisations and individuals who provided us with written evidence, and the 37 individuals who gave oral evidence. I am particularly grateful to all the young people who took part in our survey and told us of their experiences of using social media. We received over 3,000 responses from schools across the UK, which was amazing. This is an evidence-based report, and it would not have been possible without the input of all those people. I thank the parliamentary outreach and education services for facilitating the responses from schools. I would also like to thank the brilliant team who support the Science and Technology Committee in the work we do.

Throughout our inquiry, we heard repeatedly that children no longer make a distinction between the online and offline worlds. The boundaries between the two have become blurred. In 2015, almost a quarter of 15-year-olds in the UK spent six hours a day or more online outside school, and much of that time was spent on social media. At its best, social media can be a positive, transformative force in a young person’s life. It is a way of keeping in touch with friends and of connecting instantaneously with people across the world from different backgrounds. Crucially, it has given many young people an opportunity for their voice to be heard on the issues that they care most about.
At its worst, however, social media has been linked to cyber-bullying, grooming, sexting and the promotion of harmful information and behaviours. Those risks are not new and they are not caused by social media. We are clear throughout our report that social media can act both to amplify and to facilitate those risks. For example, we heard how bullying no longer stops at the school gate. Instead, it finds its way into children’s homes via social media, sometimes taking place in front of a large online audience.

Frustratingly, we do not have a good enough understanding of the scale of the problem—be it cyber-bullying via social media or grooming—or do we have robust academic evidence of the relationship between the use of social media by young people and its effect on their health. That is not an acceptable situation. It cannot be right that we do not yet have a good grasp of who is at risk of experiencing harm from using social media and why, or of the longer-term consequences of that exposure on children.

Social media is, of course, still a young research field, but the more pressing problem is that researchers lack access to data on social media and its use. That valuable data is held by social media companies. It has the potential to provide the types of insights that are so clearly needed, yet social media companies have not readily shared it with bona fide researchers. It is deeply disappointing that we continue to grapple around in the dark on this issue when the answers could be forthcoming.

In our report, we call on social media companies to make anonymised high-level data available for research purposes to bona fide researchers, while also respecting data protection principles. We also stress that the Government should consider what legislation needs to be in place to make that happen. Incidentally, I very much welcome the chief medical officer’s report today and her call for access to data for research, which matches the Committee’s call. I also very much welcome her guidance to parents and others.

The lack of good-quality academic evidence does not give us a licence simply to sit back and do nothing. We heard repeatedly from parents, carers, teachers and children themselves that they were worried about the detrimental effects of social media. Arguably, we have waited far too long for social media companies to step up to the plate and address the risks that their platforms facilitate. Successive voluntary codes of practice and guidance have not delivered effective protection for children online.

Legislative progress, too, has been patchy and achingly slow. Most online content is still subject to little or no specific regulation, creating, in effect, a “standards lottery”, as the regulator, Ofcom, has described it. Change is long overdue. Sometimes the opportunity to enact vital changes feels infuriatingly out of reach. I hope that will not be the case on this occasion. The Government’s forthcoming online harms White Paper, with the prospect of legislation to follow, presents a crucial opportunity to put a world-leading regulatory framework in place. This chance must not be squandered.

First and foremost, a principles-based regulatory regime for social media companies should be introduced in the form of a new primary legislation underpinned by strong sanctions. The regime should apply to any site with registered UK users. At the core of this new regime must be the principle that social media companies have a duty of care towards their users who are under 18. In essence, that means that children must be protected from harm when accessing and using social media sites. It should be achieved through social media companies acting with reasonable care to avoid identified harms. If enacted, it would be a powerful, game-changing step, and it is one that my Committee urges the Government to take.

Social media companies must also be far more open and transparent in how they operate and particularly how they moderate, review and prioritise content. To achieve that, the Government should introduce a statutory code of practice for social media companies to provide consistency on content reporting practices. This will require primary legislation. We were particularly encouraged by the German example of the Government setting a clear 24-hour timeframe in which social media companies must respond to reports of potentially illegal content. A similar approach should be put in place in the UK.

To uphold the new regime, a regulator should be appointed by the end of October 2019. We believe that Ofcom, working alongside the Information Commissioner’s Office, is well placed to perform this role. Ofcom should not only monitor compliance with the proposed code of practice, but have the necessary teeth to take enforcement action when warranted. Enforcement actions must be backed by a strong and effective sanctions regime. Consideration should be given to whether directors ought to be held personally liable.

Finally, the digital literacy and resilience of children, as well as of their teachers and parents, must be improved. Young people in particular must be equipped with the skills that they need to navigate and assess what they are seeing on social media and beyond. To achieve this, personal, social, health and economic education must soon be made mandatory by the Government for both primary and secondary school pupils. It should deliver an age-appropriate understanding of the harms and benefits of the digital world.

I want to finish on an optimistic note. I am encouraged by the sheer amount of interest in and the work that is currently being undertaken on this matter, which is occurring both inside and outside Government. What we need now is action—effective action in the form of new primary legislation that brings forward a robust regulatory regime, underpinned by strong sanctions. What we do not need is more toothless voluntary codes that can be ignored by social media companies.

Success depends on sustained leadership and commitment from the Government, even when it is difficult. At the core of this, there needs to be a legal duty of care, with the clear understanding that there are consequences for their actions if social media companies fail to protect children. Without leadership and perseverance, the worst that social media has to offer will continue to blight the lives of children. This must not be tolerated.
life after viewing images on Instagram? Did the Committee consider the concerning issue of social media companies that will not release the data concerning a young person who has died, possibly as a result of images that have been seen in that way, and did it form a view on what should be done?

Norman Lamb: Molly Russell’s father, Ian Russell, spoke out after we completed our report, and what he said about the experience of his daughter is central to our recommendations. There must be much greater transparency, as well as mechanisms to ensure that the very harmful materials that Molly saw on Instagram do not come in front of children online. Children must be protected from such harm, and the hon. Lady is right to highlight that issue.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve on the Committee chaired by the right hon. Gentleman, especially with regard to this report. I wholly agree with its conclusions, but draw particular importance to the point about data access, which is vital for future knowledge, as well as the duty of care. Does he agree that our conclusions about parental engagement are of equal importance? Parents have a key role to play in empowering their children and giving them resilience online, but they themselves need huge support to educate their children. The onus is therefore on Governments across the United Kingdom to ensure that parents have the right remedies, right knowledge, and right access to information to be able to educate their children and protect them online.

Norman Lamb: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks, which I entirely share as I enjoy working on the Committee with him. He is right to highlight the need for guidance and advice from the parents’ perspective, which is why I welcome the chief medical officer’s report today. One thing she highlights, which is potentially uncomfortable for us all, is the fact that children report being concerned about parents who use social media in front of their children, rather than engaging with them. In a way that makes the point that we all have a responsibility. The Government have to act, because the time for legislation is long overdue, but as we grapple to cope with the social revolution that has happened over the past five years, we as a society all have a responsibility.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on this incredibly important report, which complements some of the work done by the Education Committee. Does he support the request made to the Chairman of Ways and Means to make arrangements to question Ministers in Westminster Hall, in order to test how joined up the Government are in arrangements to question Ministers in Westminster Hall, which complements some of the work done by the Education Committee.

Norman Lamb: I think that is a brilliant idea. I completely support the right hon. Gentleman’s suggestion and would be happy to work with him to ensure that it happens. The opportunity for us across Committees to challenge and question Ministers and ensure effective action is a valuable one.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I, too, commend the Committee and its Chair for this excellent report. I have not yet had the chance to read it, but I wish to ask the right hon. Gentleman two questions. First, is he aware of the excellent work being done by my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) and the all-party group on social media and young people’s mental health and wellbeing, which he chairs? It recently held an inquiry into social media and young people’s mental health, which will be published in March, and I urge the right hon. Gentleman to take note of that.

The second point is about the potential for social media to be a force for good in relation to young people’s health. I chair the all-party group on children, teenagers, and young adults with cancer, and we are keen for good health messages to go out on social media because, as the right hon. Gentleman says, young people today see no difference between the online and offline worlds, and social media is potentially a powerful force for good. Would he consider holding a further inquiry, if necessary, to explore that issue?

Norman Lamb: I would be happy to work with the all-party group to ensure that our collective learning on this issue feeds into decision making by the Government, so that we get the legislation right and as quickly as possible. The hon. Lady makes the important point that social media is often a force for good. It is important to have a balanced view of this issue, and although we must recognise the powerful potential good impact that social media can have, we must also recognise its risks and harms and take action to protect children from those harms, while not throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): I wish to follow on from the point raised by the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) about the potential force for good of social media, and I thank the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and his Committee for this report. I also wish to reflect on comments made yesterday by the Suicide Prevention Minister, who referred to the opportunity to use algorithms to promote things positively. As a parent of four daughters aged between 15 and 20, and as a mother who works away, I can say that social media has had a very positive influence in my daughters’ lives. One particular YouTuber, Zoe Sugg, was almost a virtual big sister in our household, and I echo those comments and encourage more positive stories around social media and the opportunity for positive algorithms to support its use in the future.

Norman Lamb: The hon. Lady makes a valuable point, and I am conscious that teenagers and young people can get online access to advice, guidance and support to help them through difficult periods of their life, and encourage them to seek help from others. We must recognise that and ensure that our approach to this issue is balanced, both recognising the potential harms and understanding the positive aspects of social media.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I congratulate my right hon. Friend and his Committee on the production of this excellent report. Does he agree that as new technology develops, and particularly as we hand more control over to algorithms, there is an urgent need to ensure that ethical considerations are fully thought through at the design stage? In addition to the specific regulation that he envisages, we also need a more general
code of data ethics—a sort of Hippocratic oath, perhaps, for developers and data scientists—to ensure that those principles are thought through as technology is developed. Would he support my campaign for such a code to be named after Ada Lovelace?

Norman Lamb: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution, and I would support her campaign. I also agree about the importance of designing ethics into the way that algorithms operate. Indeed, this week our Committee took evidence from the head of the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation, and there is an important discussion to be had. Although there are rapid developments on the ground with the Government using algorithms in all sorts of different ways, we do not fully understand how to ensure an ethical framework that protects people from bias and can be built into the data used by algorithms. If such bias become embedded into the algorithms there are very dangerous potential outcomes, and my hon. Friend is correct to say that we need to get this right.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): May I join the right hon. Gentleman in congratulating our Committee Clerks on helping us with this extensive and high-quality report? Does he agree that in traditional regulated sectors, the idea that a regulator should be able to see data to assess harm on behalf of consumers and take action in an appropriate way is perfectly normal? Not just our report but that by the chief medical officer, reports that we are expecting from the Government, and announcements made yesterday by my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) and by others, indicate that this is merely an incremental change as we adjust to the new online world. This is something that should be welcomed, and positively and proactively taken forward by the Government without many hurdles.

Norman Lamb: I echo the hon. Gentleman’s comments about the amazing support that we get from an impressive and able team, and I very much agree that data must be available to regulators and researchers so that we gain a much greater understanding of where the risks are and which children are most at risk of harm. By improving our understanding in that way, we are much more likely to protect children from harm.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): This is the second time this week that I find myself in the same room as the right hon. Gentleman, agreeing on many issues and focusing on our children’s mental health. That feels very appropriate in Children’s Mental Health Week. As we have heard today, social media is one of many factors that may contribute, in both a positive and negative way, to our children’s mental health. We recognise that social media and technology can bring huge benefits for our young people, but we need to recognise and manage potential harms.

I welcome the Science and Technology Committee’s report and the opportunity to better understand the relationship between young people’s mental health, excessive screen time and the use of social media. We will consider the Committee’s findings ahead of the publication of the online harms White Paper. The report calls for media companies to have a duty of care. We are seriously considering all regulatory options as part of the White Paper. In the meantime, the Government are very clear that we need to hold companies to account. They have a responsibility to their users. We will be setting out plans for both legislative and non-legislative measures in our online harms White Paper.

We continue to work with our colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care on all possible policy options to take forward on young people’s mental health in relation to all areas of health and social media. All relevant Ministers across Government will see and react to this very good report.

Norman Lamb: I thank the Minister very much. Just to be clear, the other occasion when the Minister and I were in a room together was when we talked about the national lottery’s work on children’s mental health. It is making a very significant investment, in six places around the country, in looking at how we can give children the best possible start to life. That is worth applauding.

I welcome the Minister’s response. All I would say is that I encourage her to get on with it. We have been waiting for quite a long time now, and we need the White Paper to be published as soon as possible. Harms continue to happen while we wait for the legislation to be introduced.
Tackling Disadvantage in the Early Years

EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

2.22 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Social justice is the defining issue for our country and is a fundamental aspect of the Education Committee’s work. We published our report on “Tackling disadvantage in the early years” this morning. I thank my Committee colleagues, a number of whom are in the Chamber—my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) and the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows)—and I am grateful to the Committee’s officers and to the witnesses to our inquiry, as well as to the stakeholders and practitioners we met on our evidence-gathering visit to Manchester.

We started our inquiry last year by exploring the effect of the early years on children’s life chances. We were concerned about the apparent absence of strategy in this area. The life chances strategy promised by the Government under the previous Prime Minister was never published, and the Government’s social mobility action plan did not fully address the importance of the role of the early years. Even more concerning were reports that the Government’s flagship policy of 30 hours’ childcare appears to be entrenching disadvantage. Despite the Government’s efforts, good intentions and some good policy—I often talk to the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), and I know he is passionate about these issues—we found that their approach is confused and lacking in direction.

Let me take the 30 hours’ childcare policy as an example of this confused approach. A policy that is intended to help parents to get back into work is a positive aspiration, but we heard that the policy is having perverse consequences that I imagine are intended. What are those perverse consequences? We heard an overwhelming message that the policy is widening the gap between disadvantaged children and those from more advantaged backgrounds. Disadvantaged children are having their hours reduced so that children from more advantaged families can have a place. The policy makes it financially difficult for nurseries to take on disadvantaged two-year-olds while more childcare is offered to more affluent parents.

It seems strange to me that an MP with children can have 30 hours of free childcare for three and four-year-olds, yet a lone parent in my constituency can have only 15 hours. Why does that matter? Because time spent in high-quality early education supports children’s development. It improves children’s cognitive and social development outcomes, and narrows the gap between the most and least disadvantaged children. Paragraph 33 of our report states:

“The introduction of tax-free childcare and 30 hours of free childcare has tilted public childcare spending towards better-off families; while in 2016 a two-parent family on the national living wage with annual earnings of £19,000 received 6 per cent more in childcare support than a two-parent family earning £100,000 a year; the former now receives 20 per cent less in childcare support than the latter.”

That seems to me to be a social injustice. One of our witnesses called the 30-hours policy a “car crash”. Despite the good intentions, it is entrenching inequality rather than closing the gap. The Government should review the 30 hours’ childcare policy, reduce the earning cap, and use the extra funds to help fund the disadvantaged.

We heard compelling evidence about maintained nursery schools. We were fortunate enough to visit Martenscroft Nursery School and Sure Start Children’s Centre in Hulme, Manchester. In January 2018, all maintained nursery schools but one were rated as outstanding or good by Ofsted—the jewel in our education system. We were told that they achieve extraordinarily successful outcomes for children. As of 2015, 64% of maintained nurseries were in 30% of the most deprived areas. They are working really well, transforming the life chances of our very young children, and the Government should be supporting them. They are in danger at the moment because there is not a funding settlement that guarantees that they can survive. Some 67% of nursery schools believe they will be unsustainable if the transitional funding provided by the Government until 2019-20 comes to an end. Maintained nursery schools cannot wait until the spending review. Funding decisions regarding staff and places for the next academic year are being made now, and transitional funding is running out. Our report urges the Government to commit to fully funding maintained nursery schools by the end of the financial year.

Parenting and the home learning environment are key for improving children’s life chances. We heard about the significance of the role of health visitors in supporting parents in the period after birth. They are the most common source of guidance for parents, and they play a wider role in prevention and early intervention. We want local authorities to collect full and complete data on the number of home visitors and home visits conducted in their area. We asked witnesses about the best way of getting important messages about the home learning environment through to parents. One witness argued for public health campaigns to support the home learning environment, for example to help parents to understand that talking to their baby is important even if the baby cannot talk back. One witness said:

“We have public health campaigns for fruit and vegetables, why not for speech and language?”

Children’s centres have a key role to play in the co-ordination of services. I was hugely grateful that the children’s Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon, who is now in his place on the Front Bench, came with me to Harlow to see an integrated children’s family hub, which is a model of an excellent children’s centre. The Government planned to hold and publish a consultation on the children’s centre problem, but it was scrapped by the Department for Education. Our report states that the Department should explore promoting family hubs as a wider model for integrated services. We need to remove barriers to progression for staff. We need proper apprenticeship schemes that are clear, not confused as they are at the moment, and graduate schemes that remove barriers to progression so that we encourage the brightest and the best to continue to work on early years education.

We are excited that the Leader of the House—she is very passionate about life chances—is chairing a cross-Government working group that is reviewing how to
Robert Halfon: I thank the right hon. Gentleman and he is absolutely right. When the 30-hours policy was devised, it was all about the labour market and perhaps trying to create incentives for people to go into work, but the problem is that it just entrenches disadvantage for those who are not able to work, for one reason or another. Although I did not talk about this much in my statement, a significant part of the report is all about the home learning environment. There is a lot of collaboration, and I have no doubt that the Minister will be listening to what the right hon. Gentleman’s Committee has said and what our Committee is saying.

Tracy Brabin: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions and remarks. We talk a lot about the problems of the workforce, which need to be recognised. There needs to be proper progression and clear qualifications, as opposed to confusion, and we need to get that right. For example, if there was a proper apprenticeship scheme, people would be paid while they were on that scheme, so the issue of the financial support bursary would be different. Once the graduate scheme is sorted, it is possible that one could look at how disadvantaged would-be professionals could be looked after and one could encourage people to teach in disadvantaged areas.

Robert Halfon: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions and remarks. We talk a lot about the problems of the workforce, which need to be recognised. There needs to be proper progression and clear qualifications, as opposed to confusion, and we need to get that right. For example, if there was a proper apprenticeship scheme, people would be paid while they were on that scheme, so the issue of the financial support bursary would be different. Once the graduate scheme is sorted, it is possible that one could look at how disadvantaged would-be professionals could be looked after and one could encourage people to teach in disadvantaged areas.
Antisocial Behaviour

2.37 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered antisocial behaviour.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to debate an issue that affects every constituency, all over the UK. Certainly in the last couple of years, antisocial behaviour has become one of the biggest issues in my constituency. It is absolutely vital that Parliament continues to debate these bread-and-butter issues when our time seems to be squeezed solely on discussing Brexit.

Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary and the fire service found in 2018 that 40% of respondents nationally think that crime and antisocial behaviour is a problem in their area, up from 25% in 2015. Of course, antisocial behaviour appears in many forms, such as gangs of youths hanging around parades of local shops, convenience stores and off-licences, public drinking, vehicle damage and theft, aggressive begging, drug dealing, noise nuisance, and attacks on public transport. In my constituency recently, stones have been thrown at buses in the Orchard Park area, meaning that the bus companies have had to divert buses from there. Of course, antisocial behaviour is also about vandalism, graffiti, fly-tipping and rubbish.

As a constituency MP, I want to make some observations about what is happening locally in my patch of Hull North, but I also want to draw out some of the common themes that are developing around the United Kingdom, challenge the Minister on what the Government need to do, and make some suggestions about sharing good practice.

My home city, Hull, is a fantastic city, with many good, hard-working people—they are the salt of the earth and proud of their communities. Many believe in the best community values of solidarity that we see in friendly societies and trade unions. Very sadly, this is currently typified by the way the community has come together in the search for the missing university student Libby Squire, in the work the emergency services are doing with the University of Hull, students and local people. It is also shown in work being done with young people by Steve Arnott and his Beats Bus crew and by the boxer Tommy Coyle.

Like any city or town, however, Hull has its problems, and sadly we now have a generation of young people who have grown up in the austerity years. We could call them the austerity generation. Some have become very difficult to reach. On a visit to a local primary school in my constituency, the year 6 students told me they did not like the rubbish and fly-tipping blighting them the austerity years. We could call this the ‘Boxers and Butter’ issues when our time seems to be squeezed solely on discussing Brexit.

Another one said:

“Groups of intimidating youths also hanging around shops being verbally abusive and displaying anti-social behaviour around people trying to use the shops, always the same ones, I’ve stopped going now—it’s got beyond a joke.”

And this:

“One of our Neighbours banged our door for quite a few times with his guests, they were shouting as they were all drunk. I called 999 (because I didn’t have a credit to call on 101). The operator said that it’s not an emergency and disconnected my call by advising to call on 101. Few minutes later they urinated inside my house through the door.”

Or this comment:

“Spat at, threats to ‘slit my f***ing throat’, threats to ‘smash my f**ing face in’.”

Feeling safe where we live, work and play is important to us all, and antisocial behaviour can make people’s lives miserable. As our local police and crime commissioner Keith Hunter, who is also the national lead for police and crime commissioners on antisocial behaviour, says, antisocial behaviour is often the start of what can lead to serious criminal behaviour if not checked and dealt with. It is clear that we need to reclaim our public spaces for the law-abiding majority.

Keith Hunter has also said:

“When public services and policing retreat from public spaces there will always be a section of society who will seek to use that void for their own criminal or anti-social purposes. That hard core encourages others who under different circumstances would not be a problem. Then law-abiding people don’t go to those areas, reinforcing the takeover by the bad element.”

I have to reflect on the fact, therefore, that since 2010 there has been a cut to the Humberside police budget of 31%. Until recently, policing levels in Humberside were down to levels not seen since the 1970s. We have stopped seeing police, special constables and police community support officers on our streets, especially outside the city centre. We have also lost our excellent Hull community wardens, who provided an extra reassuring presence on the streets all over Hull.

It is not just about police numbers; equipment has been cut too. For example, we no longer have our own helicopter based at Humberside airport, which could respond quickly, track suspects and identify cannabis factories with its heat-seeking capability. We now share a helicopter with other Yorkshire forces. Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary reported in 2017 on the substandard response to ongoing police incidents resulting from the decline in the number of national helicopters. They are aware of reports that Lincolnshire police are using police drones. I wonder if the Minister could reflect upon drones as a cost-effective idea that other police forces should consider using more widely.

The police grant settlement this week sadly does not produce the central Government funding that police forces need. Humberside’s PCC says that “services are stretched to breaking point” and is now having to consult on a 6.4% council tax precept increase—a regressive tax, let’s remember, on the “just managing”—to raise the money he needs to stabilise police numbers and meet the increasing costs of the force. Thankfully, we have a PCC who is actively recruiting and training police officers in order to restore some of the numbers lost since 2010. He recognises the reassurance of having a presence focused on the frontline.
Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making some vital points about antisocial behaviour. She mentioned the role of community support officers and the cuts to their numbers. The Welsh Government stepped in to fund community support officers across Wales when the UK Government cut the funding. Is that not a stark reminder of the difference between Labour and Tory Governments’ records on policing and local government?

Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend’s intervention sets out very clearly the difference and how the role of PCSOs is valued in Wales.

There are some good initiatives happening in Humberside to tackle antisocial behaviour, particularly where the police are working alongside active Labour councillors such as Rosie Nicola, Gary Wareing, Steve Wilson, Gwen Lunn, Marjorie Brabazon and Anita Harrison, who are all determined to tackle antisocial behaviour in their areas—for example, by using a mobile cop shop to move to areas where problems develop. With the current problems with attacks on buses, there are also plans to use a Trojan bus with police aboard who can take action if stones and other items are thrown at the bus. They can stop the bus, get off and deal with it.

The police are showing a video in local schools demonstrating the effects of antisocial behaviour. I think the video came from Dundee and contains the example of a child throwing a stone at a driver who then swerved, hit a pram and killed a baby. That kind of video is useful in educating children and young people about the effects of what they think might be a prank. Humberside has also pioneered Operation Yellowfin to combat crime with motorbikes—another big problem in my area—and has received national recognition for its work with local petrol stations to prevent people who commit antisocial behaviour on motorbikes and mopeds from being able to buy petrol. That said, we need a routine long-term police presence to deter and detect antisocial behaviour, not just special one-off operations when things get really bad.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the fundamental problem is that, with 21,000 police officers having been taken out of the system, along with PCSOs and others, it is an uphill struggle and that the Government must take seriously the need to put in significant resources if we are to tackle antisocial behaviour? At the moment, the police are having to deal with violent crime, which has gone up by 19% in the last year, and so of necessity are deprioritising antisocial behaviour, which is making people’s lives a misery and terrorising our constituents.

Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I could not agree more.

We should recognise the important work that my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) has been doing in identifying the off-rolling of school pupils. Owing to changes in the education landscape and the academisation of schools, there has been an increase in the number of children who are being home-educated. They disappear from the school system, and many then become part of the antisocial behaviour problem. I should be interested to know the Minister’s view. I should also like to know whether she is willing to speak to her colleagues in the Department for Education, and whether she thinks that including education representatives in the community safety partnerships might be a way of dealing with the problem.

We also need to do much more in relation to mental health. We need to understand what antisocial behaviour does to people’s health and wellbeing, to understand that mental health issues can be one of the reasons why perpetrators become involved in antisocial behaviour, and to understand the help that they require.

One idea that could be rolled out nationally came from New York in the 1990s, when the mayor adopted a zero-tolerance approach to antisocial behaviour, fly-tipping, rubbish-dumping and graffiti. The outcomes were very positive. If a window was broken it was fixed, if rubbish piled up it was moved, and if people behaved in an antisocial way they were dealt with. If that is to work here, however, it will need stable funding, and, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), the money must come from central Government. It will also need a multi-agency approach, and strong political leadership both nationally and locally. I understand that there is a plan to adopt this approach in Beverley Road in my constituency, where there are multiple issues connected with antisocial behaviour, but sadly, although it has been much talked about, not much progress has been made so far, and communities are still suffering from the blight of antisocial behaviour.

I should also like the Minister to consider the effects of supported housing for those who have drug and alcohol problems or mental health issues, or have recently left prison. In Hull there are many projects in Victorian terraced housing in tightly packed neighbourhoods, with limited support. I often receive complaints about shouting, swearing, drinking, drug-taking and threats of violence in those properties. There is also a large hostel, Westbourne House, in a residential area. Along with the police and crime commissioner, we believe that the hostel is in the wrong location and causes antisocial behaviour problems in the neighbourhood. Establishing such hostels and supported housing in settled communities can cause real problems. I hope that the Minister will be able to say something about better guidance on where they should be located, better monitoring and better enforcement of contracts, and will also consider whether the Care Quality Commission needs more powers.

A report by the National Audit Office shows the scale of the funding reductions in my city since 2010. There has been a 37% decrease in Government funding for the council. Early intervention schemes have been cut back, and now focus only on those who are most desperately in need and in crisis. Children’s centres no longer have their original purpose of providing a universal service for all families, and voluntary and youth groups have been cut. Those cuts, along with all the others, are creating a perfect storm in our most disadvantaged communities. Cuts in services are often a false economy, because they will cost taxpayers much more in the longer term.

Another aspect of antisocial behaviour involves neighbour disputes. Constituents tell me that they have to fill in numerous diary sheets, and nothing ever happens. Hull City Council has told me that it has to demonstrate a “pattern of behaviour”, and needs the sheets in order...
to do so, but even then the behaviour may not be serious enough to lead to enforcement action, namely eviction. I am also told that owing to the current pressure on the courts, when the council does go for eviction and has all the evidence to hand, it can take as long as eight months—or more—for that to happen. Even when dates are given for hearings, they are often adjourned. Antisocial behaviour of that kind causes real upset and distress, and I should like to hear from the Minister what more she thinks she could do to tackle it.

When the coalition Government took office in 2010, they changed antisocial behaviour legislation. I believe that that action was led by the Liberal Democrats, who thought that Labour’s legislation was too draconian, and obviously felt that they should be more on the side of the perpetrators than on that of the victims. Community protection notices can work quite well, but they cannot be issued to those under 16. In the case of under-16s, the only option is the use of injunctions. The council tells me that the problem with injunctions is that they are very hard to enforce. Hull City Council has to get good evidence and signed affidavits and it has to apply to the court and pay fees. It has to bear the burden of getting the injunctions, but if they are breached, very little happens.

This is linked to my concern about criminal behaviour orders, which are available only when a conviction has been achieved. I recently came across a young man who had been given a CBO and who had breached it multiple times. He went to court, but no action was taken even though he was terrorising the local community. I have written to Justice Ministers about this several times, but I have not had a satisfactory response, so I hope that the Minister will be able to help me to get one. I suggest that it is time for a review of the legislation and of the training of the judiciary and their understanding of the effects of antisocial behaviour.

In conclusion, I want to remind Members of a story that my friend, the former right hon. Member for Holborn and St Pancras, Frank Dobson, used to tell about Lena Jeger when she was campaigning as the Labour candidate in the 1953 by-election. Canvassing a woman in a block of flats in a Camden Town, Lena launched into the great left-wing issue of the day: German re-armament and the threat that it posed to international peace and security. When Lena paused for breath, the constituent asked: “Did you come up in the lift?” “Yes dear,” replied Lena. “Stinks of piss, doesn’t it?” said the woman. “Yes dear,” said Lena. “Can’t you stop ‘em pissing in the lift?” asked the woman. “I don’t think I can,” said Lena. “Well,” said the woman, “if you can’t stop them pissing in our lift, how can you expect me to believe that you can stop the Germans re-arming?”

In 2019, if we cannot get all our agencies working together to stop youths throwing stones at buses in Orchard Park or to tackle aggressive begging in Newland Avenue on my patch, how will voters believe that we can sort out the big challenge of Brexit?

2.56 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), who touched on many important issues. I thank the Secretary of State and the Policing Minister for the additional resources that have been given to Greater Manchester police recently. That is very welcome, although I would not like to suggest that we would not appreciate more. The additional money is important as it will enable the police and crime commissioner of Greater Manchester, who is also the Mayor, to ensure that there is a fair distribution of resources right across Greater Manchester. There is often concern that Greater Manchester police put too much focus on Salford, Manchester and certain parts of Greater Manchester, rather than the parts of the boroughs of Bolton and Wigan that I represent and have an interest in. There is a strong feeling locally that there needs to be a fairer distribution of policing resources.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North was right to put getting this right in the context of Brexit. After Brexit, antisocial behaviour and law and order more generally is the single most commonly raised issue. Brexit will hopefully be done and dusted in a matter of weeks, but antisocial behaviour and law and order are significantly longer-term issues that need more focused and concerted action over the long term. People write to me, email me and raise issues on social media and at the public meetings that I hold, and antisocial behaviour is a very frequently raised concern.

Recently, the communities in Ladybridge and Westhoughton have held very well attended community meetings. I always think that, if people are prepared to come out to a community centre on a beautiful sunny evening when they could be spending time with their family and enjoying life, it really does show their strength of feeling. The meetings have been incredibly well attended, and people have been very vocal about antisocial behaviour such as the behaviour of their next-door neighbours, and about the inability of the police and other agencies to deal with those disruptive neighbours or with events and activities that take place on the high street and more widely. They sense that there is an inability, or perhaps an unwillingness, to deal with these concerns. Over time, what may be a low-level or relatively small concern can develop and get worse. As the hon. Lady pointed out, if problems can be nipped in the bud early on, that prevents them from getting worse.

In Allerton, a few serious incidents of violent crime, including a stabbing at the library and other incidents on the high street, have led to a greater feeling that things are getting out of hand. I had a meeting with the local superintendent and chief superintendent, and I was reassured to hear that they were confident about reorganising, having a stronger community focus and restoring the relationship with the community. That can help local police to better understand what is going on, but the local community also get to know the local police. Increased visibility has a deterrent effect and improves people’s confidence. We want people to be confident when going around the community so that they feel part of the community. If people do not feel confident about being out and about and getting involved, that can lead them to withdraw. As people withdraw from the community, problems can easily get worse and then out of hand, turning into a bigger challenge for the police.

I recently spent some time with the police on a Saturday night shift. Both the bobby on the beat and an officer in a patrol car can deal with an immense number of different situations. It speaks to the quality and ability of our police that they can deal with such things. One of their biggest worries is alcohol on our high streets and the effect of people who have had a little too
much to drink. However, we should also reflect on good pubs, good pub management and good landlords and landladies and the influence that they and the community can have on drinking. Pubs are an important part of our local community, and good management from good proprietors can help to create a good healthy pub environment, which can help to reduce issues that occur on the streets.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that some communities are not interested in going to the pub and want to drink in the street? The street then becomes their drinking place, which leads to antisocial behaviour that frightens residents away from their town centres.

Chris Green: I entirely agree. On a slightly different note, residents in Horwich have told me about a small fishing lake where people sit around late into the evening. Whether drugs or drink are involved, that presence of people and the rowdiness and noise that goes with it is upsetting and off-putting. People who want to take their children to the high street should not have to avoid it after a certain hour. They should not have to avoid parts of my constituency due to inconsiderate behaviour.

That is where the police have to react and get involved, because a police presence—a bit of visibility every now and then—can tone down people’s behaviour so that they have more respect, which can improve the environment. If we can get more people and more families on to the high street and elsewhere in the community, that can have a civilising impact, which is better than the sense that people have to evacuate such areas, leaving them to the people who drink in the street.

How the police manage antisocial behaviour links in with sentencing by magistrates courts. The approach needs to be more robust. Constituents frequently raise with me their concerns about sentencing and the opportunities for rehabilitation in prison. We should be looking at the whole criminal justice system and, whether it is policing, the courts or prisons, more resources are required in all those areas.

3.5 pm

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I concur with the previous speakers. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on securing this important debate. Antisocial behaviour is a significant matter for a considerable number of residents in our constituencies and we need to find some better answers.

I did not want to say a lot but, as there is a bit more time, I will try to say a bit more. Antisocial behaviour is so frustrating for our constituents. People without a lot of money, living on terraced streets, have their wing mirrors kicked off and then have them kicked off again a month later. Youths on the street think it is entertaining to act in an aggressive or surly manner that brings about fear in others. Noise nuisance. Neighbours who just want to argue endlessly and disrupt other people’s lives. People who just want to deny others an amenity; they may not do something in person. The actions range from doing graffiti, to destruction, to vandalism, to the way they keep their property or neighbourhood, with open spaces and playgrounds forever being vandalised.

That loss of amenities and that threat destroy communities, yet we do not take it as seriously as our constituents do. This debate is extremely serious to me because antisocial behaviour blights so many communities. My constituency—including Accrington and Hyndburn—is no different from many others. Antisocial behaviour is a bugbear. I listen to constituents who come to my surgeries to talk about issues that are very frustrating or that are being dealt with in an exceedingly slow way. I know that individual is suffering.

I always say to my staff that antisocial behaviour is the No. 1 issue that I want us to tackle for people who come into my office or surgery. I tell them that I want them to give it the highest priority because it is so destructive hour by hour, day by day. There is a dysfunctional family on my cousin Vicky’s terrace. They think it is appropriate to play loud music and shout at 4 o’clock in the morning. She works, so you can imagine the implications. It is driving her around the bend and very little can be done. Resolving the issue is very slow and difficult, which is typical of many of the antisocial behaviour issues that my constituents face.

Antisocial behaviour blights lives in many ways. A lot of the time these incidents are not considered to be serious enough, but they have a huge, scarring and detrimental impact on victims’ lives. I appeal to Members to escalate the issue. The damage often does not affect MPs—how many MPs live in a deprived area and have to suffer the consequences of antisocial behaviour?

Siobhain McDonagh: I feel a sense of déjà vu. When I became an MP in 1997, antisocial behaviour was one of the biggest issues and, under the guidance of Prime Minister Tony Blair, we took huge action to try to tackle it, whether through safer neighbourhood teams, bashing police teams in town centres, introducing antisocial behaviour orders or discussing what to do about antisocial tenants. We are now going backwards on all those issues and we are reinventing the wheel—it was there, but we have resiled from it.

Graham P. Jones: I concur with that. Indeed, I think my hon. Friend has seen an advance copy of my speech, as I want to raise a number of those issues. I will not address them directly now, except to say that, on council estates, we have moved away from having the old tenant manager and collecting rents at the door. I do not suggest we should have that now, but the system had some advantages and we have replaced it with one where there seems not to be as much supervision, which brings difficulties and an increase in antisocial behaviour.

I was not highlighting the MPs who are sitting here today, as they are clearly exceedingly concerned about antisocial behaviour in their constituencies. It is worth mentioning that this week we voted on the police funding settlement, which is at the heart of all this. I do not think there is any escape from the fact that if police numbers are reduced—I will go on to comment on other aspects of the police and criminal justice system—police presence is reduced and of course that will have a detrimental impact. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North said, where there is a vacuum in policing, there will be an opportunity for those with a malign or malevolent attitude to others to behave in a way that is not conducive to the wellbeing of the victim, the neighbourhood or the community. We therefore have to put that right. It is wrong that the Government
have cut policing so significantly, as the consequences are considerable. I asked my local police and crime commissioner in Lancashire, Clive Grunshaw, who is doing a very good job, about this situation. He said that he has lost a considerable number of officers. He has lost 800 officers in Lancashire and 450 members of police staff—that is never mentioned, but it diverts resources.

In 2002, or thereabouts, the Labour Government under Tony Blair introduced neighbourhood policing. After seeing rising crime year on year, decade on decade, we began to reverse that cycle, no more so than in terms of antisocial behaviour and low-level crime, with the introduction of neighbourhood policing. That was a positive, progressive approach to some of these issues. I know that we must have sanctions, and I will address those in a moment, but at the heart of reducing antisocial behaviour was neighbourhood policing.

I often talk about Peel ward, which I represented as a councillor before I came here. In 2002, it had 120 antisocial behaviour incidents a month. The neighbouring Spring Hill ward had slightly more—it had nearly 130 a month. We can only imagine having that many incidents, and we must remember that the wards are small in my constituency. There was constant harassment of residents, day after day. When neighbourhood policing was introduced in Lancashire—it came in in my ward at the very beginning of the roll-out—we began to see huge reductions in antisocial behaviour. Within about three years I think we were down to 10 or 15 incidents a month. We can only imagine having that many incidents, but they were angry. I remember holding a public meeting in Accrington at the council offices just prior to the introduction of neighbourhood policing. The room could hold about 140 people, but nearly 200 turned up and we could not get everyone in. It was dangerous, as people were packed at the back and pushing to get in, and the anger was incredible.

I do not want to return to those days. I do not want to return to the days when I got a telephone call after midnight and was so sick of antisocial behaviour that I just rocked up out of the house and went round to a neighbour’s house where there was a gang of 20 yobs, and confronted them myself on Bold Street. I think there is a video tape somewhere of me confronting those in a moment, but at the heart of reducing antisocial behaviour was neighbourhood policing.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): If the hon. Gentleman is going to ask his local police and crime commissioner to make the sort of changes he is suggesting—of course, he is absolutely right to do so as the local MP—will he also ask him why he is keeping £37.9 million in reserves in a savings account, and why those reserves have increased by £17.8 million since 2011? He is getting the money, but it seems he is not spending it.

Graham P. Jones: Let me explain to the Minister how finance works. Most public authorities usually keep back around 5% to 10%—that is the Audit Commission’s advice—because there are peaks and troughs in what they pay out each month. They need to have money there in case what they pay out rises. There is also a capital investment programme. The Minister may not know, but I know, that Blackpool police station is crumbling and needs replacing. The police and crime commissioner needs to know that he has the money. If he is prudent—he is a Labour police and crime commissioner, so he is prudent—he will be saving, year on year, to replace Blackpool police station. (Interuption.) The Minister is chuntering, but Blackpool North and Cleveleys is a Conservative constituency. If she does not want Blackpool police station to be done up, she should stand up at the Dispatch Box and say so.

Victoria Atkins rose—

Graham P. Jones: I will give way to the Minister, and if she does not want Blackpool police station doing up, she should just say so.

Victoria Atkins: I visited Blackpool North on Friday and sat in a meeting with some of the people who make the most difference in the local area, including my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) and the local police officers, community groups and councillors. We were not talking about buildings; we were talking about the great work that officers, community groups and the council do to keep that area safe. I concentrate on people rather than bricks and mortar.

Graham P. Jones: I think that is what I have talked about so far. The Minister had no answer to my question; it seems she does not really care about Blackpool police station.

Victoria Atkins rose—

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con) rose—

Graham P. Jones: If the Minister wants to get up and speak about Blackpool police station, I would be more than happy to give way, but I give way to the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies).

Mark Menzies: Just for the record, the Bonny Street police station in Blackpool is indeed crumbling—it is an absolute disgrace—but a shiny new replacement has already opened, probably around six months ago, right on the edge of my constituency. I hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying in his stout defence of the Labour police and crime commissioner, but perhaps the Bonny Street police station in Blackpool and its new replacement, which has now opened, is not the best example.

Graham P. Jones: I was using it as an example of why a police and crime commissioner would retain reserves. The hon. Gentleman has just proved the point that I
have been making: the police and crime commissioner in Lancashire, Clive Grunshaw, does a wonderful job by making sure that there are reserves so that, as the hon. Gentleman says, Blackpool and the Conservative MP there can get a brand new shiny police station to replace the crumbling one. That is what I call fiscal responsibility. The Minister should think about that when she gets to her feet and makes these points—well, she did not actually make any point in response to my point about the police station; she was saved by one of her Buck Benchers, to be fair. This is about prudence. The Minister talks about people, but perhaps she should have listened to the points I made earlier about this being about staff, people, communities and neighbourhoods.

To return to the point that I was making, we have lost 800 staff—this is not just about the savings. By the way, I say to the Minister that there is a difference between capital and revenue—another obvious point. However, cutting 800 staff means that antisocial behaviour will increase. A total of 450 staff have been removed from the back office, which has an impact, and neighbourhood policing units have basically collapsed; they no longer exist. We have gone back to 1990s response policing with police increasingly driving around areas in their panda cars. I have been out with the police at night on several shifts and seen how policing has become a blue light operation. That is what Lancashire constabulary has been reduced to. When there is serious knife crime in an area or some big incident happens, the police cannot deal with antisocial behaviour. We cannot have a progressive solution if we strip out neighbourhood policing.

I want to touch on one other point, which relates to the coalition Government. I sometimes get sick and fed up with Liberal politicians saying that we should not have CCTV cameras. They talk all this nonsense about catching criminals. I ask Ministers to please listen to constituents and residents and to be on their side—do not be on the side of those Liberals. I say gently to the Minister that our constituents and residents suffer and would like to see CCTV cameras working; they do not see it as a problem.

I have asked for the precept to be raised, and I say that quite openly. The public have been asked about that, and 78% of those surveyed support that move. I like to say that I am in touch with the people, but in this particular instance I obviously am. The public want to see more police on the beat. They want to see our police tackling antisocial behaviour.

The cuts have really affected our areas of Hyndburn and Haslingden. We have no presence, apart from a blue light presence, on the streets. I know that sometimes the chief constable does not want to send out that message, but what has happened is that there has been a massive increase of drugs in Hyndburn and Haslingden from county lines. The streets are awash with cocaine, and young people are getting involved through county lines. People can get cocaine anywhere at its purest level; never has it been available on the same scale as now. I ask for police sniffer dogs to go in, but there is a lack of policing; the police say they are unable to do that to try to resolve some of these issues. But young people involved in antisocial behaviour are slipping into a life of crime, so we need to be very concerned about the worst antisocial behaviour because of how that will manifest itself further on.

In all of this we need to go back to some basic principles. When we were tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime we had the right policies. We need to get back to being tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime; we have never controlled antisocial behaviour more than when we had that policy. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North said, the architects of that policy should be congratulated, because it was a breakthrough, but instead we have seen a roll-back in the last few years.

As has been said, a reformed ASBO needs to be reintroduced; I do not think it to see people go to prison, so that is where the reform needs to be. Local authorities and police should be able to impose ASBOs where necessary on some of these individuals—the worst elements.
We need to go back to what matters and listen to people; we need to have a community-centred approach to tackling this issue.

As the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) said, we need to look at the criminal justice system. For the worst offenders—not the majority, but those who repeat antisocial behaviour—we need to look at the criminal justice system. Community payback does not particularly work in some instances for repeat offences, and prison does not work, so we need to find something in the middle that does not send offenders back to hang around with their mates again and commit more antisocial behaviour. We need to look at other aspects of the criminal justice system so that we have a system that is progressive, that trains people, and that gets them out of this behaviour, but that also sanctions those who want to carry on. It must be punitive, but with some progressive or educational elements.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the changes and amendments that need to happen in the justice system are part of a very complex solution, and that no one golden bullet is going to solve all problems?

Graham P. Jones: I agree with that. As I have said, we should always start with the progressive answer, but for those who are regressive and refuse to behave we need to look at a reformed and tougher criminal justice system.

3.27 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones). I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for securing this important debate and the Backbench Business Committee.

I think that most Members will agree that antisocial behaviour forms a huge part of their caseload. It is perhaps not the part of their caseload that they came into politics to deal with, but it is the reality of what our individual constituents face, frequently day to day. Indeed, the constituents who come to see us are merely the tip of the iceberg of those who suffer from antisocial behaviour.

I pay credit to Citizens Advice Scotland, which has an excellent website that helps people by guiding them through the world of antisocial behaviour, which is incredibly complex. The website starts by giving a list of definitions of what amounts to antisocial behaviour, including what we have heard about in the debate: noise, shouting, swearing, the gathering of groups, harassment—including, of course, racial and sectarian harassment—verbal abuse, and the bullying of children both at school and beyond, such as at public recreation grounds. Indeed, we have had the benefit today of hearing about two excellent Committee reports on social media, through which bullying takes place, and on the need for intervention early in young children’s lives to give them the best possible support for the future.

I want to discuss two aspects of antisocial behaviour: antisocial behaviour that is perpetrated by an individual, which is frequently described as neighbour disputes; and antisocial behaviour that is occasioned by groups. Neighbour disputes are incredibly difficult to provide help for, and it is frequently the case, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North said, that mental health problems sit behind individual cases. Indeed, mental health problems are often passed on to the recipient of antisocial behaviour. Dealing with the situation can be challenging, difficult and, unfortunately, expensive.

I would like the Minister, if possible, to extend a view on situations that occur among people in freehold accommodation, rather than rental or leasehold properties. In such cases, the recipients of antisocial behaviour frequently get to the stage where they say, “I’m just going to move. That’s the simple answer—I’ll admit defeat and move away.” However, under existing law, both north and south of the border, there is an onus to disclose neighbour disputes in sale documents, which will of course make selling a house incredibly difficult. I wonder whether the Government have had any thoughts about how to facilitate a method of addressing that, because sometimes the only answer for the person who is suffering antisocial behaviour is to move away.

Siobhain McDonagh: Does my hon. Friend agree that the exponential growth in private renting has exacerbated the problems of antisocial behaviour? Landlords often do not care about the behaviour of their tenants because they do not live next door to them. All they care about is that the rent is getting paid, and they see that as the end of their responsibility.

Martin Whitfield: I cannot better my hon. Friend’s intervention. Indeed, the only reason why I chose to raise the issue of freehold premises is that it is rarely mentioned. Within my constituency, there have been challenges for people who have admitted problems and subsequently found great difficulty in selling their houses, but that in no way downplays the antisocial behaviour, and the pain, suffering, mental health anguish and challenges, faced by families in rented and leasehold accommodation.

As we have heard, groups can also choose to behave antisocially, and there is one aspect of that which needs to be addressed, because it might be the key to solving the problem. Let me describe some examples from where I live in Prestonpans in my constituency of East Lothian, which is of course in Scotland, where these matters are devolved. There have been great challenges involving our early teenagers who hang around in groups. I know a significant number of the individuals involved, having had the privilege of teaching them at primary school. They are not bad people, but sometimes when they group together, a group mentality takes over, with actions and behaviours becoming acceptable to the group that, in all honesty, its members would never, ever contemplate doing as individuals. Much work needs to be done to address this group mentality, and to aid and abet some of the very best work that is going on to defeat antisocial behaviour.

Let me raise another example from my community. A new playpark was put up predominantly for children under 10, and particularly those of pre-school age. There was a big discussion about how to stop the equipment being damaged, and that was achieved by bringing older brothers and sisters into the park to explain why the equipment was so important to their younger brothers or sisters. Suddenly feeling an identity among the community that was going to use the facilities
empowered the older children to look after it. A significant number of those children and young people said to other young people, “Don’t damage the park. It’s for my little brother and sister.”

Antisocial behaviour is occasioned, in the main, by people who become dissociated from others in their communities, be they their neighbour who is playing the television too loud, a group that has nothing to do because of the closure of after-school clubs, or groups of vigilantes who have lost faith in the community, in society and in their politicians—the people they have elected to govern them to look after them and solve problems. There are no simple answers. I could stand here and rail against austerity, because withdrawing assets and funding is a huge problem and it has caused this isolation to increase and become magnified. Responsible leaders and a responsible Government need to admit that that withdrawal has gone too far. We need to re-empower our communities and our society, and that will cost money. Empowerment should come through giving local authorities more devolved power and responsibility so that they, in turn, can devolve that back into communities, with people again feeling connected to what happens around them. They will then not have to phone their councillor after midnight and say, “Come and speak to these 20 people,” but may instead be able to speak to the person in question and say, “Look, you can’t really have a party and invite all these people.” The connection between people will be such that antisocial behaviour reduces.

Graham P. Jones: Will my hon. Friend consider the fact that one of the this Government’s failures is the number of NEETs—those not in education, employment or training—that we have, with the figure running between 6% and 10% across every county and area? Where are these young people? What are they doing? Why are they not in education and training? [Interruption.] Martin Whitfield: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s intervention. That is true, regardless of any dispute of those statistics that I feel may be coming. If someone becomes dissociated, and disconnected from their education and from their family and friends—for whatever reason—why should they buy into the society that they find themselves in? If their rented housing is inadequate—if they have water coming down the wall—and they have a landlord who just does not care, why should they buy into society and what their neighbour needs?

When we look at young children’s behaviour and sense of responsibility at school, we see that people innately care about each other. They lose that feeling because of the experiences that they face in life. One of our responsibilities as leaders is to ensure that the funds, assets, skills and strategies are in place so that people do not lose that in the first place, and so that if they are at risk of losing it, there is support to guide them back, such as after-school clubs and mentoring. Then they will understand their responsibilities, from something as simple as not dropping litter all the way through to not being part of a vigilante gang that feels that it is its right to foster justice in a community.

I am reminded of Orlando’s great phrase in “As You Like It”: “I do desire we may be better strangers.”

One of the problems that we have found in our communities is that, for a whole lot of reasons, it is becoming much easier to become a better stranger than to become a better friend. There are no simple answers, but I have respect for a Government who face up to trying to solve these problems. I think that there individuals, answers and strategies out there that can make our constituents’ lives, families, schools and communities better. In that way, we will drive down antisocial behaviour—not excusing bad behaviour, but showing why it is not acceptable in our society.
Government recognise that the level of antisocial behaviour on the streets is due to their failed policies, and until the Government really end austerity and fund our police properly.

3.42 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): For me—and, I imagine, for you, Madam Deputy Speaker—some of the issues that we have been raising this afternoon were ones that we were discussing back in 1997, and considering how to tackle them. Although nirvana never came, certainly progress was made in many of our town centres and cities. In a way, we have lost our way and forgotten what was successful, but we do know what worked.

My constituency of Mitcham and Morden is not unique as a place. Over the past few years, we have again seen a steep rise in antisocial behaviour on our streets. We have always had our problems, but never before has antisocial behaviour, street drinking and petty crime felt as pervasive or hard to tackle. I am afraid that, particularly around Mitcham town centre, the climate of antisocial behaviour has become so intense that the difficulties of suburban shopping centres have become much worse. A multimillion-pound regeneration of the town centre should have meant that Mitcham began to get better, yet when speaking to local businesses I have been dismayed to hear stories of shopfronts vandalised, staff abused and intimidated, and once loyal customers choosing to shop elsewhere, feeling that their local town centre had become unsafe, or was simply an unpleasant place to shop. Mums—principally mums—did not want their children to be in an environment where men urinated in the street or brawled because they had drunk too much.

Antisocial behaviour is a problem that residents often feel powerless to change, but they are by no means apathetic. When I welcomed Sophie Linden, London’s Deputy Mayor for Crime and Policing, and Sally Benatar, commander of our south-west London Basic Command Unit—because we no longer have borough police services in London—to a public meeting in my constituency in June 2018, hundreds of residents turned up. The place was packed. They were spilling out into the playground outside. They stood for hours to make their point in the swirling heat, and the concern raised time and again was, “We just don’t see police on our streets any more. We don’t see the police community support officers who used to get to know us. We cannot get through to the police.” Anybody who has tried to ring 101 knows exactly how difficult it is just to get the phone actually picked up.

Martin Whitfield: On the point about police officers, it is frequently said—by, I must say, somewhat older residents—that previously police officers, who were part of and understood the community, knew the stories behind what was frightening them. There is clearly much evidence saying that it does not matter whether we have police on the beat, but the truth is that police officers who understand their community have a community that understand the police officers as well.

Siobhain McDonagh: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. We got a kickback on this in 1997-98—principally from the police, who felt that the best way to deal with crime was in fast cars—but there was a resulting reduction in crime. That came about from the safer neighbourhood teams, which proved substantially the success of having police on the beat and of having police community support officers, who initially were often rejected by the police and the community, because they had the time to build relationships and get to know people. When people, especially young people, began to get into trouble, as my hon. Friend says, such officers could bring agencies together and start to provide the support that many of those individual youngsters and their families desperately needed.

Graham P. Jones: I just want to put this point on the record because my hon. Friend may have somebody in her constituency that she thinks the same about. I would like to say a big thank you to PC Dave Pearson, a local beat manager, because he has done a fantastic job. He has sorted out a lot of antisocial behaviour, and he deserves to have that put on the record.

Siobhain McDonagh: I am delighted that I gave way to my hon. Friend. Thanking our public servants and our police who go the extra mile to make our areas better is really important.

All too often, disgraceful antisocial behaviour just goes unchecked. It goes unchecked because it is not seen as a serious crime. It goes unchecked because the local police teams simply do not have the resources to follow up every last incident of vandalism or drunken hooliganism. It goes unchecked because we no longer have the bobbies on the beat to control it. However, when a drunken altercation led to the tragic murder of a young man in my constituency last year, it served as a poignant, painful reminder that the gulf between antisocial behaviour and serious crime is not as large as we often allow ourselves to believe.

Mitcham and Morden has been my home all my life, and I am deeply proud of it. I sincerely want each and every one of my constituents to share this pride in our local area, but it can become desperately hard to ask them to do so when they do not even feel safe in their own community. The simple truth is that there is no substitute for a visible police presence in the community. Mitcham needs more bobbies on the beat, and I suspect we are far from alone in that regard.

We did not arrive here from nowhere. The rise in antisocial behaviour we have seen in so many of our communities is the regrettable but inevitable consequence of more than eight years of indiscriminate cuts and biting austerity at the hands of successive Governments. In real terms, central Government funding for the police has decreased by 30% since 2010. We have lost roughly 20,000 police officers in that time, or 14% of the workforce.

In the London Borough of Merton—a small, suburban borough that is the third safest in London—we have lost 90 police officers since 2010. The safer neighbourhood teams, which used to have five officers, a sergeant, two PCs and three PCSOs, are now down to two PCs and one PCSO, and that is when we can get them, because when people go on long-term sick leave or have to move on somewhere else, those vacancies are not filled.

The important Mitcham safer neighbourhood team has gone, so there is now no longer a team for the town centre. Amazingly, the police officers who used to be based in every secondary school in Merton have also gone,
because the police cannot recruit quickly enough to fill those posts. Retention rates have plummeted because our police do not feel valued. How could they when, year after year, they are asked to take on more work with less support, fewer resources and, in real terms, lower wages? Even when they are offered more money, it is difficult to fill those posts. Detectives in the Metropolitan police area have been offered £4,000 a year more, but they still cannot recruit detectives. The consequence of that for our safer neighbourhood teams is that many police are forcefully transferred into those roles, and are not available to walk our streets and do the basic policing work that we know our communities need.

The Conservative party has always taken great pride in its image as a party that would put the police first, come down hard on crime, and keep the men and women of Britain safe. With police disappearing from our streets, violent crime on the rise, and many of us feeling more vulnerable than ever before in our communities, I find myself asking the same question as many of my constituents: whatever happened to the party of law and order?

3.51 pm

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I apologise for being held up at the beginning of the debate.

I thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for securing a debate on such a substantial issue. As we have heard, Scotland has a separate legal system, but the Antisocial Behaviour etc. (Scotland) Act 2004 remains in force and covers police and agency powers regarding antisocial behaviour. The Scottish Government have always been clear in their belief that there must be a partnership approach if we ever hope effectively to tackle antisocial behaviour, and that includes the police, local authorities and court services.

One thing we can all agree on here is that everyone has the right to be and feel safe in their own home—that should be the benchmark for the kind of society we are aiming for. But that also includes an element of compassion, because that right also applies to those individuals who sometimes find themselves participating in antisocial behaviour. I applaud the comments by the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), who spoke very eloquently about the need to see individuals as people who need help, rather than simply to chastise them as a problem. That is important because if we want to move forward as a society, we have an obligation to understand why people do the things they do, and why they behave as they do at certain times.

This is about stopping and asking whether a young person is roaming the streets because they are trying to escape something horrible in their own home. Or are they lashing out as a cry for help? If we find someone who is intoxicated or aggressive, someone should assess their mental health at some point, and if their health is not okay we should find out why and figure out how these factors affect their decision making. Only then can we begin to develop meaningful preventive measures, which includes looking holistically at our judicial system, our social security set-up and our health structures, because all these things play into people’s lives.

That is what the Scottish Government have tried to do whenever they have had the power. For example, since 2008 they have committed £92 million to CashBack for Communities, which funds a wide range of projects and facilities throughout Scottish communities. In my constituency, I have had the pleasure of seeing the essential support that so many local organisations provide, including—to name a few—RAMH, the Kibble, Spark of Genius, and the council’s team to combat antisocial behaviour. I have played football with Street Stuff, which is brilliant because people take the time to sit with an individual and treat them as a human being who matters, as opposed to simply to solve a problem that needs to be solved. They take the time to do that, seeing past all the bravado and any aggressiveness, and finding out what is actually going on in that person’s head and life at that moment in time. Making that effort and taking the time to sit with someone, treating them as a human being who matters even if they are off the wall, is about finding out where their mind has taken them and finding ways that we can help to bring them back into the real world and support them.

On the whole I am pleased that those measures seem to be having a positive impact in Scotland. Experiences and perceptions of antisocial behaviour have been reduced over the past 10 years under the SNP. The percentage of adults who felt that people behaving in an antisocial manner was a common issue in their area has fallen from 46% in 2008-09 to 29% in 2016-17. The Scottish Household Survey 2017 also reflects that trend. The estimated percentage of adults who experienced vandalism has almost halved between 2008-09 and 2016-17. Fewer adults now think that violence between groups of individuals or gangs is common in their area, falling from 26% to 10%. We seem to be heading in the right direction, even if we are not fully there yet.

Ultimately, we have to recognise that it benefits society as a whole when we do our best to ensure the welfare of absolutely everyone. I think that is exactly the point made by the hon. Member for East Lothian, when he said that we have to find a place for everyone. No matter how challenging or difficult that person is—I have no doubt that everyone here has had dysfunctional and difficult constituents come to them—we have to offer some kind of assistance and a way of legislating better on these issues in the future. We need to treat people as though they matter and understand where they are coming from. I hope that this Scottish perspective has offered some sort of substantial help to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North. I thank her again for bringing this debate forward.

3.56 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I too congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on securing the debate. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) and my hon. Friends the Members for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones), for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) and for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on their excellent speeches.

Antisocial behaviour covers a wide range of unacceptable activity which causes harm to an individual, to their community or to the environment. Anything from vandalism and littering to street drinking and drug usage, from nuisance neighbours to begging, are all
examples of antisocial behaviour. If an action leaves somebody else feeling distressed or harassed, or if it causes concern for public safety, then it is deemed to be antisocial behaviour. Individual occurrences of antisocial behaviour can appear to be quite minor, but the cumulative impact of persistent incidents in communities can have a highly damaging effect.

The most recent Crime Survey for England and Wales reports that almost 36% of respondents had experienced or witnessed antisocial behaviour in their local community, an increase of 5% from the previous year and the highest figure since data were first collected in 2012. I am not surprised by those figures. Drink-related crime was one of the highest types of antisocial behaviour that respondents said they had experienced. Drinking on streets and on public transport can lead to others feeling intimidated, and to verbal and physical attacks.

Acts of vandalism are all too common in many of our communities. We see endless graffiti on public and private property. Unfortunately, they are not all Banksy's. I hear many cases of homes that have been attacked, property damaged and car tyres slashed. We need to seriously crack down on the perpetrators of these crimes. While many, although not all, antisocial behaviours do not physically hurt individuals, the emotional and psychological damage they cause can be just as harmful.

The availability and use of drugs in our communities is also a real worry. County lines has been responsible for a rapid rise in the accessibility of drugs on our streets up and down the country. Gangs are targeting our most vulnerable young people: kids in the care system or those trapped in poverty; kids who maybe do not have somebody waiting for them at home wondering where they are. These youngsters are being manipulated into gang culture, which is a key factor in much of the antisocial behaviour and more violent crime that is becoming far too normalised across society today.

The use of synthetic drugs is still a major cause for concern. Despite the blanket ban on them having heavily diminished the supply, we would be very naive to think that the problem is anywhere near solved. Criminals will continue to produce these highly toxic drugs, and people—often the most vulnerable people—will continue to use them and keep up the demand. Individuals and groups hanging around on streets with nothing to do and nowhere to go, those who are high on drugs and those in need of their next fix or under the influence of alcohol are all potential threats to our local communities.

Boredom, desperation and rivalry can all be the catalyst for a wide range of antisocial crimes.

While all that is going on, police cuts continue and local authorities are seeing big reductions in their Government funding, despite unprecedented pressures. All of that means there are not enough resources to deal with the ever-growing problems. While the headlines read that an additional £970 million funding will be available through the police grant for 2019-20, it does not take long to realise that the reality is very different: £509 million of that will come from doubling the police precept for council tax payers, meaning a further burden on our already hard-pressed constituents. It will also mean that areas with a low council tax base, such as south Wales, will be hit hardest.

Alongside that, the £142 million of pension grants for local forces from central Government funds falls alarmingly short of the £311 million pension liability.

This means that, despite core central Government funding for local forces increasing in theory by £161 million, the reality is that this, together with the pensions grant, does not even cover the pension liability. Taking all that into account, the harsh truth is that however the Government try to manipulate the figures, central Government funding for local police forces has been cut for the ninth consecutive year.

Police numbers are now at their lowest for three decades. Since the Conservatives came into Government in 2010, the number of police officers has fallen by 21,000, 16,000 police staff have been axed, and community support officer numbers have declined by 6,000—all this while the Government continue to promise to protect the frontline. Public safety should be a priority, but as things stand, some forces are so stretched that tackling antisocial behaviour on their streets is a battle that they are struggling very hard to take control of.

But it does not need to be like this. The Welsh Labour 2011 manifesto promised more funding for community support officers, and it delivered. While the Conservative party has been scaling back and cutting jobs, the Welsh Government, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), has invested in 300 more community support officers across Wales. Labour has a plan to make Britain safer—to recruit more police officers to take back control of our streets. We need to tackle antisocial behaviour and make sure that our constituents feel safe in their communities. Warm words and manipulated figures do not make our communities safe. Resources, action and funding are what we need to make our citizens feel safe, our communities feel cared for and our country protected.

4.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): It has been a pleasure to be here, although it has been difficult to hear some of the accounts that hon. Members across the House have shared of experiences that their constituents have suffered at the hands of those who act antisocially. I join the thanks and congratulations to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on securing the debate. We share a television news programme, so I know of the work she does in her local area. I join her in thanking the officers and all those involved in looking for Libby Squire. We are all conscious, of course, that it is a live investigation, but our thoughts are with the family.

I thank hon. Members for participating in this debate, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green), as well as the hon. Members. Members for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones), for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin), for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black), and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) for his intervention.

As we have heard, antisocial behaviour can have a significant impact on both individuals and communities, and it can affect people in their own homes and our public spaces, which everyone should be free to enjoy safely. Left unchecked, persistent antisocial behaviour, whether it involves littering, vandalism, public drunkenness, aggressive dogs, noise, threats or abuse, can have a
The police and local authorities have available to them a range of powers and actions. We tend to focus on the 2014 Act, but the police and councils also have general operational powers. For example, the police in the constituency of the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North have been working alongside Hull City Council to install 17 CCTV cameras on the Orchard Park estate to drive down the number of crimes. I understand also that the police have been working with communities to make sure they feel safe, including by visiting schools to speak to pupils about the impact of behaving antisocially. That is not part of the 2014 Act, but it is part of their general powers and actions.

The hon. Lady also mentioned the use of drones by Lincolnshire police. These are proving to be useful in many ways. Obviously, Lincolnshire is a vast rural area, and my police and crime commissioner, Marc Jones, is pleased with their use in tackling hare coursing, which is not a form of antisocial behaviour that has been mentioned today, but believe you me its impact on local communities is frightening and intimidating. It might be an example of one of the more serious types of antisocial behaviour.

I am pleased to say that under the 2014 Act we have reformed the tools and powers available to local areas. Mention was made of ASBOs. Initially, they were of use, but they became a badge of honour among some protagonists, which is why the coalition Government reviewed the law on antisocial behaviour and introduced the 2014 Act.

Graham P. Jones: It strikes me that the point the Minister has just made is a very middle-class view. What do working-class communities think about ASBOs? Were they asked if they were beneficial before they were taken away?

Victoria Atkins: I am talking about the children subject to them. Among them, they were becoming a badge of honour, which is why we increased the range of powers under the 2014 Act not just to target individuals behaving antisocially, but to give much wider powers to protect whole communities and public spaces, which I will come on to in a moment.

We had an urgent question this week on knife crime prevention orders, which are a very targeted form of preventive order that we are introducing through the Offensive Weapons Bill to help to catch the small cohort of children who may be susceptible to knife crime before they start accumulating criminal convictions or causing even more harm in the community. I very much hope that the orders will enjoy the support of the House when the Bill returns.

Diana Johnson: On the introduction of those preventive orders, which the Minister spoke about at the Dispatch Box earlier this week, a person did not have to have a conviction to be given an ASBO, but they would need a conviction to get a criminal behaviour order, and, as I explained, there are problems with enforcement. Is it not time to look again at whether the changes introduced in 2014 are really working?

Victoria Atkins: As I have said, we are reviewing the powers in the 2014 Act. Towards the end of my speech I shall talk about the reviews that are being undertaken. I fully acknowledge the work that was done in the noughties to tackle antisocial behaviour, but we wanted to improve on it. We thought that increasing the range of powers available in the Act would help to address some of the problems that had arisen over the years since the introduction of ASBOs.

The powers in the Act can be scaled up or down depending on the nature of the antisocial behaviour. They are flexible, they enable local agencies to tailor their approach to the individual circumstances, and they range from tools for early intervention to those that can be used to address the most serious and persistent antisocial behaviour. Whenever possible, such behaviour should be stopped before it escalates. We therefore introduced a civil injunction which may impose prohibitions or positive requirements. It may, for example, require the perpetrator to repair damage to someone else’s property.

As the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North just mentioned, when behaviour becomes more serious and involves or occurs alongside criminal activity, a criminal behaviour order may be made. It can impose prohibitions and requirements to stop the antisocial behaviour: for example, it may prohibit the offender from entering a particular area.

Unfortunately, some areas can become hotspots. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West gave a vivid description of antisocial behaviour in Horwich, and, like others, focused on the role that alcohol can play in some forms of it. One of our actions to tackle antisocial alcohol consumption was the introduction of local alcohol action areas. Multi-agency work is conducted in 32 areas in England and Wales. Wrexham, for example, is taking part in a “Drink Less Enjoy More” initiative to reduce alcohol sales in pubs, bars and clubs to intoxicated individuals. We have given new powers to relevant authorities to tackle alcohol-related crime and harms.

We have, for instance, placed cumulative impact policies on a statutory footing, made changes in the late-night levy that will make it more flexible and fairer to businesses, and given immigration officers new powers to tackle illegal working in licensed premises.

We have also introduced a range of powers to deal with antisocial behaviour in hotspot areas. The dispersal power can be issued by the police to require an individual who engages in antisocial behaviour, crime or disorder to leave the area for up to 48 hours. The community protection notice can be used by the police and local councils to address unreasonable behaviour affecting a community’s quality of life, involving, for instance, graffiti, rubbish and noise. The public spaces protection order can be used by a council to put restrictions on an area in which behaviour has, or is likely to have, a detrimental effect on the local community. I know that several councils have considered using those orders to try to control alcohol consumption in public places.
As we have heard, it is local communities that suffer as a result of antisocial behaviour, and we wanted to enable them to speak out and “call out” the authorities when they believe that they are not being listened to. The community trigger enables victims of persistent antisocial behaviour to demand a formal case review when a locally defined threshold is met, and the community remedy gives victims a say in the out-of-court punishment of perpetrators.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North asked about guidance. We want to help local agencies to understand the powers and informal measures they can use to tackle antisocial behaviour, which is why we have published statutory guidance for frontline professionals. We updated that guidance in December 2017 to reflect feedback from those who are working with these powers, and to remind people of the importance of proportionality and transparency in the use of them.

I reassure Members that the Home Office keeps these powers, and the Government’s overall approach to tackling antisocial behaviour, under review through a national strategic board. This brings together representatives from key agencies and across Government to consider our approach and to identify any emerging issues. This debate is timely, as the board will meet again next week and will no doubt consider the points that have been raised today. I am grateful to agencies and associations such as the Local Government Association, which very kindly invited me to an event last year to discuss antisocial behaviour and the use of public space protection orders. Our multi-agency work programme will help to bear down on antisocial behaviour in local communities.

Opposition Members were keen to address the issue of police funding. I always regret that I have to give people a mini history lesson whenever I tackle this issue, but it is important to put the decisions that have been made over the past few years into context. We inherited a very difficult economic picture in 2010, and we had to make tough decisions to address the mess that we were in economically because of the way in which things had been run in years gone by under the Labour Government. That is why we made tough decisions—[Interruption.] I hear Labour Members saying, “Well, you’ve had long enough.” In 2015, the then Home Secretary was able to say to the Chancellor, “We must protect police funding” because we had managed the economy in such a way that we could begin to make those changes in police funding and in other areas. Police funding has been protected since 2015, and last year Conservative Members of Parliament voted for a funding settlement that increased police funding by up to £470 million. This week, Conservative Members voted for the Government’s proposal to inject a further £970 million into policing, with the help of police and crime commissioners, but sadly, Opposition Members did not feel able to support that.

I want to outline what the funding settlement will mean. Humberside will have £11.5 million more than last year as a result of Tuesday’s settlement. It has reserves of £28.9 million, which is higher than the national average. Greater Manchester will receive £34.7 million more than last year because of Tuesday’s vote. It has £75.6 million in its reserves—an increase of £25 million since 2011. The reason that I keep talking about reserves is that I want to equip all Members on both sides of the House to hold their police and crime commissioners to account and ask them how they are spending their reserves.

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Graham P. Jones rose—

Victoria Atkins: I am about to come on to Lancashire, but I would be happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman—[Interruption.] I am sorry. I am getting conflicting requests. I am being asked to speed up. I must mention Lancashire, because I was delighted to visit it last week. My hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) and I met the chief constable in Hutton, and my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) and I met community leaders. My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) and I met people in Morecambe to discuss crime and policing issues in the local area. Lancashire does have £37.9 million in reserves, and that has increased by £17.8 million since 2011, which is higher than the national average—

Graham P. Jones rose—

Victoria Atkins: I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman had that information to hand. I will happily give way to him.

Graham P. Jones: The police and crime commissioner for Lancashire is watching this debate, and he has just sent me a very informative message to say that he has published his reserves, which are actually £25 million. I ask the Minister to correct the record at the Dispatch Box.

Victoria Atkins: I am happy to say that the reserves are £37.9 million as of March last year. If the PCC has decided to spend some of his savings, the Government welcome that, because we give money to PCCs to spend on policing in the local area, not so that it can sit in savings accounts. I will not trouble Members with the figures for Bedfordshire, the Met or South Wales, because I know that the House is eager to move on to the Adjournment debate.

Turning to education, we are conscious of the role of alternative provision when it comes to county lines. I hope that hon. Members know that we are expecting a report from Mr. Timpson on alternative provision, because we are conscious of the impact that it can have on serious violence. I am pleased that we have raised the age at which children can leave education from 16 to 18, but I am aware that some children still fall through the net, which is why the report will be so informative and important.

I am extremely grateful to all Members for their contributions to this debate. Antisocial behaviour still affects communities—

Martin Whitfield: Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Atkins: I am being directed not to take the hon. Gentleman’s intervention, so I hope that he will understand. I thank everyone for today’s robust debate.

4.20 pm

Diana Johnson: I thank the Minister for her kind words about the ongoing Libby Squire investigation. I am pleased that we had the opportunity to have this debate this afternoon and I thank all Members who took part. It was particularly interesting to hear what
my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) said about parts of the debate leading to a sense of déjà vu and that we were talking about reinventing the wheel. It is clear that mistakes have been made, particularly around police cuts since 2010. The thin blue line now really is too thin.

No one can seriously say that the fact that Labour increased police numbers when in government, meaning we had neighbourhood policing, more officers on the beat and PCSOs, was the reason we had a banking crisis and the sub-prime mortgage crisis in the USA. So to try to argue that that had to be dealt with by an incoming coalition Government is, frankly, tripe.

I remember Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary saying in 2010 that police budgets could be cut by up to 12% without affecting the frontline, but we have reached a point at which over 30% of police budgets are being cut. Choices made by the coalition Government and then successive Conservative Governments gave tax cuts to the rich and did not protect policing. Combine all that with cuts to local authorities, and it should come as no surprise to anyone that we are seeing such levels of antisocial behaviour today.

I ask the Minister to reconsider the legislative change that came in after 2010 that removed the victims of antisocial behaviour away from the centre, seemingly giving more rights to the youths who were not behaving well and engaging in criminal activity. We need to review that. The victim must be at the heart of antisocial behaviour legislation and protections.

_Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):_ I remind the House that the motion on beer taxation and pubs will not be moved.

### Closure of Santander Banks

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

4.23 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I thank those Members who have stayed behind for this important debate. The Lanark High Street branch of Santander is just one among 15 branches in Scotland that will be closing their doors. The Lanark branch will close on 4 July this year. That news has come as a shock to many of my constituents who rely on their local branch.

For the people and businesses in Lanark who depend on the face-to-face service they get in their local branch, especially those who are elderly, vulnerable, or live in the rural parts of Clydesdale, the nearest bank is in Lanark, so the closure of the branch is not just an inconvenience but a blow to the community, bringing new challenges for a town centre that is already struggling. Many local businesses depend on having quick access to their bank, and the closure will cause difficulties for many businesses in not only the town centre but the surrounding areas. For some customers, without the branch there will be no reason to visit the town centre at all, which is ultimately bad news for the local economy—footfall in shops, restaurants and cafés on Lanark High Street will drop.

I am sure I am not alone in this House in trying to tackle the decline of town centres, and I am sure many Members will agree that bank closures will only worsen the situation on our high streets.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. For customers, as she says, it is not just the banks but the other shops on our high streets that will be affected. Taking away this resource does not help older people or people who do not want to use internet banking.

Angela Crawley: That is exactly why I have secured this debate. It is important that the Government provide answers on how they hold these businesses to account, especially big businesses like Santander.

I have continued to campaign actively on town centre decline and regeneration in areas such as Hamilton and Carluke. The consequences of further closures of banks and high street stores in the Clydesdale area cannot be overstated. The wider impact they would have on Lanark are all too obvious and cannot go unrecognised.

Santander wrote at the end of last month to inform me of the decision to close its Lanark branch, with the rationale being that its internal review had found the branch to be no longer viable. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that it had already removed key services such as specialist mortgage advice and financial advice from many of its branches during the internal review.

According to the letter, 89% of customers using the branch are also using additional ways to complete their banking. That includes 26% using another Santander branch and 53% using online or mobile telephone banking. I fully accept that the changing nature of the digital economy and the increased use of online banking have changed how we use branches. However, Santander’s own figures suggest that it is content to let down the...
nearly three quarters of customers who are unable to travel to another bank and who rely on that service, and the nearly half of customers who do not or cannot access their bank online or through their phone.

**Mhairi Black** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): The Santander branch on Renfrew High Street is the sixth bank branch to close in the last three years across Renfrewshire. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is simply not good enough for banks to up sticks and leave without taking account of the digital and geographical constraints that are a reality for far too many of our constituents?

**Angela Crawley:** I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend, who drives home the point of this debate. In my constituency of Lanark, the rural issues go to the heart of why these closures are so impactful and, ultimately, why we are calling on the Government to do something about it.

This Government have stood on the back of the financial industry for years, yet they have done little to regulate it, to the point where banks are now closing right, left and centre and nothing is being done to improve local economies. None of the measures being taken has considered the impact on rural economies.

**Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ruther Glen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen), that the closure will have. I must pay tribute to my constituents in rural areas, Santander has failed to take into account the wider ramifications of why these closures are so impactful and, ultimately, why we are calling on the Government to do something about it.

It is regrettable that Santander chose not to undertake a full consultation with staff and the local community. Instead, it will follow a process of writing to customers to tell them when their bank will close, without adequately consulting the customers and staff who will be hardest impacted by the changes. Clearly, this decision has been taken behind closed doors, in the hope that no one would try to challenge it. I have spoken about only one story of a bank closure in my constituency, but this picture has been replicated all across the UK, as we have heard from other hon. Members.

Santander has announced its plans to close 140 branches across the UK, of which 15 are in Scotland. I wrote to the Secretary of State for Scotland, who is in the neighbouring constituency, so he is only down the road, asking him to meet a cross-party delegation of MPs to discuss how he and his Treasury colleagues could come together to mitigate the effects these closures will have in Scotland. Unfortunately, he has written to me today declining our invitation and laying the responsibility squarely with the Treasury, so it is all on the Minister here today—he can blame his pal. I hope he will have no more platitudes for me today and will give my constituents real answers on how the Government intend to hold big business to account for its rupturing impact on local economies and towns.

I warn the Secretary of State for Scotland, who was once upon a time the only Tory in Scotland—he now has some friends: ignore these cross-party calls at your peril. The cross-party calls from the Scottish National party, Lib Dems and Labour are clearly asking him, although he is not here to answer—and the Treasury, the Department he believes should be answering—what will you do to help my constituents? Scotland will not forget those who have let it down, and Members on the Government Benches have failed repeatedly to live up to their responsibilities. These closures will put 1,270 jobs at risk and will likely cause £40 redundancies, as Santander expects to redeploy only a third of the staff.

This is just the latest crisis for bank branches in the UK. The consumer magazine *Which?* reported at the end of last year that 60 bank branches were closing each month in the UK. Santander alone has closed 230 branches since 2015. People are being left behind without proper access to services. Post offices and mobile banking trucks do not offer the same range of services or the same convenience as branches. Some people, particularly the elderly and the vulnerable, are unable to use online services. For people who live in rural areas such as Lanark and many other constituencies that will be affected by these closures, it can be a challenge to access banking services when branches close. The Santander closure in Lanark means that my constituents in Auchengray, Tarbrax and Woolfords will lose out on one of their relatively close services. This might mean that they have to travel into town and then for another hour on a train to get to the city to bank, or travel to their neighbouring town assuming that a connecting bus service is available.

Leaving aside the restrictions in digital connectivity faced by some of my constituents in rural areas, Santander has failed to take into account the wider ramifications that the closure will have. I must pay tribute to my constituency neighbour on the other side, the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen), for his work in campaigning to keep ATMs open in rural areas, which mitigates some of the effects of bank branch closures. I recognise that Santander has made a business decision based on changing patterns of banking, but there must be a better way than to simply pull the plug on branch services, especially for rural communities.

The issue of transport, which I have raised, and the built environment should also play a key role in big businesses’ considerations when they are making such decisions. I believe these are real problems, and I must ask the Minister: what steps will he be taking to halt the effects of these closures on our communities? If he cannot halt them, how will he hold businesses to account in the future? This will only continue to happen in many places. Santander is but one example. RBS was another, and I am sure many more banks will do similar things unless the Government clamp down. These closures will have a deflating effect on local economies across the country, especially in small towns and rural areas, and I
wonder what effects the Minister thinks that will have on the UK economy as a whole, especially at this moment in time.

I accept that Santander has made a commercial decision, but I know also that its decision will have a huge knock-on effect on other businesses in the communities it serves, and I cannot just stand back and allow it to go ahead. I know the closures will negatively affect many people, including the elderly and the vulnerable in our communities. I know that our town centres will struggle to recover from the damage caused by losing yet another branch. Rural communities will be less connected than they currently are, and businesses will suffer from the loss of their local branch.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), who could not be here today, has secured a Westminster Hall debate on the subject, so I assure the Minister that we will not be going away and this issue cannot be ignored. As I have said, I accept that this is a commercial decision by Santander, but I urge the Minister to take any action he can possibly take to halt the effects or hold the banks to account for this closure and the many others that will affect towns and rural communities. I hope he will pay heed to the comments of all Members who have spoken.

4.35 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I commend the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) for securing the debate. Just before I came over from the Treasury, I noticed that there will be a three-hour debate on the matter next Thursday, in which rather more Members will be able to contribute. I know that branch bank closures can be difficult for the communities affected, and particularly for the most vulnerable customers. The Government are keenly aware of that, and later I will go into more detail on what support is in place for those customers. After lobbying from SNP Members, I had the opportunity to visit Scotland last autumn, when the Royal Bank of Scotland was carrying out a review, so I am very engaged in this matter.

It is clear that the way we bank is changing. More and more of us—the process is very rapid—are choosing to bank online or through an app, and fewer people are choosing to visit a traditional branch, as we used to. Between 2011 and 2016, branch usage declined by 42%, whereas mobile banking usage increased by 354% between 2012 and 2017. That is unprecedented consumer change, and banks have obviously had to adapt to remain competitive in the circumstances. That adaptation has involved virtually all the main banks taking tough decisions about their respective branch networks.

Decisions on branch networks can be unpopular, and I understand why, but they are not ones that the Government can make. To be fair, the hon. Lady recognised that in her observations on the Santander decision. Branch network decisions are commercial decisions for the bank’s management team, and the Government do not intervene in them because we believe that commercial firms are best placed to make commercial decisions. The flexibility to respond to changes in the market is what makes the UK’s financial services sector one of the most competitive and productive in the world.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The closure in my constituency will be the fourth bank that my town has lost, and the town has a high proportion of retired people who do not bank online or use their phone for contactless payments. My mother will never bank online. It is really two decades too early to withdraw these banks. Their ATMs go, too, so there is a problem for people who want cash in our town.

John Glen: I will talk in a few minutes about the ways in which we have intervened to try to find solutions to the circumstances in which the hon. Lady’s constituents find themselves. As I am sure those Members who have spoken are aware, the UK financial services sector is a whole-UK phenomenon, and Edinburgh in particular is important to financial services. The Government want to protect the sector, which is why we do not make the direct intervention that some may be looking for.

The Government firmly believe that the impact of branch closures should be understood, considered and mitigated, so that all customers, wherever they live, can continue to access over-the-counter banking services. The first step is to ensure that customers feel informed and supported when a branch closes, which is why the Government support the industry’s access to banking standard. All the major high street banks have signed up to the standard, which commits banks to a number of outcomes when a branch closes. First, they commit to give at least three months’ notice of a closure and explain their decision clearly; secondly, they commit to consider what services can still be provided locally, and communicate alternative ways to bank clearly to customers; and thirdly, they commit to ensure that support is available for customers who need extra help to bank online or, where that is not possible, to access services at the local post office. The standard is not just a checklist that banks need to go through; it is about being considerate of customers’ concerns when a branch closes.

In the case of Santander, I am pleased to inform the House that it took a number of steps when announcing the restructuring of its branch network. Not only did it proactively contact all customers, as per the requirements of the standard, but it set up a dedicated phone line for customer queries about the changes for the duration of the closure programme. Furthermore, its branch teams will be proactively contacting known vulnerable customers to ensure that they are properly supported and advised on how to continue to bank locally. This includes all customers over the age of 75 who have visited the branch in the past 12 months, as well as those customers who have sight impairments or mobility issues, power of attorney, or are known by the team to be vulnerable. Where needed, this support can include: walking customers to the post office to introduce them to the post office team and demonstrate how they can carry out their banking; introducing them to staff in a neighbouring Santander branch; or helping customers to switch their account to another nearby provider. The teams will also take the time to talk to vulnerable customers about how they bank, changing the frequency of their statements and ordering cash cards, and to demonstrate how to use ATMs and contactless cards.

I acknowledge the point made by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). My father died a couple of years ago and I have been trying to migrate my mother to do more of this stuff online, otherwise
the burden falls to me. I recognise that there are limits to that process but, in this case, a great deal of sensitivity has been shown to help customers to adapt to the new environment.

Angela Crawley: I appreciate what the Minister has said about the measures that Santander has taken. It is very noble of the bank to offer to walk someone to a post office—or to take them on the train to Glasgow in my case—but I am not hearing from him what the Government are doing to regulate financial services when they continually close branches across the UK. That is what I want to hear from the Minister.

John Glen: I promise the hon. Lady that I will come on to talk about that. It is about the relationship between the banks and the post office in the instance where it is the last bank that is closing. I am not here to defend the banks and the post office in the instance where it is the responsibility of my colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions to work with banks where they fall short.

Liz McInnes: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. He paints a rosy picture of what Santander is doing to help vulnerable customers, but the fact is that it told my constituents in Middleton that they could bank at Middleton post office, which is earmarked for closure and will be moving into a branch of WHSmith, so in my constituency it most certainly is not in touch with what is going on in the town centre.

John Glen: I am not seeking to paint a rosy picture. I am setting out plainly the facts about what the bank has undertaken. I obviously cannot account for the way in which every single branch has handled things. I note the hon. Lady’s observations and I am very happy to look into what she says, or to make a link to Santander for her.

I hope that the hon. Lady will agree that this support demonstrates that there is a commitment to the spirit, not just the letter, of the standard, which is warmly welcomed. To ensure that all banks meet the requirements of the standard, the Lending Standards Board monitors and enforces it. Last year, it published its annual report on banks’ adherence to the standard and found that, overall, firms’ engagement was positive and genuine. However, there were some areas where banks could do even more, and the Lending Standards Board is using the full range of tools and sanctions at its disposal to work with banks where they fall short.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I thank the Minister for giving way. I wish to raise again the kind of work that Santander is doing in introducing people to post offices. Is he aware of the appallingly low rates of pay given to sub-postmasters for doing banking work, especially in places where there are no banks left?

John Glen: I am aware of the concerns raised in that area and I have met postmasters about that. That area is the responsibility of my colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, but I note the point the hon. Lady has made.

I have recognised when I have participated in debates over the past 13 months that there have been some concerns around the provision of post office banking services. The Government recognise that some customers just prefer, or need, to carry out their everyday banking over the counter. That is why we support the Post Office’s commercial agreement with 28 high street banks and building societies, which enables 99% of personal banking customers and 95% of small business banking customers to carry out their everyday banking at one of the 11,500 post office branches. While I concede that the range of services offered by post offices may be more limited than that offered in a traditional bank branch, the services provided through the extensive post office network ensure that essential banking facilities, such as depositing and withdrawing cash, or depositing a cheque, remain available in as many communities as possible.

Marion Fellows: I know that this is a Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy fiefdom, but the Minister is saying that banks are closing and post offices are good, yet post offices are also closing simply because of the low return that sub-postmasters are receiving for doing banking business. That takes so much of their time and they are earning much less than the minimum wage per hour.

John Glen: I note the points that the hon. Lady raises but, as I have said to her, I cannot comment on this matter directly from my vantage point in government. However, I would just point out that since 2010, post office branch numbers have been at their most stable for decades, and 99.7% of the national population now lives within 3 miles of a branch and 93% lives within a mile of their nearest post office. I am very sympathetic to discussions of rurality, given the nature of my constituency, and almost 99% of the rural population live within 3 miles of a post office.

The Government believe that too few customers know about these excellent services so, at my predecessor’s request, UK Finance and the Post Office have been working together to launch a five-point action plan to raise awareness of post office banking services. Members may have seen posters in post offices or advertisements for the services in papers, or noticed the Post Office logo on their bank’s leaflets and websites. When I was new to office last year, there were concerns about the execution of that relationship, and I followed up and wrote to both parties to ask for assurances about the delivery of the programme.

The Government cannot reverse the changes in the market and in customer behaviour, nor can they determine firms’ commercial strategies in response to those changes. Today’s debate has focused on the loss of traditional banking channels, but it is important that we do not lose sight of a range of innovations in the retail banking market. They are bringing real benefits to consumers of all types, as I saw for myself on my visit to Scotland last summer.

No matter how the market changes, however, the Government will continue to take positive action to maintain access to vital banking services and ensure that banks support communities across the UK when their local branches close.

Dr Whitford rose—

John Glen: I was about to conclude, but am happy to give way again to the hon. Lady.
Dr Whitford: I thank the Minister for giving way. The banks that have already left my town did not leave any ATM behind. Because of the low fees earned through the LINK system, more and more ATMs in rural locations, particularly across Scotland, are also closing. Many people are not remotely ready to live in a totally cashless system, so is there anything that the Government can do at least to ensure that there are ATMs in every community?

John Glen: I am grateful for that intervention. The Government recognise that widespread free access to cash remains extremely important in the day-to-day lives of many people up and down the country, and LINK, the UK’s cash machine network, is committed to maintaining free access to cash through its extensive footprint of ATMs. The Government set up the payment systems regulator to ensure that the UK’s payment systems work in the interests of their users. The regulator is closely monitoring the situation and holding LINK to account for its commitments to maintain the broad geographic spread of ATMs across the UK.

I draw the attention of the House to the debate to which I envisage I will be replying next Thursday. I hope that it will give hon. Members an opportunity to make further points, which I will be happy to take on board.

Question put and agreed to.

4.49 pm

House adjourned.
the way to save the officer, and PC Wardell received a hand wound, but the dog received serious head wounds as well as the chest injuries. PC Wardell believes that Finn saved his life.

As other officers arrived, the suspect was apprehended. Finn was badly injured, bleeding and was taken to the vet and then on to a specialist vet. He was in a terrible shape with his lungs punctured in four places and yet he was licking his handler’s hand wound. Finn had a four-hour operation to save his life. The vet commented on his strength and bravery. PC Wardell slept downstairs with Finn for the next four weeks, and I think we are all pleased that Finn made a remarkable recovery. After 11 weeks, he was ready to go back to work with PC Wardell. On his first shift, on 22 December 2016, they arrested a fleeing suspect on their first outing.

Finn is one of the most successful police dogs that Hertfordshire police has known. He has won national recognition for his bravery: Action Animal of the Year; Hero Animal of the Year; and the PDSA gold medal, which is known as the animals’ George Cross. However, when it came to charging the offender, it became clear that there is a problem with the law. For the assault on the officer, it was a straightforward offence of assault occasioning actual bodily harm, but there were two potential charges for the injuries to Finn himself—either causing “unnecessary suffering” to an animal under section 4 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006, or section 1 of the Criminal Damage Act 1971. Neither offence properly provides for the criminality involved in the attack on Finn. In the event, an offence of criminal damage was brought, but this treated Finn as though he were simply a piece of police property that had been damaged—a bit like a police radio or something of that sort.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): May I thank My right hon. and learned Friend for his persistence in introducing this Bill and say how strongly I support it? He is making the compelling case that treating these animals in the criminal justice system as items of property is entirely unjust, and it does not reflect their bravery and service.

Sir Oliver Heald: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, who was here a moment ago, told me that he thought it was unpalatable to think of police animals as equipment. In addition, the penalty for criminal damage is largely determined by the value of the property that is damaged, and a seven-year-old police dog who is close to retirement is simply not worth much money. And so it proved at court, where no separate penalty was imposed on Finn’s attacker for the attack on Finn.

The offence under section 4 of the Animal Welfare Act is potentially a better route, but there are two problems with it. First, the maximum penalty is only six months’ imprisonment. After a consultation, happily the Government have committed to increasing that to five years, and that has been widely welcomed. I pay tribute to the campaigners who have pressed for that, including Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, which is also a strong supporter of this measure. The Government’s commitment to a maximum penalty of five years clearly represents a great improvement.
Secondly, there is a difficulty with the application of section 4(3)(c)(ii) of the Animal Welfare Act, which sets out that various factors must be taken into account in deciding whether the infliction of suffering on an animal can be considered unnecessary—those factors include the protection of a person or property—and currently contains no reference to the role of service animals. Clearly, the mission of a service animal is to restrain a suspect or to use its physical presence to support the actions of an officer in accordance with his or her duty, but there is no reference to that in the Act. We have heard from police dog handlers, prosecutors and all the police and crime commissioners in the country that there is concern that the provision allows defendants to argue that they are justified in applying force against a service animal in self-defence, rendering the force necessary. That has apparently been an issue in deciding not to prosecute for the offence under the Animal Welfare Act.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman—on this occasion, I will call him my right hon. and learned Friend—for the doggedness with which he has pursued this Bill, and I thank those who have campaigned outside. It is unfortunate that the campaign has been necessary. Surely we should be protecting those who protect us. In this instance, we are talking about police dogs, but the same should apply to uniformed staff and the blue-light services. We should treat attacks on them and attacks on service animals as aggravating circumstances, and the CPS should get that message loud and clear.

Sir Oliver Heald: I certainly agree with my friend the right hon. Gentleman. He is right that such attacks are really attacks on those who keep us safe, and it is a pity if that is not adequately recognised in law. I pay tribute to him; in his support for the measure, he has been like an old dog with a bone—[Interruption.] I will not repeat the sedentary comment that has just been made.

I thank Ministers in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, particularly Lord Gardiner; my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State; My hon. Friend the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, who is the Minister today and who was supportive at an earlier stage; and the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), who dealt with the Bill in Committee. They have discussed the matter with me at length, and now they are supporting the Bill, which is the outcome of discussions. The Bill follows the example of the Australian Animal Welfare Act, which makes similar provision for service animals. This approach is becoming the norm in advanced countries, and that is good to see.

Clause 1 provides that the consideration in section 4(3)(c)(ii) of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 should be disregarded if the animal was under the control of a relevant officer at the time and was being used by that officer in the course of the officer’s duties, in a way that was reasonable in all the circumstances. A relevant officer is defined as a police constable or a person such as a prison officer who has the powers of a constable, or persons in analogous positions. Clause 2 makes provision for commencement in the normal way. The measure applies to England and Wales, but it is fair to mention that a campaign for Finn’s law to apply in Scotland is gaining ground, and the same is true in Northern Ireland. My hope is that this will become the law across the United Kingdom.

Taken together with the Government’s increase in the animal welfare penalty, this change in the law will mean that for the first time there is suitable protection for service animals and a proper sentence for offenders. Service animals such as Finn do a great job, and there are 1,200 police dogs in service at any time. There should be proper recognition in law of their vital role, and I commend the Bill to the House.

9.45 am

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I was not expecting to be called to speak so soon, so it falls to me to say what an enormous debt of gratitude this House owes to Finn—I understand that he is not here at the moment, but he will be later—[Interruption.] Oh, Finn is here. Super! I look forward to meeting him later. Look, he is standing up, so we can see him—marvellous! I am sorry that those on the Opposition Benches probably cannot quite see him, but I hope that you can, Mr Speaker.

As I think we will hear from Members from all corners of the House, we owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Finn, to PC Dave Wardell and to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald). The Bill has not had an easy passage through this House, and I fail to see how someone without my right hon. and learned Friend’s many years of experience in a wide range of judicial and barristerial posts could have got it this far. Many congratulations to him.

It is a genuine honour to speak in support of the Bill. I am sure we all agree that service animals, from the police to the prison service, do a very important job. There are 1,200 police dogs in service, and more often than not their role is to help in unpredictable and very dangerous situations. Between April 2017 and March 2018, they were used in nearly 2,000 incidents, including 557 occasions when the suspect had a weapon. In just 99 of those incidents, the suspect escaped. I suspect that that is rather better than the statistics for humans who try to apprehend suspects.

As we know from the case of PC Dave Wardell and Finn, however, the result is not always a happy one for the dogs in the line of duty. Finn is just one of hundreds of dogs to sustain an injury while they are doing their jobs. My own local neighbourhood inspector in Cherwell, John Batty, told me about an incident that he witnessed. He says:

“Takan is a young boy and it is a real shame that he was released to catch him. The suspect had a knife on him and he stabbed Tyke causing him to lose an eye and although he eventually recovered he had to be retired. It was very traumatic, especially for the dog handler, so anything we can do to evidence the need for such a law is well worth the effort.”

I could not agree more.

Today’s Bill brings in long-overdue changes to provide proper recognition in law of service animals’ vital role. Service animals are used widely across the prison service; police dogs are bred and trained to be brave, and, where
necessary, aggressive; and sniffer dogs also have specific characteristics. Those characteristics may make life after service very difficult for such animals, and it is not always easy to rehome them. We know from well publicised cases that the retirement of military dogs can be difficult, and it may require sensitive handling. Now that we recognise that these dogs exist and we can talk about military service—at an earlier point in my career, we certainly were not permitted to do that—it is important that we talk about the needs of those dogs and their handlers. They really are a fourth or fifth emergency service. They play an essential part in keeping the brave men and women who protect us safer than they would otherwise be, and it is important that we recognise that.

I am glad to see the Minister here. I hope that he will remind us later of the Government’s commitment to increase the maximum penalty for animal welfare offences from six months to five years. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has spoken of her desire to make sure that the United Kingdom is a world leader in the care and protection of animals. This Bill takes us one step closer to achieving that aim. This Bill is for Finn, who is sitting very quietly in the Gallery; for Tyke, who I hope is still enjoying his retirement; and for all of our brave service animals.

9.50 am

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I, too, pay great tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald), who is the very embodiment of a sensible but compassionate Conservatism that is still, in my view, right at the heart of our party, and long may that be so. There is huge support for this measure. I have even had to bring my spectacles today to give it extra attention because of the huge importance that I attach to it. Apparently, the optics are very important these days.

There are two key things I want to talk about. First, there is the principle. I think that most of us were here when we had the Second Reading of the excellent Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) to protect public servants and introduce stiffer penalties for assaults on them. In effect, the principle is the same. We are saying that where a police dog, for example, is there in the line of duty, that is not a normal procedure—it is something extra special. It is about an animal that is performing a task to protect us and to uphold public service. I very much welcome that principle.

I also want to give the local angle from Suffolk. We have had a very moving case not dissimilar to that of PC Wardell, to whom I pay tribute, up in the Gallery. It concerned a dog called Aman. During an incident in Ipswich in 2011, police dog Aman was stabbed as he attempted to stop an armed man who had stabbed a person after breaking into a home and trying to avoid capture. His handler, to whom I also pay tribute, was PC Steve Jay, who was also injured in the attack. Less than four weeks later, they were both back at work. So excellent was the performance and so vital the role played by Aman in effectively saving a life that in March 2012 he was given the police dog action and humanitarian action of the year award at Crufts—a very special award. In November 2011, the pair were together presented with a special recognition gong during the Stars of Suffolk awards.

Unfortunately, police dog Aman is no longer with us—he has passed on to a special place. However, I have this tribute from retiring Chief Constable Gareth Wilson, who has just retired as the year of sort Suffolk.

“It’s probably timely to recognise the bravery of our police dogs following the recent death in retirement of one of our heroes, Police Dog Aman, they truly are a pleasure to watch working—well, unless you are a criminal running away from a crime scene, then it must be pretty frightening!

We often talk about the ‘police family’ and we naturally think about police officers, PCSOs. Specials and volunteers—but we also mustn’t forget our police dogs who play a key operational role and with their handlers provide a really important service to the force.”

That is an excellent tribute. In quoting it, I should pay my own tribute to the departing chief constable. Speaking as an MP, he has been an excellent support to us. He was with the Essex murder squad before he came to Suffolk, so he has a real, gritty background in frontline crime. I always found him to be approachable. He had strong views on policing. I pay tribute to him as he retires to a quieter life in Suffolk.

This is an excellent Bill that embodies a very noble principle of supporting those who protect us. We usually think of people but today it is about animals, and animals that are performing an incredible service day in, day out. I join other hon. Members in supporting the Bill.

9.54 am

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) in this Third Reading debate. I, too, congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) on getting the Bill to this stage. I supported his Bill when it was a ten-minute rule Bill, going back well over a year now, and it was a great pleasure to serve on the Bill Committee. I have been able to see his dogged determination to get the Bill to this stage.

The Animal Welfare (Service Animals) Bill, to give it its full title, is more commonly known as Finn’s law. It is great that Finn is here today. The Bill is a much needed reform to ensure that the perpetrators who injure animals in service get the sentence they truly deserve. I was honoured to meet Finn and his handler, PC Dave Wardell, when they came to Parliament during the Committee stage of the Bill. From my childhood, I have had a fear of Alsatians and German Shepherds, so it took quite a lot of courage for me to go up to meet Finn when he was in New Palace Yard, but he was so docile and loved being made a fuss of. However, I was assured by PC Wardell that if he gave the command, the dog would have become a very, very different dog. Luckily, he did not need to give that command, so we were all safe, but we did not get to see a police dog in true action, which I know is quite spectacular. Police dogs are trained meticulously, and that is so important. They are really, really skilled animals. Just as we respect people with skills, from a human point of view, we also need to respect animals with such skills. I commend all police dogs and their handlers for those skills.

This new piece of legislation could so easily have been called Axle’s law. Police dog Axle, better known as PD Axle, is another police dog that was almost killed when he was stabbed three times in nearby Amber Valley...
in Derbyshire. The attacker had tried to attack a police officer while avoiding arrest earlier that day. After stabbing Axel, he threatened another police officer with a knife. I am sure that all Members will be pleased to learn that PD Axel has recovered from emergency treatment and is now back on duty. Everybody was really pleased to see that. Axel received very many good-will messages. There were posts on social media and requests to know where to send goody bags with doggy treats. Axel became quite a celebrity, just as Finn has. He has perhaps put on a few pounds from eating all the doggy treats as he was recovering.

This Bill is much needed to protect our heroic service animals and to ensure that all those who harm these wonderful animals get a sentence they really deserve. I am delighted to support it today.

9.57 am

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con):

I commend the relentless efforts of PC Dave Wardell, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) and the entire Finn’s law team for their efforts with this Bill. As my right hon. and learned Friend said, the Bill has incredible support, and it is so obvious why when one reads Finn’s story. It is not only about the tragic event itself but everything that followed—the agonising wait during Finn’s four hours of surgery, his 11-week recovery in which he was supported by PC Wardell’s loving family, and the wave of public support for a change in the law demonstrated by the online petition. It is an emotional account of remarkable bravery and the crucial role that service animals play in keeping us all safe. Their willingness to protect those on the frontline who protect us reinforces the need for this Bill.

The passage of this Bill would represent a lot more than a recognition of Finn’s and PC Wardell’s sacrifice. We have heard many accounts of why the Bill is needed. It would demonstrate that this House recognises the daily sacrifice that our service animals and their handlers make to protect our communities. The strong penalties that it can implement will act as a serious deterrent to those who think that they can get away with harming our police dogs. Given that at any one time there are over 1,200 police dogs in service, it is right that the whole House recognises that these animals protect us every single day.

I saw this for myself when I undertook a night shift with our local police constabulary, Whitehaven, in Cumbria, over mad Friday, one of the busiest nights of the year. I had the opportunity to meet Jamie, our dog handler, who talked about some of the scenarios in which his dogs were used, which really brought home to me the terrifying experiences a dog handler has to go through. He gave the example of having had to chase his dog as it was chasing a potential criminal and then having to face this criminal in a dark wood as they turned on him with a knife. It was his dog that used its initiative and protected its dog handler. That really brings home how necessary police dogs are in our forces and how we must protect them.

I am pleased to see the implementation of suitable protections in the Bill. The service animal must meet the following requirements: it must be “under the control of a relevant officer”; it should be being used by an officer in the course of their duties; and it must be used “in a way that was reasonable in all the circumstances”.

Those amendments prevent misuse of the statute and allow for a pragmatic solution.

As my right hon. and learned Friend stated, the Government are committed to the very highest standards of animal welfare, and the Prime Minister has set out that we will make the United Kingdom a world leader in the care and protection of animals. I am encouraged that the Government will ensure that any changes required to UK law are made in a rigorous and comprehensive way to ensure that animal sentience is recognised after we leave the EU.

In conclusion, I commend once again the hard work of all those involved in bringing the Bill forward, and I look forward to its progressing through the House.

10.1 am

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con):

I will keep my remarks fairly short, in the spirit of the debate, and given my keenness to see the Bill progress through the House today. I welcome the fact that it has made the progress that it has, and I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) on all the work he has done to bring it to Third Reading from where it will—hopefully, soon—head to the other place and pass through there as well. It is particularly welcome that the Bill follows the work done on the private Member’s Bill to protect emergency service workers. We are now looking to bring in this Bill to provide more appropriate sentences for those who attack service animals.

To be clear, this is not about attacking a piece of equipment; it is not like smashing a window or damaging a desk—this is about attacking a living creature. It is not much of a step up from using violence against a police dog to using violence against a police officer. Therefore, it is right that the courts have more appropriate sentencing penalties available to them when dealing with people who commit the type of offence that was committed against Finn, who, as other Members have said, is with us in the Public Gallery today.

As Members will know, I am a strong fan of animal welfare legislation, having introduced some of my own Bills. Sadly, they did not get through, but, thankfully, the ideas in them have been picked up by the Government to strengthen the penalties available to our courts against those who abuse animals. I am clear that the mindset that would justify stabbing a police dog in the way that Finn was stabbed could just as easily justify using violence against a human being. Therefore, it is absolutely right that we pass this Bill to give our courts the powers they need to sentence much more appropriately and to make it clear that a service animal is different from just any piece of equipment: it feels pain; it is sentient; and it can express its own emotions. This is not like a truncheon or a light being broken, so it is absolutely welcome that the Bill will soon progress through the House and become law.

I am keen for us to make progress today and, therefore, before I resume my seat, I will just say that I very much hope that all Members—I suspect there will be cross-party consensus—
Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op) indicated assent.

Kevin Foster: I see my friend on the Opposition Front Bench nodding. I hope the Bill will receive support from all Members present and will soon be, not just a Bill before this House, but an Act of Parliament.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): I, too, congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire on a very important piece of legislation. It is brilliant that Finn is here—I would say “in person”, but I should really say “in dog” I suppose. I also congratulate PC Dave Wardell and everyone who has brought forward this Bill, on all their hard work and indeed on their service to this country.

The Bill is clearly needed; there is a clear deficiency in the law. Dogs, as my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) pointed out, are not just property; they are hugely sentient beings. The dog my parents-in-law have tends to whimper or cry whenever I set off back to Westminster; I do not know whether that is a comment on the state of Westminster at the moment, but it is clear proof that dogs are hugely sentient and indeed emotional beings.

The Bill is a wonderful natural complement to the private Member’s Bill put through by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), which aimed to protect those who protect us and to increase sentences for people who attack police officers in the line of duty. This Bill naturally builds on that and protects police animals, too. The sort of person who is prepared to stab a dog with a 10-inch blade is clearly incredibly dangerous.

Research shows that such incidents are not as rare as we might think. Of the 1,920 incidents mentioned in a suspect escaping. That is just to reiterate how effective police dogs are in their work.

Neil O’Brien: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend, who is very knowledgeable. I am not surprised to be reassured that he has thought through all the implications in full.

This is a hugely important piece of legislation. I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend on steering it through the House, and I hope we will pass it today to protect the police animals that protect us.

10.4 am

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien). Like everybody else here, I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald). I also welcome Finn and his handler and supporters up in the Public Gallery.

It is safe to say that our relationships with animals have stood the test of time, and none more so than that with man’s best friend. Dogs, in particular, have become an important part of the police in the post-war period. It is thought that the first ever police dog was used in 1859, when a bloodhound helped Luton police track down a murderer. Today, dogs are used in maintaining law and order, fighting the war on drugs and supporting counter-terrorism operations.

These intelligent and dedicated animals have demonstrated time and again that there is nothing they will not do for their handlers. Finn’s story shone a light on that. We have heard how Finn, even having been stabbed in the chest with a 10-inch blade, still intervened to save his handler, PC Wardell. That is an amazing story, and it gives us such faith and hope that there are dogs such as this on our streets to protect us.

10.7 am

Trudy Harrison: Does my hon. Friend also recognise that police dogs are incredibly capable at what they do, with a really remarkable success record? Just 5% of the 1,920 incidents mentioned resulted in a suspect escaping. That is just to reiterate how effective police dogs are in their work.

Gillian Keegan: Absolutely. I totally agree with my hon. Friend. The value of dogs in the force is clear. As she says, in 95% of deployments involving dogs the suspects are apprehended.

In Sussex, our police force utilises dogs in tackling a range of criminal activity every day. Recently, when Sussex police attempted to stop a car, a brief chase ended with the suspect vehicle crashing into a roundabout and all three passengers fleeing the scene. Police dog Isla was sent after the driver first, and once the dog was spotted the chase ended rather quickly. Isla then started a fresh pursuit for the first passenger. She was found sitting in front of the suspect barking continuously, as she was trained to do, until her handler back-up arrived. However, two out of three was not enough, and police dog Isla then led her handler 300 metres down the road, where she located the third and final suspect. All three were arrested for the theft of a vehicle.

As well as Isla, in the past few months police dogs Sparky, Lottie, Gonzo, Jack and Bobby have all contributed to arrests in my constituency. The great thing about this Bill is that it has given all of us the opportunity to go and meet our police handlers and the dogs, as well as to learn all about their incredible work. The police handlers
told me that the dogs are frequently beaten and kicked on duty when assisting in an arrest or working to control crowds.

It is the bravery of a serving dog that has led to this debate, but it is also worth highlighting the important role that our mounted units play. This Bill will of course protect all service animals, including many of the horses we see in mounted units. I have had the experience of watching police horses actually break up a huge crowd of people in my home town of Liverpool.

Finn’s story and others highlighted in this debate show how vital these service animals are to the police—they tackle crime on our streets every day, and they keep their handlers and the public safe—so it is simply wrong not to have the protections in place that they need. I am so pleased that this Bill will put in place all the protections that they deserve:

“You can judge a man’s true character by the way he treats his fellow animals.”

10.11 am

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I particularly thank the right hon. and learned Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) for bringing forward this Bill and for his persistence in championing the cause of police dogs for so long. As in the previous stages, the Opposition will fully support this Bill as it corrects a crucial imbalance in animal welfare. Service animals are sentient beings that bravely and loyally serve the public. The law should recognise them as such and give them the protections that they deserve.

I join hon. Members in paying tribute to the brave police dog Finn. Opposition Members could not quite see him when he made his tour de force in the Public Gallery, but we look forward to being invited to the Government Whip’s Office for a photo later. This is not something that normally happens to Opposition Members.

[Interruption. / Ah, there he is—brilliant. I look forward to visiting the Whip’s Office to see Finn in person, and to say thank you to PC Dave Wardell and all those who have campaigned for Finn’s law.

As we have heard from the right hon. and learned Gentleman, Finn protected PC Wardell from an attack that might have cost him his life or at least given him serious injuries. Finn’s case was extreme but, sadly, not unusual for police dogs. Life is rough, so we are told, and police animals are routinely put in harm’s way to protect us in the name of the law. Surely the time has come for the law to protect them as well. Every service animal matters and this Bill, when implemented, will make that true for police dogs. Police dogs and police horses are valued public servants and, like Finn, can be real victims of violence and animal cruelty. The law must give them the protection they deserve.

I am sure many Members in this House are followers of Devon and Cornwall police dogs on Twitter—DC_PoliceDogs. Rightly, it is one of the most popular Twitter accounts in Plymouth and the far south-west. It is a reminder of the daily work that police dogs do not just in big cities, but in rural areas such as the far south-west. It is fantastic to see how they join up with other service animals, such as the Devon and Somerset fire and rescue service specialist search dogs. All of them deserve good protection.

Labour Members have been at the forefront of protecting animal welfare for many years. Indeed, we like to believe that we are the party of animal welfare. From bringing forward the landmark Hunting Act 2004 to protecting domestic animals under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, Labour has always placed the welfare of animals high on the policy agenda. At a European level, Labour secured better welfare standards for battery hens and chickens, and tightened the rules on the transport of live animals. It is a record that my party can rightly be proud of, but it is also a record that requires us to support—and ensure that we support—all those who are fighting for animal welfare. It is the reason why we are very pleased to support this Bill.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman rightly mentioned that animals are not property and should not be treated as such under the law. The current law is inadequate in that respect, and the omission of service animals from the protection of animal cruelty legislation needs to change. It is fantastic and overdue that this Bill creates a specific offence for those who seek to injure service animals. They deserve appropriate recognition for the vital role they fulfil.

Recourse to the Criminal Damage Act 1971 is not good enough, and in cases such as Finn’s, it has been shown that that approach simply does not work. Some 1,200 police dogs are protecting us at any time, and their protection must be made clear in law. Labour welcomes the Sentencing Council’s updated sentencing guidelines on animal cruelty, which now include a new aggravating factor of causing unnecessary suffering to an animal that is being used in public service or as an assistance dog.

In reality, however, we know that we need to go much further. The law as it stands is not a successful deterrent, and many people who work with service animals think it is failing to offer protection. The Animal Welfare Act was a watershed moment in animal rights, but we must continue to build on the progress that we achieved over a decade ago.

Sir Oliver Heald: The hon. Gentleman may be aware that his right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), who was the architect of the 2006 Act, is one of the Bill’s co-sponsors and agrees that this change is needed to improve that landmark piece of legislation.

Luke Pollard: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for that intervention, and it is good to see on the back of the Bill the list of luminaries who are backing it. I note that my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) is among those champions. Indeed, his work in supporting the welfare of animals is something that I think all of us on both sides of the House can be proud.

I am pleased that the Government have announced increased sentences for animal cruelty. That is an important step forward for which Labour has been arguing for some time. I would be grateful if the Minister told the House when he intends to bring forward legislation to put that into practice. Sadly, on every single day that goes by without that strong deterrent being put into law, examples of animal cruelty are being carried out across the country for which there are insufficient criminal penalties. I would be grateful to the Minister if he clarified the position.
Let me turn briefly to implementation. This really important Bill extends to England and Wales. As was said by the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on Second Reading, there is the question of how we can extend the Bill’s provisions to the entire United Kingdom, with devolved Administrations making the appropriate decisions for their locality, but may I ask in particular about Northern Ireland? Northern Ireland does not have a sitting Assembly at the moment, so the devolved legislature does not have the ability to take action. I would be grateful if the Minister outlined what discussions have taken place with the Northern Ireland Office about how these really important provisions can be extended to police dogs in Northern Ireland.

Sir Oliver Heald: I am very eager that the law covers the whole United Kingdom. The position in Northern Ireland is slightly difficult because it has a different animal welfare law from the 2006 Act, which covers only England and Wales. When I looked into this with the House authorities, I found that it would be very difficult to amend my Bill to cover Northern Ireland, for example because the long title refers to the 2006 Act, which applies only to England and Wales. I was told that if I tried to amend the Bill to include Northern Ireland, I might lose it. However, this is clearly a very important thing to look at, and I am certainly supportive of doing something for Northern Ireland.

Luke Pollard: As someone who grew up watching films of dogs travelling the country to protect their owners and rescue people, I know that where there is a will, there is a way. I hope that Ministers will take forward the belief that extending Finn’s law to cover all parts of the United Kingdom is a sensible and prudent way for us to make sure that police dogs, wherever they are serving, enjoy the same protection as they will in England and Wales under the Bill.

The concerns raised by the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien) about safeguards are important, and we must also consider concerns about self-defence. I know that the right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire addressed such concerns in the Bill’s early stages, but as we close one loophole regarding police dogs, we must not risk opening another. That is especially important when considering the implementation of the Bill and how it will be judged by the courts, and we must send the strong message today that we do not seek to create new loopholes around the courts, and we must send the strong message today that we do not seek to create new loopholes around self-defence, especially regarding the excessive use of force.

The Opposition fully support the Bill. Animals do not have a voice in politics, and it is our job to give them one. There will be people across the country who, over the past few months, might not have looked at the House of Commons and decided that it is politics at its best, but today they will see hon. Members on both sides of the House coming together in favour of something that carries the overwhelming support and good will of the British people.

I hope that the Bill will create headlines in the media today. It is up to us all to show that when considering important matters such as protecting animals from cruelty, we will close any loopholes in the law that enable the perpetrators of such cruel violence to get away with it. That is something of which the House can be rightly proud. It has never been more important to have an ambitious animal welfare agenda, and the Opposition fully support the Bill.

10.21 am

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I am delighted to speak in support of the Bill promoted by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) and to follow the able contributions of so many other hon. Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), for Erewash (Maggie Throup), for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), for Harborough (Neil O’Brien), for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster). Each and every one of them made a great contribution, often citing specific issues in their constituencies.

I pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire for championing the cause of our much-loved service animals and promoting this important Bill in recognition of the strong support among the public for Finn’s law. In particular, I congratulate him on his persistence. The original draft of the Bill would have created a completely new offence, and he will be aware that at the time—I think that I first discussed this issue with him about a year ago—the view of lawyers was that a new offence was unnecessary. However, I had tremendous sympathy for the cause that he advocated, and I was delighted to ensure that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs engaged with him to consider how his Bill could address this challenge. Together we came up with a sensible solution that is built on a model used elsewhere in the world, particularly in western Australia. It effectively removes an assailant’s ability to claim self-defence under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 in circumstances involving a service animal.

The Government recognise that service animals do invaluable work that can take them into dangerous situations, and the highest level of protection for such animals should be made clear in law. That is why the Government are supporting the Bill, which introduces what has become known as Finn’s law. I might add that it shows their characteristic commitment that both PC Wardell and Finn have followed each and every stage of the Bill’s passage through Parliament from the Public Gallery, and we are delighted to see them here today as well.

When the Bill becomes law, animals such as Finn will have more protection from unprovoked, callous attacks. That is because the Bill amends the Animal Welfare Act 2006, as it applies in England and Wales, to make it clear that someone’s ability to claim that they were acting in self-defence when they attacked a service animal shall be disregarded. No longer will someone be able to inflict suffering on our much-loved service animals—police dogs like Finn, police horses, or animals that support the prison service—and say that they were simply protecting themselves.

In supporting the Bill, we agree with my right hon. and learned Friend that using offences under section 4 of the 2006 Act to prosecute attacks on police and other support animals that cause unnecessary suffering could be made more difficult due to fact that the court must
consider whether the defendant was acting in fear of harm. The Bill will make it easier successfully to prosecute people for causing animal cruelty by attacking a service animal. We are also taking separate steps to help to protect all animals under our care and protection—including our heroic service animals—by increasing the maximum penalty for animal cruelty from six months’ imprisonment to five years. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) asked when that measure will be introduced; it will be brought forward as soon as possible. As he noted, the House is often preoccupied with other issues at the moment, but the matter remains at the top of the Government’s agenda. It is a clear commitment, and we will bring forward that legislation as soon as possible.

John Spellar: The Minister is pleading absence of parliamentary time, but did we not finish at about half-past two in the afternoon on Wednesday?

George Eustice: The parliamentary agenda and timetable are somewhat unpredictable at the moment, but the point remains that we are committed to raising the maximum penalty for animal cruelty to five years’ imprisonment. Specifically, we will amend the maximum penalties set out in section 32(1) of the Animal Welfare Act 2006. That will cover cruelty caused by attacks on service animals, which is the second limb of the Finn’s law campaign.

As my right hon. and learned Friend pointed out, Finn was stabbed by an assailant in 2016 when he assisted his handler, PC Dave Wardell, in the apprehension of a suspected offender. Finn received serious injuries, but we are all thankful that he survived and was even able to return to duty, before later retiring and attending debates such as this. In August 2018, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State had the pleasure of meeting Finn and PC Wardell at DEFRA’s offices. The Secretary of State stated clearly that “every day service animals dedicate their lives to keeping us safe, and they deserve strong protections in law.”

That was why he undertook to continue working with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire in developing this law.

The Bill is concerned with the offences under section 4 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which relate to animal cruelty or, as the Act states, causing “unnecessary suffering to an animal”.

When considering a prosecution for cruelty, the court must currently consider whether the defendant was acting in fear of harm. Relevant here is the list of considerations in section 4(3) that the court must consider, which include whether the suffering was caused for “a legitimate purpose, such as...the purpose of protecting a person, property or another animal”.

In other words, the perpetrator of an attack on a service animal could use that provision to claim that they were acting to protect themselves. The Bill amends section 4 so that that consideration shall be disregarded with respect to incidents that involved unnecessary suffering inflicted on a service animal that was supporting an officer in the course of their duties. It will therefore be easier successfully to prosecute people for causing animal cruelty by attacking a service animal.

Clause 1 amends section 4 to allow the self-defence provision relating to animal cruelty to be disregarded if it concerns a service animal under the control of, and being used by, a relevant officer in the course of his or her duties in a way that was reasonable, and if the defendant was not the relevant officer in control of the service animal.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): May I just say how delighted I am to be here this morning? I was the shadow Policing Minister during the first debate on Finn’s law, and I am so pleased that we are today passing this Bill, and that I am in the Chamber as well.

George Eustice: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for making that point. I think that we are all delighted to be here today to pass such feel-good legislation, which we all support.

The provisions will apply to dogs and horses used by the police and to dogs used by prison officers—they tend not to use horses, unsurprisingly. Service animals are defined in the Bill by reference to the person who is in control of them. The Bill applies only to animals that are under the control of a relevant officer at the time of the attack. The definition of “relevant officer” covers a police constable, a person who has the powers of a police constable and a prison custody officer. The type of animal is not restricted either; it can include dogs and horses, or indeed any other animal in the service of a relevant officer.

Clause 1 also provides the Secretary of State with a power to amend by regulations under the affirmative procedure the definition of relevant officer, provided that the additional persons are in the public service of the Crown. That provides the flexibility to add additional officers in the public service of the Crown who might not have been considered at this stage.

The Bill also provides for situations in which a police or prison officer may be required to use restraint against their own service animal, for example, to protect themselves or a member of the public. It provides that new subsection (3A) will not apply in a section 4 prosecution where the defendant is a relevant officer.

Clause 2 provides for the extent, commencement and short title of the Bill, and sets out that the Act will come into force two months after it is passed, which is the normal time for the commencement of Bills following Royal Assent. It sets out that the Act will extend only to England and Wales, as does the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which it amends. The shadow Minister noted that Northern Ireland is not covered. As my right hon. and learned Friend pointed out, that is because the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which the Bill amends, extends only to England and Wales. I should point out that Scotland has its own animal welfare legislation, the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006, and Northern Ireland has the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, so they have the powers to make their own equivalent legislation, although I take the point about the absence of an Administration in Northern Ireland.

In conclusion, the Government have put animal welfare at the very top of our agenda. We are increasing the maximum sentence for animal cruelty from six months to five years. We have made CCTV mandatory in slaughterhouses. We propose to ban the use of electronic shock collars on pets, and third-party sales of puppies...
and kittens. We have also modernised animal welfare standards for dog breeding, pet sales and other licensed activities involving animals.

It was noted at the start of the debate that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire has been particularly dogged and persistent in championing this cause. I was very pleased to be able, as a DEFRA Minister, to bring forward the regulations that changed the licensing regime for puppy breeding, which is something I have championed since I was first elected in 2010. Today, let me underline the fact that attacks on service animals such as brave Finn will not be tolerated. That is why we support the Bill, which will provide additional protection for our service animals. We hope that it will now make a swift passage through the other place without amendment.

10.33 am

Sir Oliver Heald: I thank all Members who have spoken today for their invaluable support, including my hon. Friends the Members for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), for Erewash (Maggie Throup), for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), for Torbay (Kevin Foster), for Harborough (Neil O’Brien) and for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), as well as the Minister and the shadow Minister. I also thank the Public Bill Office, which has been very helpful, particularly Adam Mellows-Facer, and the civil servants in DEFRA and other Departments who have helped with the Bill. I wish the Bill well in the other place and thank my noble Friend Lord Trenchard, who lives in my constituency—close to where Finn lives—for agreeing to take it through that House. We heard mention today of three brave police dogs—Aman, Isla and Axle—and I think that from Chichester we heard about Sparky, Lottie and Gonzo. In a way, the Bill is a tribute to all the brave service animals in our country. I hope that it can now proceed.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Value Added Tax Bill
Second Reading

10.35 am

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I presented the Bill on 5 September 2017, and it is with a wry smile that I rise to speak to it today, with some four hours ahead of us—perhaps not all of that time will be needed to consider it. I put it down on the Order Paper for consideration very late in the Session because I anticipated that it would be a topical matter on the eve of our departure from the European Union. We are now just seven weeks away from the UK’s independence day, on 29 March, when UK citizens will end their enslavement by the European Union.

There has been a lot of discussion about trade, but leaving the EU is about much more than that; it includes control over our own taxes. Reducing VAT, as the Bill proposes, will reduce the cost of living for consumers and the burdens on business, and it will reduce significantly the cost of living for people living in fuel poverty, which is also topical, bearing in mind yesterday’s announcement that what we all thought would be a cap on fuel prices has turned out to be more like an opera hat—it can go up very significantly at short notice. The Bill is therefore particularly relevant at this time.

When the Prime Minister made her Lancaster House speech some two years ago, she talked about the UK being able to develop an alternative economic model in the event that the European Union tried to impose what are effectively punishment terms as part of the withdrawal agreement. I think that we are now in that situation. The deal that the European Union is offering is not satisfactory. We are moving towards leaving without a deal, but in circumstances in which it will be open to the Government to take back control over important parts of the economy, and VAT is an important part of that.

The history of VAT goes back to 1 January 1973, when the United Kingdom joined the European Economic Community and, as a consequence, purchase tax had to be replaced by value added tax, which came in on 1 April that year. The then Conservative Chancellor, Lord Barber, set a single VAT rate of 10% on most goods and services. That standard rate is now 20%, which indicates the increasing burden of taxation upon ordinary people up and down the country.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on introducing the Bill. It is certainly very timely, but the increase in the tax rate and in taxes generally is due to the increase in our outgoings on the national health service, the state pension and so on. Although I welcome the principle, I am concerned that to fund any significant changes in VAT will be expensive to the Treasury at a time when we face increasing costs in the health service and so on.

Sir Christopher Chope: I disagree with my hon. Friend; he is taking a conservative view rather than looking at the dynamic effect on the economy of making tax reductions. My hon. Friend is not yet a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Treasury and that is why he is able to participate in this debate, but I know that he would very much like to be a Treasury Minister in due
course. When we were in opposition and I was a shadow Minister, my hon. Friend was an important adviser in that Ministry. I know that he has a keen interest in the Bill. One of my concerns is that the Treasury is not always on the side of the dear British consumer, and I am putting the case on behalf of the consumer today.

Let us remind ourselves of the history of VAT. When the Labour Government came into office in 1974, they attempted to introduce extra rates of VAT. One way and another, things were changed around, but eventually Denis Healey reduced the higher rate to 12.5% in April 1976. Geoffrey Howe organised an increase in VAT when he was the Conservative Chancellor. He raised the standard rate from 8% to 15% in June 1979, but in so doing abolished the higher rate.

After that, the rate stayed the same until 1991, but was then raised from 15% to 17.5% by Norman Lamont, now Lord Lamont, when he was Chancellor. At the 1992 general election, the Conservatives were elected—unfortunately, I was not among them; I was defeated in that election—on a promise not to extend the scope of VAT. In March 1993, Norman Lamont announced that domestic fuel and power, which had previously been zero-rated, would have VAT levied at 8% from April 1994. My Bill would take us back to the time before 1994 when there was no VAT on domestic fuel and power. That is one the most important parts of my Bill.

This issue is close to my heart, not least because I was present during the by-election campaign in Christchurch in July 1993, when the biggest issue on the doorstep was the Government’s imposing VAT on fuel, reneging on their manifesto commitments. That by-election saw the largest ever swing against the Conservatives, and a Conservative majority of more than 20,000 was converted into a Liberal Democrat majority of more than 17,000. That was my inheritance when I became the prospective parliamentary candidate. I know that my constituents feel strongly about VAT on domestic fuel and power, and I hope that the Government regret the decision that was taken then, over which they were subsequently not able to have any control. Although the Labour Government eventually reduced the rate to 5%, under European Union rules it is not possible for this sovereign Parliament to reduce VAT below 5% when it has already been set in train. That opportunity will be available to us as soon as we leave the EU.

Another criticism of VAT is that it is regressive because it is paid by all consumers whether they be rich or poor, young or old. The poorest spend a larger proportion of their disposable income on VAT than those who are financially much better off. The Office for National Statistics report has shown that in 2009-10 the poorest 20% spent 8.7% of their gross income on VAT while the richest 20% spent only 4%. That is another reason why reducing or eliminating VAT on various goods and services would be an effective way of creating a dynamic effect in the economy, and would be fair and equitable at the same time.

I have outlined some of the general issues relating to the Bill. It paves the way for sharing and securing for equitable at the same time.

The first key element of the Bill is to enable the Government to raise the maximum turnover thresholds for exemption from the requirement to register for VAT. That is set out in clause 1. We in the United Kingdom have a registration threshold of £85,000, the highest in the EU. In my submission, it is not high enough. That is why I have put in clause 1 a suggestion that there be a modest initial increase in the threshold to £104,000 and that the threshold for deregistration should be £100,000. The consequence would be that many small businesses would be taken out of VAT and consumers would be saved the cost of VAT on the services provided by them.

I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury is on the Front Bench to answer this debate. I have been perplexed about Government policy on VAT thresholds. Currently the threshold is £85,000 and that was due to be the situation until March 2020, but under EU law it is open to the Government to increase the thresholds every year in real terms. That has traditionally been what has happened. However, the present Government, for reasons that I hope my hon. Friend will be able to explain, have decided to freeze the threshold until the end of March 2022. The consequence, apart from giving some extra money to the Treasury through what is effectively a stealth tax, is that many more small businesses will be caught up in VAT registration.

The current threshold means that 3.5 million businesses do not have to account for VAT, which is half of all businesses in the United Kingdom. We know how important small business is. It provides half of all the private sector jobs and accounts for more than a third of our national income. Why would it not be sensible for the Government’s policy to be to increase the VAT threshold to the maximum that is allowable under EU law rather than freeze the threshold, thereby making it difficult to increase it in the future by a significant amount?

The Government issued a consultation paper on the VAT threshold and called for evidence following a paper the Chancellor commissioned from the Office of Tax Simplification, and that consultation made it clear that the threshold cost the Exchequer £2.1 billion in 2017-18—the cost has not risen since because the threshold has not been increasing as it was before that date.

Following the OTS paper, the Government consulted on whether to increase or reduce the threshold. A table annexed to the call for evidence showed that the £81,000 threshold in 2014-15 had deterred 50% of sole proprietor and partnership businesses from increasing their economic activity for fear of passing the threshold. What a ridiculous artificial constraint on enterprise! Surely, we should be encouraging businesses to expand, not introducing measures that deter that activity.

The consultation concentrated on the large number of businesses just below the threshold and on what could be done to reduce the cliff edge and smooth the transition for businesses registering for VAT. Following the consultation, the Government concluded that nothing had been decided—in that respect, it was not an unusual process of public consultation. Paragraph 4.35 of the paper that summarised the responses reads:

“Many responses committed to the view that an increase to the threshold would make it much easier for newly-registered businesses to cope with the administrative and financial implications of registration. For example, if the threshold were to be raised to £100,000, businesses would likely be able to afford

The first key element of the Bill is to enable the Government to raise the maximum turnover thresholds for exemption from the requirement to register for VAT. That is set out in clause 1. We in the United Kingdom have a registration threshold of £85,000, the highest in the EU. In my submission, it is not high enough. That is why I have put in clause 1 a suggestion that there be a modest initial increase in the threshold to £104,000 and that the threshold for deregistration should be £100,000. The consequence would be that many small businesses would be taken out of VAT and consumers would be saved the cost of VAT on the services provided by them.

I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury is on the Front Bench to answer this debate. I have been perplexed about Government policy on VAT thresholds. Currently the threshold is £85,000 and that was due to be the situation until March 2020, but under EU law it is open to the Government to increase the thresholds every year in real terms. That has traditionally been what has happened. However, the present Government, for reasons that I hope my hon. Friend will be able to explain, have decided to freeze the threshold until the end of March 2022. The consequence, apart from giving some extra money to the Treasury through what is effectively a stealth tax, is that many more small businesses will be caught up in VAT registration.

The current threshold means that 3.5 million businesses do not have to account for VAT, which is half of all businesses in the United Kingdom. We know how important small business is. It provides half of all the private sector jobs and accounts for more than a third of our national income. Why would it not be sensible for the Government’s policy to be to increase the VAT threshold to the maximum that is allowable under EU law rather than freeze the threshold, thereby making it difficult to increase it in the future by a significant amount?

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the cost of professional advice to cope with the administrative burden, while also being more able to absorb the cost of VAT. One representative body felt that the administrative burden would only be taken out of the equation if the threshold was much higher. The UK is currently unable to increase the level of its VAT registration threshold in real terms, under EU law, but there may be scope to review this in the future.

It will come as no surprise to the Minister to learn that I took the figure of £100,000 in my Bill from that paragraph. I have not gone as far as the OTS suggested in its original paper, but I could see the merit, if the Bill ever gets into Committee, of raising the threshold to something like £500,000. Then we would be talking only about really substantial businesses having to pay VAT, which would significantly reduce the burden on business and encourage entrepreneurial activity in our enterprise society.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): What estimate has my hon. Friend made of the cost to the Exchequer of increasing the threshold to that level?

Sir Christopher Chope: The estimate made is not mine but comes from the OTS paper:

“Raising the threshold significantly, for example to £500,000, would potentially impact around 800,000 businesses. Of those, between 400,000 and 600,000 businesses might choose to deregister, while 200,000–400,000 might choose to remain registered. This would simplify the tax obligations for businesses that chose to deregister, reduce VAT-related competitive distortions between registered and unregistered small businesses, and reduce the administrative burden on those businesses. However, raising the threshold to such a high level would cut the funds available for public services by between £3bn and £6bn a year.”

My hon. Friend will be conscious, however, that those figures are much lower than the £39 billion figure that is on the lips of most members of the public, if not Members of this House, as we prepare to leave the EU on 29 March, when we will have the opportunity to save ourselves £39 billion.

Neil O’Brien: I congratulate my hon. Friend on introducing the Bill to discuss this important issue and this potentially big simplification, but am I right that the £6 billion price tag is roughly equivalent to half the budget for the entire police force of England? This is a substantial sum. Beyond the £39 billion, does he have an suggestions for how to raise enough money to make good the hole?

Sir Christopher Chope: I do. It is a mistake to look at these issues without considering the dynamic behavioural effects flowing from changes in the regulatory environment. We are all agreed—certainly the Treasury and the Chancellor have expressed concern about it—that the country is suffering from a crisis in productivity, and it is clear from the OTS reports and the consultation that people in the engine room of our economy find VAT to be very burdensome and that it adversely affects their productivity. The problem of productivity centres around this bunching issue. Why are we inhibiting businesses from expanding and becoming more economically productive by imposing an artificial threshold? To an extent, it has been imposed on us by the EU, but we can break free on 29 March. I hope my hon. Friend will take a dynamic perspective and not just look at the straight line figures produced by the Treasury.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I want to highlight the point my hon. Friend is making. When the income tax rate went up to 50%, I had small businessmen come to me saying, “I’m not going to work any harder if I have to hand over 50%.” I’ll work four days a week and play golf on Fridays. I’m not going to invest my capital in a business if the Treasury doesn’t understand the pressures of running a small business,” and they stepped away from increasing their productivity—indeed, went backwards—until we started to reduce the rate. Too often, we fail to understand the consequences of tax policy on behavioural patterns.

Sir Christopher Chope: My hon. Friend makes a brilliant point. This used to be at the heart of Conservative thinking and policy making on the Treasury Bench. It was that dynamic thinking that was behind past decisions to significantly reduce the top rates of tax. I hope we can rediscover that much more dynamic approach to the behavioural consequences of high taxes and artificial thresholds.

Neil O’Brien: I thank my hon. Friend for being so generous in giving way again. I think he is wrong to say that it is not the approach of our Front Benchers to think in dynamic terms: the Treasury has produced a wonderful paper showing that a third of the cuts in corporation tax are made up for by dynamic gains. Active work is being done on this; it is a Conservative belief. However, I would only ask my hon. Friend what proportion of the £4 billion or £6 billion loss to the Exchequer that he is talking about does he think might be made up for by dynamic effects? I agree that there are dynamic effects and I agree that this is a wonderful simplification; I just caution him that another Conservative principle is sound money and not running a huge £150 billion a year deficit like Labour did.

Sir Christopher Chope: Obviously, we are all united in wanting to be fiscally and financially prudent, and, going back to the intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), having looked at the evidence that came forward on this issue, I was horrified to see that, for example, if some cafés in tourist resorts think they are going to exceed the VAT threshold in a particular quarter they will close down for a week or two. What contribution does that make to the UK economy? How ridiculous is that, with the consequence that people are not being employed in those cafés and so on? I agree it is desirable that more work be done on this, and that in a sense is the purpose of today’s debate: to try to get people to think about the radical ways in which we could change VAT now that we are going to have the freedom to do it. VAT is the third largest tax in this country; it generates £120 billion or thereabouts. Surely we should now be looking at our ability to examine the best way in which that tax on goods and services can be applied so that it delivers the best productivity results and does not lead to the distortions we have been speaking about.

There is a problem with the Treasury approach to a lot of this. It produces a document setting out the cost of reliefs. It says that not having VAT on food—having zero rating on food—costs the Exchequer some £18 billion a year. We should look at that not in the context of saying, “We can’t afford to lose £18 billion,” but in the context of saying, “Why should we be charging people
who want to go off and buy some food £18 billion?”. The mere fact that the Treasury continues to draw up estimated costs of principal tax reliefs shows that it is looking at this from the wrong end of the telescope. The Treasury also says the reduced rate for domestic fuel and power is costing the Exchequer £4.85 billion. What an extraordinary approach that is, as it implies that the Treasury might be minded to put domestic fuel and power VAT back up to 20%. This gives me the feeling that the mindset in the Treasury needs a lot of alteration and that at the moment it is far too negative and unimaginative on a lot of these issues.

Our inability to increase the threshold or meaningfully alter the design of VAT without the unanimous agreement of all other member states is a big problem. It has not stopped the EU Commission of course publishing proposals to cap the thresholds at €85,000 from July 2022 and establishing a new EU-wide threshold of €100,000. That is another example of the statist expansionist agenda of the European Union about which the British people spoke so strongly in the referendum just over two years ago.

The EU Commission is proposing changes that will affect tourism, construction, accommodation, food, traders, professional and scientific and IT service providers and so on, and we could still be faced with an €85,000 VAT threshold if we do not leave the EU on 29 March. If we stay in the EU under some transitional arrangements without knowing what the final outcome will be, throughout that period we will be subject to EU laws relating to VAT. Bearing in mind that the VAT thresholds across the rest of the EU are often only about €20,000 rather than €85,000, we could find the law being changed against us because we would not have a veto. We would be outside the EU so we would not be able to veto this, but we could find that our VAT law was made even more restrictive than at present, although many of our constituents will have thought that we had actually left the EU and got rid of this gross interference in our lives.

I mentioned earlier the compliance costs for VAT. One survey cited by the Treasury found that for UK small and medium-sized enterprises over 40% of all financial costs of tax compliance and 50% of time costs are due to VAT, and that statistic has been confirmed by the Federation of Small Businesses. VAT is particularly unattractive to businesses providing business-to-consumer activities, because they tend to be more labour-intensive, and labour of course is not subject to VAT. We must also think about the impact of VAT on consumers and the cost of living.

I hope I have been able to make a strong case in relation to clause 1, and I shall now turn to clause 2. It sets out the second element of the Bill, which is to make provision for the exemption of certain goods and services from liability to VAT and for connected purposes. The goods and services that are subject to VAT are set out in the Value Added Tax Act 1994 and clause 2 would ensure that domestic fuel or power in group 17, fitness items in group 18, goods subject to excise duties in group 19, insulating materials for home improvement in group 20, repairs and improvements to historic buildings in group 21 and women’s sanitary products in group 22 would all be exempt from VAT, rather than being subject to VAT as they are at present.

James Cartlidge: I hate to sound like a stuck record but want to repeat a point. My hon. Friend gave a basic estimate of the cost of raising the threshold, but it seems to me that this would bring a separate cost to the Exchequer; has he a cost for these exemptions in terms of potential lost revenue?

Sir Christopher Chope: Yes, of course I do. I have an estimate—not quite done on the back of an envelope, but on a rough piece of paper. The Government’s figures say that the reduced rate—5% instead of 20%—for domestic fuel and power, which is by far the largest item here, currently costs the Exchequer £4.8 billion. That implies, based on my maths, a yield of some £1.6 billion from having the rate at 5%. Therefore, of all the measures in clause 2, that is by far the largest cost. However, I would have thought that that cost was more than justified by the social and economic benefit of introducing such a policy.

The Government told domestic consumers of electricity and gas that they were on their side and that they wanted to cap their costs, so they introduced, with the sounding of trumpets, a cap on energy costs. We then found out yesterday that the cap is by no means some 10%, the consequence of which will be an increase of £100 on an average household bill of about £1,200 a year. If we add VAT, that is another additional cost. If we removed VAT from a £1,200 bill, that would be a saving of about £60 per household on average. I would have thought that that would be worth while, and it would be one way of mitigating the effects of rising energy prices across the world and rising prices of the raw materials. Why not go for that? If we look at all this like an accountant—although I am not an accountant, I did once work for a large firm of accountants, so I know the mindset that can be associated with such activity—why are we not considering the political benefits that will flow from eliminating VAT on domestic fuel and power?

James Cartlidge: Many households in my constituency, including my own, use heating oil, and I am sure that people would be very grateful. However, it is not an accountancy view to ask about the impact on the Treasury given the cost of vital public services, such as health and education, which we all want to see better funded. That is my angle, and it not about accountancy.

Sir Christopher Chope: If we look at things in a dynamic way, what is the extent of the burden on the health service and social services of having people who are unnecessarily cold in their own homes because they cannot afford the cost of heating? I give that as an example of why we need to consider the wider picture, rather than just focusing on the accountants and the numbers. I do not know whether my hon. Friend is an accountant, but if he is, I had not intended any criticism of him specifically. As the public’s representatives, we should be examining such things on the basis of what is in their interest. If there ever was a demonstration of how hostile people are to the idea of being taxed on domestic fuel or power, it was apparent during the Christchurch by-election to which I referred earlier.

I presume that the only reason why my hon. Friend would be in favour of some of the items in clause 2(2) is that there would hardly be any significant cost associated with them. However, if one thinks about repairs and
improvements to historic buildings, for example, is it not important that there should be an incentive? There certainly should not be a disincentive for people to repair and improve historic buildings—the heritage of our great nation. As for insulating materials for home improvement, surely it is sensible if people are to improve the energy efficiency of their homes, they should not be subject to a disincentive tax.

I shall now turn to clause 2(2)(b). Fitness is something of which we speak frequently in in this House, and it is directly linked with the health service, the obesity agenda and so on. Why are we charging VAT on a whole range of fitness services? How can that be consistent with the public policy objective of encouraging people to get fit and thereby not only improve their quality of life, but relieve the burden on the health service?

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): As always, my hon. Friend is giving a detailed explanation of his proposals. On the topic of fitness, how would he deal with the fact that while a computer console can run fitness games that allow for physical movement, people may just buy one to sit in front of TV and play games? How would that be defined under this Bill?

Sir Christopher Chope: I am glad that my hon. Friend is giving a detailed explanation of his proposals, as always. He is trying to negotiate a better deal for the United Kingdom. Can my hon. Friend think of anything more ridiculous? If the matter had been under the control of Parliament, and not be subject to the ghastly laws of the European Court of Justice. Can my hon. Friend think of anything more ridiculous? If the matter had been under the control of Parliament, we would have had the opportunity to change our laws on VAT much more imaginatively than we could with this Bill, and I will give just one example.

Sir Christopher Chope: The problem with the teacake or the Jaffa Cake case—

Neil O’Brien: That is a separate case.

Sir Christopher Chope: Yes, but the problem is that all that was subject to decisions by the European Court of Justice. Can my hon. Friend think of anything more ridiculous? If the matter had been under the control of our domestic laws set by Parliament, we would have had the opportunity to change our laws on VAT much more imaginatively than we could with this Bill, and I will give just one example.

Speaking of transparency, clause 2(2)(c) would exempt from VAT goods that are already subject to excise duties, because I strongly believe that we should not double tax. Why should somebody who is paying duty on petrol then also have to pay VAT on that duty?

James Cartlidge: It raises a lot of money.

Sir Christopher Chope: But would it not be much more transparent if excise duty was raised and petrol was not then subject to VAT, which is a hidden tax? When my hon. Friend campaigns so actively to ensure that fuel duty is frozen, I hope he will extend his campaign to ensure that fuel duty is not subject to VAT. Clause 2(2)(c) would achieve exactly that objective.

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend knows what I am going to ask. How much?

Sir Christopher Chope: Nothing. It need not be anything. To be transparent, whether on cigarettes, fuel or any other item subject to excise duty, it should just be excise duty, which could be set at whatever level the Chancellor or Parliament chooses. It should not be distorted and disguised by adding extra VAT. When the Chancellor increases the excise duty on a bottle of whisky, he never says, “By the way, it is also going to be subject to 20% VAT.” He puts VAT on the increase in excise duty. Why do we not make it simpler and more transparent? That is what clause 2 would achieve. I am glad that my hon. Friend has been softened up, and I hope he sees the benefits.

Clause 2(3) properly defines domestic fuel or power in some detail, which I hope will meet with the approval of interested colleagues. As I said earlier, items under groups 18 to 22 are less well defined in the Bill, although the items in group 22 are specifically defined.

We were told by the EU that women’s sanitary products would be, or could be, exempted from VAT. We were told there would be an EU consultation. That was all the talk when the former Prime Minister David Cameron was trying to negotiate a better deal for the United Kingdom in the European Union. Women’s sanitary products being subject to VAT is a controversial issue, but nobody seemed to be prepared to stand up and defend such a policy. In the end, the European Union promised that it would consult and look at it with a view to amending the policy, but it never did. That has resulted in the Government having to continue charging VAT, and they have used the revenue generated therefrom for other purposes. What a ridiculous distortion. What a waste of energy. Why cannot we just change the law and do what we think suits us best as an individual Parliament, and not be subject to the ghastly laws of the European Union?

I have explained some of the Bill’s content, but it only touches the surface—a starter for 10—because I see the opportunities opening up beyond 29 March. We will have the opportunity to change our laws on VAT much more imaginatively than we could with this Bill, and I will give just one example.

To protect and encourage British manufacturing after 29 March, why could we not move VAT on all cars, or any other product, manufactured 100% in the United Kingdom? Obviously, we cannot do that at the moment because of the VAT rules and the European Union state aid rules. If we want to generate a dynamic offshore
economy in which taxes are low but with strong incentives for manufacturing, why not do something like that? It might be a step too far for this Bill, but I put it down as a marker. It will be interesting to see whether my hon. Friend the Minister has a briefing on such a proposal. When the Prime Minister said that no deal is better than a bad deal, she said that no deal would be really good because it could enable us, as a United Kingdom, to develop a dynamic alternative economic model.

There is a lot of food for thought in this Bill, and I remind my hon. Friends that it is not within its scope to increase VAT or to remove any exemptions. Before they get on their hobby horses and say that we need more money from VAT and from consumers, I remind them that that is outside the Bill’s scope.

11.27 am

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), although I would highlight that I am a chartered accountant—and proud to be so. My training perhaps gives me a different perspective on politics, and I often from myself thinking in a different way from Members who are lawyers—not in a good or a bad way, but simply in a different way. Such training offers a breadth of policy, planning and thinking that we need to bring together. I am thrilled to speak on my hon. Friend’s important Value Added Tax Bill, and about how we might start to make significant improvements to this regressive and most punitive of taxes on the poorest, and on small businesses’ growth and productivity, after we leave the EU—very shortly, I hope—and are free to make such improvements once again.

I will address three areas of policy change proposed by the Bill, although there is much more I could discuss: VAT thresholds for small businesses; the flexibility of VAT rates on energy; and the big, thorny question of the sanitary products challenge that we have to solve. The first area on which this Bill offers an excellent improvement to our present VAT rules is the threshold for paying VAT. A small business whose main activity is one of human endeavour—the “services” part of goods and services—must monitor its monthly sales on a rolling 12-month basis these days, and must register to pay VAT as soon as the cumulative total reaches £85,000. Most small businesses that have many VAT-charged goods, such as plumbing businesses, are more likely to be VAT registered from the beginning, so such monitoring does not have to happen—those businesses are already in the VAT system because they want to reclaim the VAT on goods they have to use.

The threshold means that, overnight, a business suddenly goes from not being VAT registered to being VAT registered and having to charge an extra 20% on its bills. Imagine going in for a monthly haircut that used to cost £20 and suddenly finding that it costs £24. That business therefore slow down or close their doors early not to make further sales. This arrangement is simply anti-competitive and surely it is not the sort of business driver that any Conservative Government would mean to be encouraging.

A real-life example that highlights the problem is that of a young businesswoman with exactly this dilemma in my constituency. This young woman owns a small hairdressing business in a small town, and employs two stylists full time and one part time. Her turnover is about £100,000—above the £85,000 threshold—and she is therefore VAT registered. Her VAT payments to the Treasury are in the region of £16,000, leaving her with net sales of £84,000. A number of competitors have set up business in the area and purposely kept their audited income below the £85,000 threshold to avoid paying VAT, while still charging prices comparable to VAT-registered retailers. Of course, the clients do not know whether a business is VAT-registered in that small business environment, but there is a 20% advantage in favour of that non-VAT-registered business—20% more for doing less work. This young woman does not make any profit worth mentioning, but she pays herself a wage and keeps three trainees employed, and she enjoys her work. Her father, who is also a constituent, has advised her to close the business and save all the hassle that goes along with self-employment and running a business. Is it not a tragedy that a father feels he has to say that to his energetic and business-focused daughter?

Let us look at this woman’s options and the consequences. She could follow her father’s advice and close her business, putting four people out of work. That would involve vacating the premises and creating an empty shop on one of the small high streets in my constituency. She could lay off a member of staff to reduce the income to below the threshold and de-register for VAT, although perhaps still charge the VAT-hiked prices and see whether clients will pay. This is a simple but brutal example of the anti-business growth of our present VAT rules. I have been frustrated by this for a long time—as an accountant and in politics—because we have been trapped in this position. We have no control over it because we are operating under the EU VAT directive.

I would go further than my hon. Friend has proposed in his Bill so far. It is wonderful to have a Treasury Minister in the Chamber, because I have written a number of times to a number of Chancellors on this subject, and I have the opportunity to make my argument again verbally today. Where other thresholds exist, such as for income tax, national insurance and stamp duty, there is an exemption on charges for amounts up to the threshold, with payments made only against the remaining amount over the threshold limit. If, in the case of any small business, we made VAT payable only on income above the threshold, we would offer a sliding scale of price increases or sales volume that would support the business and encourage the employment of more staff, unlike with the disincentive of the dramatic cliff edge at £85,000. Whether we are talking about £100,000 or £20,000, the effect is the same: there is a cliff edge from paying no VAT to entering the VAT world, with all the commensurate costs, stress and extra time spent dealing with it. It seems odd that there is no threshold step for VAT, just a cliff edge.
In the context of small business as a whole, the threshold is very low, despite the fact that it is one of the higher ones in the EU. It is an excellent start to see the Bill’s proposal of, in the first instance, raising the threshold to £104,000. Should this excellent Bill gain Government support and make progress, however, I would propose to go further and call on the Treasury to make all income below the threshold exempt from VAT, with further turnover up to a certain point—for example, £150,000—having VAT charged only on that marginal trading activity. Businesses could then carry the sales tax burden across all sales without having to force it on the customer in the hard way that happens now. This is important for the small business cohort; we are not talking about businesses whose turnover has reached £1 million and are employing 10, 15, 20 or more people. We are talking about the small business that suddenly falls under the complex and heavy burden of VAT, which is genuinely having an anti-competitive effect on them. We are doing ourselves and our businesses no favours at all.

The approach I am setting out would give small businesses a window of growth and investment opportunity, and the chance to take on more staff, before being hit with a 20% surcharge on all sales. Such a fairer, graduated system would level the playing field between small below-the-threshold firms and those growing businesses. It would stimulate growth in the small independent retail sector and might even be a policy that could help to revitalise our empty high street shops.

The Bill offers much more besides increasing the threshold for VAT for small businesses, as it takes up the long-overdue opportunity to exempt some critical goods from VAT altogether once we have left the EU and the limitations that the EU’s VAT directive forced upon us in 2006. The directive aimed to harmonise VAT across the European Union. Although it makes cross-border sales activity easier and has some merit for the simplification of sales taxes, it has limited any individual country’s ability to determine whether or not to exempt goods from VAT. VAT on fuel has been a matter of contention for years. To his credit—even everyone take note, because I am not going to say that very often—the then Chancellor, Gordon Brown, brought that tax levy down to 5%, which was a very creditable decision, but under the EU directive, he had no independent authority to scrap it completely.

Let us consider the position for my poorest constituents in rural Northumberland—“deepest, darkest rural Northumberland”, as my mother refers to some of my more wonderful and hard-to-reach communities. In these areas, the choice in heating solutions is limited to wood, coal, expensive electric heating, which often does not work when the weather is really bad, or oil tanks, assuming the snow does not prevent the tanker from getting to a farm in the first place. There is no mains gas, so people do not have the opportunity of consumers in more urban areas of choosing a supplier from a competitive range of offers. The 5% VAT levy adds to their already higher than average heating cost burden, because all those other products are just more expensive. It would be a wise Government, after Brexit, who at last agreed that rural poverty—it is often ignored for far too long by Whitehall, in my humble opinion—could be alleviated in the first instance by removing this tax. As my hon. Friend identified, there might be an initial cost to the Exchequer of up to £1.6 billion, but the policy would have a broad range of principled and practical social and health benefits. The Government’s commitment to the EU is clear by their words, but such a change would make that clear by their actions, too.

If my rural constituents are disadvantaged by VAT on fuel supplies to keep their families warm, how much worse is it that our own Government could not unilaterally determine—nor indeed manage to persuade the EU while we have still been within its laws—that a 5% tax on sanitary products is a direct discriminatory charge against all women of menstruating age? A friend said to me on learning that I was going to speak in support of my hon. Friend’s Bill today that “women really ought to have tax deductions for being female—what with tampons and tights that ladder, being expected to wear makeup and have changes of wardrobe, you all should get a discount from the Government”.

I concur wholeheartedly, as I am sure you do, Madam Deputy Speaker, although that might be a step too far for the Treasury. A small and immediately helpful step in that direction would be to scrap VAT on all sanitary products, and indeed on incontinence products, which are also listed in the Bill. This outrageous tax puts these things into the “luxury items” category of products and reminds me that we have far to go to make sure that policy making has common sense at its heart.

It is wonderful that, as in the battles for women’s voting rights 100 years ago, there are men like my hon. Friend leading the charge to change the law in support of women’s rights and fairness. There have been excellent campaigns from across this House in recent years to push the Government to effect change, and the Bill is the next step to get this VAT discrimination sorted out. By scrapping VAT on sanitary products and making them exempt, as is the case for food and children’s clothes, this Government would be sending a clear message that they understand that the tax system can be an incentiviser or a punisher. For too long, I have been shocked that the EU has chosen to continue to ignore this call for fairness, allowing—no, forcing—women to have to pay more for sanitary products, which are an indispensible part of our daily lives, to boost Treasury coffers across Europe. I look forward to hearing from the Treasury in the Budget that follows our departure from the EU that it has understood and will immediately remedy this discriminatory tax.

Sir Christopher Chope: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that if we do not leave on 29 March without a deal, people will have had their expectations raised that we will have left the EU, but will be frustrated by knowing that such issues cannot be resolved by this Parliament?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Personally, I would rather leave with a deal that ensures that the bucket of issues that have to be sorted out are dealt with as we move forward from our legacy relationship into a new relationship, because that would make things easier for everybody, but the approach has to be right. The reality is that until we have left the EU, we have to follow the VAT directive, which means that we are not able to control that part of our tax law. I am grateful that we are leaving and that we will not move into the whole area of tax that the EU is looking to take control of across the board, which is a terrifying issue.
of taxation without representation. I am very glad that the British people have decided to step off the EU train before we move into that part of its policy making.

It would be a shocking failure not to remedy the discriminatory tax on sanitary products, but it has long been one of my most hated of all the directives under which we have had to work as members of the EU, as it emasculates Chancellors of whatever political colour in critical policy areas and disenfranchises us from being able to support small business, our poorest and, indeed, the female 52% of our population. It has meant that in a major area of tax policy, we have had to suffer taxation without representation for far too long. We will be able to send the clear message to the senior people in the EU Commission who determine, without oversight, what EU laws should be, that as in so many people in the EU Commission who determine, without the oversight of the Treasury’s conscience, which I know is there, so that we can make these proposals a reality after 29 March.

The VAT directive may not sound sexy or dramatic, but it has long been one of my most hated of all the directives under which we have had to work as members of the EU, as it emasculates Chancellors of whatever political colour in critical policy areas and disenfranchises us from being able to support small business, our poorest and, indeed, the female 52% of our population. It has meant that in a major area of tax policy, we have had to suffer taxation without representation for far too long. We will be able to send the clear message to the senior people in the EU Commission who determine, without oversight, what EU laws should be, that as in so many policy areas, the UK will lead the way in improving our citizens’ lives. I commend the Bill to the House and wish it every success in reaching deep into the Treasury’s conscience, which I know is there, so that we can make these proposals a reality after 29 March.

11.41 am

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) on getting one of his many private Members’ Bills to Second Reading. I thank him for giving such a comprehensive history of VAT in the early part of his speech and for his forensic analysis of each part of the Bill.

At first, I thought that the subject of the Bill seemed rather dry, but the more I looked into it, the more interesting it became. Prior to my entering this place, I ran my own marketing business, which was registered for VAT. I did not see being registered for VAT as a hindrance; I saw it as a sign of success, as it meant that my turnover was growing and quite substantial. Some business owners I spoke to were concerned that splitting VAT on a quarterly basis was quite onerous. I always found that the quarterly returns helped me to focus on the financial side of my business and provided an opportunity for a regular review. They helped me to review my business costs and the charging structure for my marketing services. In effect, I was carrying out a quarterly audit that helped me to keep my business on the straight and narrow over the 19 years for which I ran it. Some businesses may have criticised me for carrying out such a check only every three months, but it worked for me.

We are debating whether the £85,000 VAT threshold is the right one and if we should make provisions to exempt certain goods and services from VAT liability. In November 2017, the Office of Tax Simplification produced an excellent report. I must declare that I could be slightly biased, because the chair of the office is Angela Knight CBE. For those Members who are not fully aware of the political history of the Erewash constituency, Angela Knight was its Member of Parliament from 1992 to 1997. One of her claims to fame—among many, of course—was that she was the Treasury Minister responsible for the introduction of the £2 coin. She has had a varied and at times much-publicised career since leaving this place, and she was the perfect person to be appointed chair of the Office of Tax Simplification.

The views of my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch on the EU are well known, and he has expressed them today. His Bill is timely, because Conservative Members want to take back control on 29 March. We need to make sure that the VAT threshold will encourage businesses to grow while at the same time maintaining the tax take for Government, because that pays for our vital public services. Members from all parties want to make sure that we have the right investment for our wonderful public services. The current £85,000 threshold is the highest general threshold in the OECD, so some may argue that we should consider lowering the threshold rather than looking to increase it.

Some anomalies have already been mentioned. The Bill proposes exemptions, including for domestic fuel and power and for repairs to historic buildings. We have also already discussed fitness equipment and the difference between cakes and biscuits. The prime example of the latter is Jaffa Cakes: if it is a cake, it is zero rateable, but if it is a biscuit, it is taxable. It has been deemed to be a cake, so it is zero rated. Closer to my heart are the gingerbread men made by Stacey’s bakery in my Erewash constituency. In my opinion, they are the best gingerbread men a person could buy in the whole country. If the gingerbread men have chocolate trousers, they are subject to VAT. If they just have chocolate eyes but no chocolate trousers, there is no VAT. In the interests of equality, why do we not have gingerbread ladies? If we did and they had chocolate dresses, would they be subject to VAT? I am sure that we could all highlight many more anomalies, but the ones I have mentioned help to illustrate just how important it is to ensure that any changes to VAT legislation are well thought through and appropriate.

I could spend a lot more time talking about whether higher or lower threshold levels encourage more or less entrepreneurship, or about the optimal threshold to maximise the tax take without stifling business, but I am sure all that will be thrashed out in Committee. VAT is the third largest source of tax revenue collected by HMRC, after income tax and national insurance contributions, so I am sure it is above my pay grade to recommend a new threshold to the Treasury. It is clear to me that we should not jeopardise the £120 billion collected in 2016-17—I am not sure of the figures for the following year—which represented 22.5% of all taxes. I fear that the removal of one tax would only result in the increase of another tax to balance the nation’s books.

Sir Christopher Chope: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Maggie Throup: I was just about to finish, but I will give way.

Sir Christopher Chope: In her zeal to leave the European Union, suddenly my hon. Friend has not forgotten that we will be able to keep a big dividend in the form of the £10 billion to £20 billion a year that we currently pay to the European Union. Why can we not spend that on our own priorities?
Maggie Throup: My hon. Friend makes an important point; this is about priorities, and our priority may not actually be changing the level of VAT.

I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response and analysis of the proposed changes in this Bill.

11.48 am

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup). She has highlighted how the VAT rules do somewhat take the biscuit when it comes to gingerbread men. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) has shown that, on Europe, we really cannot have our cake and tax it.

I wanted to clarify one point that my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch made earlier in reference to me. He very kindly referred to me as a former senior Treasury adviser. In fact, I did serve a brief apprenticeship after leaving university at the Policy Research Unit when it was founded, but I then started my own business. I was never at the Treasury—although it can feel like that when running a business.

Interestingly, when I was a mortgage broker, I found that mortgages were exempt—mortgage commissions are exempt from VAT. We were very much of the belief that mortgages would one day be done online—this was back in 2004—and, of course, many of them now are. When we invested for the first time in a new souped-up piece of IT kit, we received a very expensive bill with VAT on it, which we could not offset, and that created many problems for us. Since then, we have diversified. Most of our income is VATable: we run a big home show at the QE2 and a property portal for shared ownership properties. It is a good business. The great frustration that I have with VAT is that it is very unpredictable in those quarterly comings and goings, particularly as we have a home show every six months.

As my hon. Friend said, we should run our businesses as if we are reviewing them quarterly to make sure that we can fund them.

The key point that I wanted to touch on with this Bill is the issue of unfunded tax commitments—a central point on which, in effect, my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch and I debated through interventions. We were joined by my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien) who was here earlier. That is not to say that any of the measures in this Bill would not be desirable. As I said earlier, I represent a rural constituency. Most of my constituents are on heating oil, so why would I object to cutting the VAT on heating oil? Of course I would not do so on principle. The same is true for sanitary products. My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) made a very good case for reducing the VAT on those to zero, which I am sure the Treasury will do once it has the power. The question is not necessarily about desirability, but, of course, about affordability.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My hon. Friend and I both have rural constituencies and constituents who do not keep their houses as warm as they should because the cost is too high. The question is one of balancing the silos of government to assess the differential in loss to the Treasury compared with the saving to the NHS for those health and lung issues that would not end up in the health service at all. The challenge, if we need to prove it before we make a change in policy, is how we do that across departmental boundaries.

James Cartlidge: Of course. Although that is a very good point, it does assume a competitive marketplace where that tax change would be passed on in full to the consumer, and it remains to be seen whether that would be the case.

The point that I was trying to make is that when the Labour party makes unfunded commitments, we talk about the magic money tree. I have to say that I was trying to keep a tally as my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch was speaking, and he seems to have opened up something that we might call a wondrous wonga arboretum of revenues. At one point, we were looking at £7.6 billion, once we added in the heating exemptions and the potential increase in the threshold to half a million pounds. These are not inconsiderable sums of money. The key thing that we have to remember is that, yes, there are those who argue about dynamic effect on behaviour, which means that these things are revenue-neutral. Perhaps I am a small c conservative, like a former great Chancellor, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), whom I admire greatly. He was talking about this very Budget. He used to take the view that we should never rely on forecasts; everything has to be paid for. If we make a commitment, we have to find a corresponding item to fund it. I take that view as well. That is how one should run a business. It is cautious—one always assumes that there is a downside and an upside. Unfortunately, we now live in an era in which we cannot talk about downsides, because there is this “Project Fear” thing, but that is the sensible way of politics and prudence.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I rather doubt that the hon. Gentleman spent a great deal of his life at Labour party conferences back in the ’60s and ’70s. Had he done so, he would have recalled Barbara Castle’s blackboard—it is probably called a chalkboard now—on which she entered every single spending commitment ever agreed by the Labour party conference with two totals. Every time we made a spending commitment, we had to vire something in the other direction. Does he pay tribute, as many of us do, to the late Barbara Castle?

James Cartlidge: The hon. Gentleman is correct; I do not spend a lot of time at Labour party conferences. I am sure that, because he is there, it is huge fun. I know that he has a great sense of humour and so on. I never met Barbara Castle, but I am sure that it would have been a great honour to meet her. I do agree with that basic set of housekeeping accounts, which, by the way, the great Margaret Thatcher also used to believe in.

Maggie Throup: As my hon. Friend mentioned Barbara Castle, I want to put it on the record that she had the same education as I did. We went to the same school—Bradford Girls’ Grammar School. On both sides of the House, we can make sure that we chalk up our balances on the chalkboard—or the whiteboard as it would be now.

James Cartlidge: That is an excellent point. What worries me is that if we make unfunded commitments that do not result in the so-called dynamic behaviour that has been predicted and the Treasury loses revenue, the people who pay will not be us in this Chamber or...
anyone outside, but people who have not yet been born. We will stick the balance on the national credit card and, ultimately, the national debt. That is what happens if we do not take control of public finances.

I also want to talk about the transition period and leaving without a deal. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch seemed to suggest that we would benefit from not having a transition, because we would be able to vary VAT. He will remember that in his speech in the recent no-confidence debate—he spoke eloquently, although it took me some time to work out whether he had confidence in the Government or not—he advocated a WTO-terms exit. I intervened on him to ask what he would do about the 40% tariff on sheep meat, and he said to me that that was “Project Fear”.

In fact, if we leave without a deal, we will have to have the default WTO schedule, because there is nothing else. That schedule includes some very onerous tariffs indeed, not least for our farmers and exporters. In a debate about the cost to consumers of VAT, it is quite something to advocate allowing certain household items that we take for granted—such as dry pasta and tinned tomatoes—to be tariffed at 15% or 20% in a few weeks’ time. This is most significant for our exporters. In my constituency, I have household name companies—by that, I mean that they are very well known in the constituency—that have written to me about no deal. The matter is critical for them; in one case, the default tariff exceeds the margin that the company makes. That is serious stuff, which we need to be prepared for.

**Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con):** My hon. Friend is making an important point about tariffs on agricultural products. Does he agree that it is very difficult for farmers, who are dealing with living animals, to plan their sales in the most helpful way? I meet a farmer regularly—indeed, whenever I drop my children off at their sales in the most helpful way? I meet a farmer farmers, who are dealing with living animals, to plan making an important point about tariffs on agricultural and the rest. We cannot cut tariffs on our exports, not; we are not taking back control of France, Germany and, ultimately, the national debt. That is what happens if we do not take control of public finances.

**James Cartlidge:** That is a good point. I was simply trying to make the point that we are talking about the impact of VAT on the consumer, yet if the no-deal scenario that some Members wish for happens, consumers will face onerous costs. By the way, even if we decided that we wanted to cut tariffs unilaterally, we could not; we are not taking back control of France, Germany and the rest. We cannot cut tariffs on our exports, and we would have far less leverage in trade deals. That is an extremely serious prospect, and we need to think about it.

**Anne-Marie Trevelyan:** I have a large number of lamb farmers in my constituency—the finest lamb comes from Northumberland, of course—and the challenge for them is: what are the Government preparing to do in the case of no deal? I certainly would not prefer that outcome; it would be much more constructive to have a deal. Should we leave without one, however, I hope very much that my Government will be prepared, and that there will be plans—contingency plans, if we want to call them that—in place to support the farming industry.

One of the great challenges has been the lack of communication from the Treasury and DEFRA. That is quite understandable, because we are still making our best endeavours to reach a deal, but there is a real difficulty in suggesting that it is therefore better to say we cannot have a no-deal scenario because of the risk. That leaves the business community at the greatest risk of facing challenges without knowing the answers.

**James Cartlidge:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. It will be the last intervention that I take, because I am a strong supporter of the Bill promoted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), and I want her to be able to speak to it shortly.

I want to finish with a point about productivity and investment, which has been made by several people. Going back to what I said earlier about IT and so on, the key to productivity is investment, and as a country we under-invest, relatively speaking. For most of the larger companies that want to invest, the ability to offset VAT is fundamental. If I had a wondrous wonga arboretum and I was told that I could cut some money for business tomorrow, I would go for business rates. I would do so because business rates are an on-cost that directly hits investment in small businesses, and I am convinced that they are what is holding back productivity in the SME sector. I will stop there, because I think the next Bill is an excellent one. I hope that if the Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch makes progress, we will find a prudent and responsible way of implementing it.

11.59 am

**Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab):** I am delighted to be here today to discuss this fascinating subject—what a lovely way to spend a Friday morning!

Unlike most other taxes, VAT is paid by us all, and we all have an interest in ensuring that it is applied in the fairest and most effective way possible. As Members know, 16.8% of tax collected in 2018-19 is forecast to come from VAT, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility. With that in mind, we must weigh our words carefully. As we have rehearsed, we have to consider both the rate and the tax base of VAT, as VAT revenue goes towards the public services that most of us rely on. The significance of VAT to the Exchequer has fluctuated over the years. The total amount raised from VAT has grown over time from £57 billion in 1999 to 2000 to £122 billion in 2012-13, with the only sustained dip being in the years of the financial crisis, when VAT revenue dropped from £81 billion in 2007-08 to £74 billion in 2009-10. However, as we know, as a proportion of GDP it has increased only slightly, from 5.5% in 1999-2000 to 6.1% in 2016-17.

As we have discussed today—I think that almost every speaker has alluded to it—VAT does not affect our constituents equally. The most recent data from the Office for National Statistics shows that the poorest fifth of households paid 13% of their disposable income in VAT compared with 7% paid by the richest fifth of households. To quote the ONS, “indirect taxes increase inequality of income.”

As we all know, different Governments have taken different approaches. Members with long memories—I see that my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North...
(Stephen Pound) is behind me, and I am sure that the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) will be included in this group—may remember that it was a Conservative Government who first introduced VAT in 1973, another Conservative Government who raised it to 15%, and yet another Conservative Government who raised it to 17.5%. It was therefore a bit of a surprise when, ahead of the 2010 election, the Conservative party spokespeople said that they had “absolutely no plans to increase VAT” to 20%. I think I hardly need remind the House of what happened next, or of the fact that the headline rate of the VAT has remained at 20% since the coalition Government put it there. I always like to remember the Liberal Democrats at this point. They are not here today.

Stephen Pound: They are not anywhere.

Lyn Brown: They are not anywhere today.

After considering these matters of history, let me touch on the question of which goods and services VAT is applied to. The choice of which goods and services we apply reduced rates to is political, not just technical. It is an example of the priorities we have as a society. We see that in some of the items that are exempt from VAT, such as sports activities because we want to encourage physical and mental health, and admission charges to museums, art exhibitions and education services because we think that that sort of thing is good for the education and mental health of our nation. There has been much discussion—I thank hon. Members in all parts of the House for this—about the imposition of VAT on sanitary products. When the rate was reduced by the last Labour Government, it was the lowest rate permissible under European legislation. On the other hand, my party unveiled plans ahead of the 2017 general election to charge VAT on private school fees. The money we raised could have been used to pay for free school meals for all primary school children—a policy that has already been implemented at local level by some really insightful Labour councils, including my own in Newham.

The current Chancellor was reportedly considering copying the idea—if newspapers are ever to be believed.

We should also understand that fraud continues to be a serious issue for the Exchequer in relation to the collection of VAT. On Government estimates, VAT fraud currently costs the UK about half a billion pounds a year, with an extra £1.5 billion of uncollected debts and around £100 million of avoidance. VAT fraud was discussed at length during the Committee stage of the Finance Bill in October 2017, when the Government introduced a new clause to place new obligations on fulfilment houses to help tackle VAT fraud, which has worsened with the rise of online sellers who obtain goods through third-party vendors based abroad.

The Opposition believe that small businesses need more support in getting to grips with the tax if we are ever to close the VAT gap. The situation has been worsened by the Government’s disaster-struck attempts to transition to making tax digital, which have thankfully been delayed until next year to give businesses the chance to adapt.

Many of us spend a large proportion of our lives online, so it is unsurprising that more UK consumers than ever buy a larger proportion of their goods through online marketplaces such as Amazon, eBay and others. In 2016, 14.5% of UK retail sites were online—up from 2% in 2006. Just over 50% of these sales were through online marketplaces, rather than directly from the seller.

The Campaign Against VAT Fraud on eBay & Amazon in the UK—a snappy title, which was possibly created by accountants—estimated that online VAT fraud “equates to £27 billion in lost sales revenue” and “additional taxes to UK businesses and the public purse in the last 3 years.”

Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs has stated that it does not have data on online fraud and other losses before 2015-16.

Sadly, the slowness of HMRC in responding to growing fraud online has been criticised by the Public Accounts Committee, which first raised concerns in April 2013. It found that HMRC had only recently begun to tackle the problem seriously, despite the fact that such fraud leads to significant loss of revenue to the Exchequer. It found that HMRC, rather than trying to use its existing powers, waited until the introduction of new measures under the Finance Act 2016 before even attempting to hold online marketplaces responsible for the VAT fraudulently evaded by traders. HMRC has been too cautious in using these powers, and the Government have refused to name and shame complacent traders. To my knowledge, they have not prosecuted a single one for committing online VAT fraud.

As the UK leaves the protection of the EU VAT area, the possibility of VAT fraud will, arguably, rise. It is therefore logical that any new legislation on VAT should consider additional measures to tackle online VAT fraud. I understand from the Treasury Committee that HMRC believes there is a £3.5 billion VAT gap resulting from mistakes made by businesses when they submit their VAT returns. The overall VAT gap in 2016-17 was £11.7 billion. I am sure we can all agree that that is a high number and therefore probably requires some fairly urgent, radical action.

The Chartered Institute of Taxation has six recommendations to help address this gap. I want to focus on just one of them today, in the interests of time and sanity, which is “resisting the temptation to introduce widespread changes that are disruptive to the majority of compliant businesses”.

Possibly, this connects to a concern about the clause we are addressing.

I am aware that there is something of a live debate on registration thresholds. There were several briefings ahead of last year’s Budget that moves were afoot to reduce the threshold and allow more small businesses to register for VAT. There are, I honestly believe, arguments both in favour and against such an approach. I have actually debated this over my breakfast table with my husband,
who just happens to be a small business owner. A concern about the threshold is not an argument for a particular threshold, because I think the only way to address such a concern would be to reduce the threshold to zero, which is something we certainly do not support. Conservative Members may claim that by setting the threshold too low we are disincentivising businesses. There are some who claim that the existence of health and safety legislation or, indeed, employment law is a disincentive to business—I know that to be true because I have done many Friday mornings—so we should be very careful where that argument takes us.

There is much in this Bill that I am sure the hon. Member for Christchurch would agree needs further consultation. First, I am not sure how the shift in threshold for registering taxable supplies in this Bill, from £85,000 to £104,000, has been worked out. It would be great if the hon. Gentleman, in his summing up, could let me know. It would also be useful to know how much consultation has gone into the exemptions for the use of coal, oil and gas as domestic fuel or power, because it is not clear to me that, as we seek to reduce fossil fuel emissions, the use of such fuels should be subsidised. I am sure he would agree that, again, this needs a broader consultation and consideration of how such a measure sits alongside other measures being taken, including by this Government—

Sir Christopher Chope: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Lyn Brown: Let me finish my sentence. Such consultation should include how such a measure sits comfortably alongside other measures being taken by the Government—for example, through the Climate Change Act 2008. If I finish the next bit, just to wrap it all up, the hon. Gentleman may find that easier. I wonder how workable or sensible it is to propose exempting VAT from items already subject to excise duty, such as alcohol and tobacco, and whether this could be counterproductive as it could amount to two policy measures pulling in different directions, with excise duty increases to try to discourage consumption and a VAT exemption in effect reducing the price.

Sir Christopher Chope: Does the hon. Lady recall—that is my question—what she said after the Government had introduced VAT on fuel? In that by-election, the Government’s argument for introducing VAT on fuel was that it would promote fuel efficiency, and the electorate in Christchurch gave the Government’s argument a big raspberry.

Lyn Brown: Can I say that I am not at all surprised—not at all—by that? No, I do not remember the 1993 Christchurch by-election. However, I assure the hon. Gentleman that, after I have driven to my friends’ this evening, I will ask them to look it up for me so that as soon as I get my gin and tonic, I will have an opportunity to refresh my memory of the politics of that by-election.

I am genuinely delighted—I mean this sincerely, which is why I wanted to say this at the end—that the hon. Gentleman wants to exempt women’s sanitary products from VAT rates or even a zero rating for sanitary products. I wholeheartedly agree, and I genuinely believe that we should be striving massively to do it. There is real poverty in some sections of our communities and poverty in relation to sanitary products really should not be exacerbated by having VAT on them. In January last year, the European Commission came back to us with revised proposals to allow countries in the EU to introduce lower rates for sanitary products, and in part that was in response to campaigns from this Chamber. As we know, the proposals still have to be agreed at EU level, and of course the UK has yet to finalise its relationship with the EU.

This has been a genuinely interesting debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Christchurch for entertaining me so thoroughly on a Friday morning. He will be unsurprised to hear that should the Bill be pressed to a vote, sadly I will not be able to support him in the Lobby.

12.15 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): From the heart-warming and uplifting bravery of Finn and his fellow service dogs, to VAT—such is the unique ability of the Treasury to change the mood in the Chamber. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) for promoting this Bill and raising these issues, and all hon. Members across the House who have had the chance to contribute today. In my experience, my hon. Friend’s rather dim view of the bean-counting accountants at the Treasury is unfair to the excellent civil servants who work there. My office has a portrait of Nigel Lawson on the wall. He was one of the great Chancellors who understood the dynamic effect of simpler and lower taxes.

Stephen Pound: And now he lives in France.

Robert Jenrick: Part of the time.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), and for Erewash (Maggie Throup)—not “ear wash” as it was pronounced in the previous debate by my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), who is the voice of small c conservatism in this place. The hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) made a fleeting cameo appearance in the debate to recommend Barbara Castle, who I agree was one of the great politicians of the 20th century. Modern politics might have been different if she had been able to take forward the reforms that she set about in the late 1960s. Briefly—he is no longer in his place—my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien) set out the twin pillars that any Conservative Chancellor must balance: sound money and respect for the public finances so that we do not leave the next generation worse off than we found it, and the liberating dynamic effect of lower taxes. Every Chancellor has the opportunity to balance the two responsibly and drive the economy forward, and that is very much the context for this debate.

The Government champion small business people and entrepreneurs, who are the backbone of our economy. A simple tax system helps those individuals and the businesses they create to operate in a productive and profitable manner, as we heard from numerous colleagues across the House. We want to find opportunities wherever we can to help them move their businesses forward.
Under UK VAT rules, UK businesses must register for VAT once their total taxable turnover crosses the threshold, which is currently set at £85,000. Businesses can de-register if their turnover falls below £83,000. The Government recognise that accounting for VAT can be burdensome on small businesses, but it should not be over-estimated—our research shows that the cost to a small business of meeting its VAT responsibilities is generally around £300 a year. That is not inconsiderable, but it is perhaps not as much as some might suggest.

We want to maintain a VAT threshold that supports small businesses, and we do. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash, the United Kingdom’s VAT threshold is the highest in the European Union and the OECD. To put that in context, the EU average is £33,000, and £44,000 in the OECD. The German threshold is only £15,600, and ours is £85,000. We compare extremely favourably with our competitors around the world. That benefits 3.5 million UK businesses that are not required to account for or pay VAT—not half of all small businesses, but 60%. It is also worth noting the large and growing number of enterprises in the sharing economy, such as individuals taking up Airbnb businesses, generally below the VAT threshold, providing the kinds of services that might, in an era before the technology was available, be provided by VAT-registered businesses such as hotels and B&Bs.

Views on the right level at which to set the threshold are divided, despite the fact that it is, by international comparisons, very generous. Two years ago, the Chancellor asked the Office of Tax Simplification to examine the impact of making the threshold higher or lower. We did not prejudice that research; we asked the OTS to come forward with its views. Its report, published in November 2017—colleagues have quoted it today—found that the relatively high level of the threshold in the UK has a distorting effect on business growth.

One reason for that, as we have already heard, is the “bunching” phenomenon, whereby small businesses limit their turnover to remain below the threshold. In the same way that welfare reform improves the ability of individuals to work extra hours or take a promotion, we do not want to discourage entrepreneurs from taking on an extra client, expanding their business or growing their sales. The bunching effect is significant, and raising the threshold somewhat, for example to £100,000, would not eliminate it; it would just move the problem further up the chain.

As a result of that report, the Chancellor committed to explore whether the design of the threshold could better incentivise growth. He launched a call for evidence in March last year, to understand the effects of the threshold on small businesses and ways of easing the burden once they become VAT-registered. During the call for evidence, businesses raised concerns, not dissimilar to those we have heard today, about the administrative and financial implications of registration, but there was no clear consensus on reform. That was not obfuscation of the kind alluded to by my hon. Friend; there was simply no clear answer on how to proceed. Numerous businesses wanted the threshold to be increased, and numerous wanted it to be decreased. The Chancellor therefore announced that the Government would maintain the threshold at its current level of £85,000 until March 2022, taking a balanced approach, with the UK continuing to lead the EU and the OECD in support for small businesses in this manner.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I agree with the Minister that the consultation was difficult and did not seem to come up with a solution, but will the Treasury seriously consider having a sliding scale for VAT registration, as is the case for other taxation systems?

Robert Jenrick: That suggestion, which my hon. Friend set out so eloquently in her speech, has been discussed on many occasions. It is an interesting proposal, but it would have significant fiscal implications, and it would mean that any business would be able to take advantage of that; large multinational corporations would benefit, not just small and medium-sized businesses. However, it is something we might consider in future.

Sir Christopher Chope: The Minister says that the consultation outcome was inconclusive, but paragraph 4.34 states:

“Above all, the most consistent response regarding the level of the VAT threshold was that a reduction in the threshold would be damaging for UK business and the economy.”

Paragraph 4.35 states:

“Many responses committed to the view that an increase to the threshold would make it much easier for newly-registered businesses” and so on. Was not the balance actually in favour of raising the threshold?

Robert Jenrick: As one might expect, many people wanted it to be increased, but a very large number of those who took part in the survey came to the conclusion that the bunching effect that my hon. Friend described, which is the fundamental issue here, would simply be kicked further down the road if we increased the threshold to £100,000. Of course, if one increased it to a very large figure such as £500,000 or £1 million, that might be of less concern because it would take out a swathe of small and medium-sized businesses, but the fiscal cost would be even higher. While I am the first person to seek a dynamic approach to taxation and lower taxes, we have to balance those two considerations and ensure that we do not live beyond our means as a country. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk said, taken together the proposals in the Bill carry a significant fiscal cost of several billion pounds, which I will mention briefly later.

The Bill proposes a threshold of £104,000. We already have the highest in the EU and OECD, so we lead the international business community in that respect. There is no evidence to suggest that the policies that the Government have adopted are leading to a diminution in the number of small businesses created in this country. There is a new start-up every 75 seconds. We are the start-up capital of Europe. We are the most dynamic and supportive economy in the world for entrepreneurs. If the UK economy has any challenge in this respect, it is how to help a business to scale up into a much more substantial business, far beyond the VAT threshold. We have been trying to tackle that issue in a number of ways that I do not have time to discuss today.

The measure is expensive, as we have heard. Its estimated cost to the Exchequer would be about £2.1 billion per year. I take my hon. Friend’s point that it might have a dynamic effect and that we need to take such things into consideration. It can be a criticism of the Treasury and the OBR that the processes that we have created in the past 15 years make it much harder to take the kind of attitude that a Chancellor such as Nigel Lawson
would have taken in the 1980s. None the less, there is a substantial fiscal cost to the measure. The loss in revenue has to be balanced by reduced public spending, increased borrowing or increased taxation elsewhere, all of which we want to avoid. While we support the desire to improve business growth, concerns remain that increasing the threshold would simply shift the problem higher up the level.

I want to mention some of the issues that my hon. Friend and others spoke about. I know that many right hon. and hon. Members care strongly about VAT on women’s sanitary products, as do I, and wish to see change as soon as possible. The Government have taken action to address the issue, but we have been unable to succeed as a result of our continued membership of the EU. There will be opportunities for reform in the future, but not until the UK leaves the EU or after the end of the implementation period, should there be a deal, which we hope there will be. At that point, we will have the opportunity to address some of the issues.

It is worth saying that since the referendum on leaving the EU, the Government have received in excess of £40 billion of requests for reliefs from VAT using the additional flexibilities that we may have when we leave the EU. In addition, numerous other requests have been made to us, whether on excise duties or air passenger duty. In aggregate, these produce a substantial cost to the Exchequer, which would harm our ability to fund public services. We have to be realistic about our ability to act and to reform these taxes once we leave the EU.

Sir Christopher Chope: Is my hon. Friend prepared to publish that list of bids so that there can be a wider debate about which ones are most popular?

Robert Jenrick: It is not a secret. These matters are frequently discussed in the House. If my hon. Friend comes to Treasury questions, he will hear debates from colleagues who have regional airports, who would like us to reduce air passenger duty. He will hear colleagues from Northern Ireland asking us to reduce the aggregates tax so that they can increase their competitive position with the Republic of Ireland. There are numerous requests for us to use the freedoms that we will have when we leave the EU. We may be able to meet some of them, but we will have to do so judiciously. If we did all of them, as I think he might wish, we would end up with tens, if not hundreds, of billions of pounds less revenue with which to fund our public services, but he is absolutely right to want a good public debate in the years ahead about how we do this.

The Government agree that women’s sanitary products should not be subject to VAT and, in the Finance Act 2016, introduced measures to enable the zero rating of VAT for women’s sanitary products to take effect as soon as legally possible. In the meantime, at 5%, the UK applies the lowest VAT rate currently possible under EU law.

Until we are legally able to remove this tax, the Government will continue to award £15 million a year to women’s charities—equivalent to the amount of VAT raised for the Exchequer from the sale of women’s sanitary products. To date, over 70 charities have received grants from the tampon tax fund and £62 million has been allocated since autumn statement 2015. This is a ridiculous and unfair tax that we want to remove as soon as we have ability. Rest assured, this Chancellor and this Government will do so.

In summary, I thank my hon. Friend for raising these issues and for the good debate we have had today. I would not always say this, but he is ahead of his time in raising these issues. The flexibilities he wants are not available today but might be in the years ahead. This prompts an important national debate about how we can continue to champion small businesses and have a tax system that supports enterprise and entrepreneurship long into the future. Unfortunately, at the present time, under EU law, we cannot act on many, if not all the measures, he has set out and so cannot support the Bill.

12.31 pm

Sir Christopher Chope: I thank everyone who has participated in the debate. We have raised a lot of issues that, once we have left the EU on 29 March, we can develop into important legislative proposals.

I am grateful to the Minister for reminding me of the time I spent in the Treasury as a PPS to the noble Lord Lawson, who did indeed understand the dynamic effect of tax reductions and who—incidentally—has since been a consistent critic of the ridiculous waste of public expenditure consequent on the Climate Change Act 2008 in his work for the Global Warming Policy Foundation, for which we should all pay him great tribute.

The Minister mentioned women’s sanitary products. He called the tampon tax ridiculous and unfair, saying we must abolish it as soon as possible, but he manifestly failed to say when. Does that not sum up the problem we face? It is always delaying and delaying while failing to respond on those issues in his remarks, but we should not allow that to pass unremarked, because if there is an £11.7 billion gap, we should be putting a lot of resource into seeing what we might be able to do about it.

I could not agree with the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), who identified important issues around online VAT fraud. My hon. Friend the Minister was not able to respond on those issues in his remarks, but we should not allow that to pass unremarked, because if there is an £11.7 billion gap, we should be putting a lot of resource into seeing what we might be able to do about it.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for West Ham (God forbid—who imposed VAT on school fees, would
it not be ridiculous if an incoming Conservative Government were then not able to remove VAT on school fees completely because, under existing EU law, they would have to leave VAT on school fees at the level of 5%? How ridiculous and undemocratic is that?

I have two options: withdraw the Bill, or put it to a vote of the House. I am confident that were I to put it to a vote, it would get a Second Reading, but I do not think there would be sufficient time in Committee and on Report to do it justice in this Session, and as my hon. Friend the Minister said, there is still the problem that we have not yet got to 29 March, so there are some things up in the air. It is easy for the Government to defend themselves against policy changes by saying that there is uncertainty, but I hope that that uncertainty will be resolved on 29 March. To remove the uncertainty relating to this Bill, however, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion, by leave, withdrawn.

Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) (Amendment) Bill

Second Reading

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I inform the House that the Scottish Parliament has approved a legislative consent resolution relating to this Bill, which is available in the Vote Office.

12.36 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Just over two weeks ago, Parliament held its annual debate in anticipation of Holocaust Memorial Day on 27 January, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. As we so often do in such debates, we saw the House of Commons at its best—recounting what happened, remembering the victims, commending the courage of survivors, and demanding that the lessons learned are never, ever forgotten. From across the House came stories of those who perished and those who survived, of the people who bravely stepped up and saved their Jewish neighbours and of those who stood by and did not. And from across the House came the clear commitment that we must never let antisemitism and racism go unchallenged, because we have horrific proof in our history of where that can lead. I believe that that is an appropriate background against which to consider the Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) (Amendment) Bill today.

This two-clause Bill has a simple objective: to retain on the statute book the Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) Act 2009, which would otherwise lapse on 11 November this year. My Bill would remove the sunset clause that is section 4(7) of the Act, with the result that it stays in force.

The case to save the 2009 Act is strong. It empowers a list of our national museums and libraries specified in section 1 to return items lost, stolen, looted or seized during the Holocaust to their rightful owners or heirs. Prior to 2009, certain institutions, such as the British Museum and the British Library, were unable to return works of art to the people from whom the Nazis stole them because legal restrictions forbade them from giving away their collections. This was a bar even in cases when the museum was convinced of the merits of the claim and wanted to return the disputed item. Even where the Spoliation Advisory Panel established by the Government to look into these cases concluded that a fair outcome was restoration to the heirs of the original owner, that still could not be done.

The case to save the 2009 Act is strong. It empowers a list of our national museums and libraries specified in section 1 to return items lost, stolen, looted or seized during the Holocaust to their rightful owners or heirs. Prior to 2009, certain institutions, such as the British Museum and the British Library, were unable to return works of art to the people from whom the Nazis stole them because legal restrictions forbade them from giving away their collections. This was a bar even in cases when the museum was convinced of the merits of the claim and wanted to return the disputed item. Even where the Spoliation Advisory Panel established by the Government to look into these cases concluded that a fair outcome was restoration to the heirs of the original owner, that still could not be done.

The panel was set up following the historic declaration at the Washington conference of 1998, where representatives of 44 Governments from around the world came together to make a commitment to increase their efforts to identify and return Nazi-looted art and objects to the families of the original owners. The declaration recognised that the Holocaust was a unique case that required specific measures on restoration of stolen art and property.

As well as the horrors of state-run industrialised mass murder, the Nazi campaign against Europe’s Jewish community involved the widespread and systematic seizure of property. Seizure of material possessions was central to the Nazi project. Throughout the long history of antisemitism in Europe, toxic tropes and lies associated with wealth, property and greed have been used again
and again. Sadly, as last year’s debate on antisemitism showed, venomous and hurtful slanders are still deployed against Jewish people by some individuals today.

I never fail to be moved by the commemoration event hosted by Barnet Council to mark Holocaust Memorial Day. The theme for commemorations across the country this year was “Torn from home”. An emotional moment during Barnet’s commemoration came when a student from East Barnet School, Chloe Blott, read out a statement about her visit to Auschwitz, where she saw piles of front-door keys taken from new arrivals at the camp—keys that they no doubt hoped they might one day use to return to the homes from which they had been torn.

The Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) Act 2009 was passed with cross-party support after extensive scrutiny, and a legislative consent motion has been secured for my Bill from the Scottish Parliament. Examples of art returned under the 2009 Act include the Beneventan Missal, which was looted during the bombing of southern Italy in 1943, a John Constable painting stolen when the German army invaded Budapest in 1944, and three Meissen figurines seized in 1937 after the death of Jewish German art collector Emma Budge. This legislation is targeted and limited in scope to a specific period in history, a specific set of circumstances and specific type of object. It therefore has no bearing on wider debates about the potential return of museum objects to their countries of origin. It has worked well in practice, and the museum community has widely welcomed proposals to retain it on the statute book.

The volume of objects looted during world war two sadly means that there is still uncertainty about the full provenance of some of the cultural treasures housed in our national museums. Extensive work has been done by those institutions to check the origins and history of everything in their collections, but the task can probably never be fully and finally completed. I want to highlight the 2016 case in which the British Library returned a book to the family of its owner Karl Mayländer, an Austrian Jewish art collector who was deported to the Łódź ghetto and subsequently murdered. For technical legal reasons, that specific case was not dependent on the operation of the 2009 Act, but it illustrates an important principle. The book was valued at just £20, but Anne Webber of the Commission for Looted Art in Europe said “every time a family gets a book back it always means a huge amount to them because it is something their relatives held in their hands and read and cared about”.

We all know that objects can provide a strong link to people we have lost. With that in mind, I want to read several comments from people involved in cases establishing the right to restore lost art and objects. Not all these submissions to the Commission for Looted Art in Europe relate specifically to the provisions of the 2009 Act, but they all illustrate the crucial principle that underlies it.

One family told the commission: “I have a need to get this painting back. It was a present from my grandparents to my parents. I remember visiting the artist in his studio with my grandfather. I lost my mother, I lost my father; they were both murdered, it all just gets stronger.”

A third family said: “Of all the pictures in the collection we are particularly pleased that this one has been rediscovered. It was one of the favourites of our grandparents and our aunt remembers it hanging on the dining room wall of her childhood home. As a young child she always liked it so much and she is so happy that she has had the chance to see it hanging in the family home again.”

Another family said: “In a real sense, my family has been waiting for this moment for eighty years, when they fled Vienna with their lives and little else, and left their beloved art collection to an uncertain fate. I hope that this will serve as an example to other institutions and individuals, which may have objects that came to their collections through similar circumstances, that it is never too late to grant a measure of justice and compassion.”

The last comment says: “70 years after the end of the Second World War, there are still many thousands of people looking for their looted property, objects that mean so much. These are not just personal items from a lost collection, but objects that carry a huge symbolic and emotional value, to many, part of the landscape of a lost family, of a life destroyed.”

Although, sadly, there is nothing we can do to make up for the pain of losing family members in the holocaust, the return of a book or a cultural object could provide a unique connection to one of those 6 million souls whose lives were cut short by humanity’s greatest crime. Two week ago, we paid many tributes to Holocaust survivors in a debate to mark Holocaust Memorial Day. The respect we accord to these incredibly brave people should include restoring precious works of art stolen from them and from their families. I commend this Bill to the House.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I have no doubt that I speak with the approval of the entire House, and far beyond, in heartily paying tribute to the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) for introducing this crucial legislation, particularly at this of all times. It is noteworthy that one of her Barnet predecessors—although not a previous Member for her constituency—Andrew Dismore, who was a regular attender on Friday mornings, also spoke with great passion about the return of the Parthenon marbles, and I have no doubt that he would have been here to support the Bill. It is also noteworthy that a legislative consent motion has been received from the Scottish Parliament, which shows the national support. We all feel the same.

The right hon. Lady spoke intensely powerfully about the emotional impact of objects. One of the things stolen from the victims of the holocaust that we can never return is their lives, or their hopes, their dreams, their culture, their community and their ambition. That can never be returned, and that stain on humanity will always be there, deep and dark, but what we can do is acknowledge the looting, the theft and the appalling way in which these priceless objects—many of them of religious significance—were ripped from those households and, in some cases, exhibited in the homes of the temporary victors within the Nazi party.

Imagine the agony of someone seeing their own cultural artefacts, perhaps a menorah or some other item of great symbolic or religious significance, being exhibited as a spoil of what was perceived to be a war. The pain must have been almost unendurable, which is
why we in this country have to do what we can, with the support of our museums and all the cultural community, to return these items from whence they should never have been taken. Is it not a shame that we cannot legislate beyond these shores? Throughout the world there are many, many countries that still hold these artefacts and objects, which should be returned.

As we see in the reports of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre in the ’50s and ’60s, which list the number of paintings, we are talking not just about famous ones—the Rembrandts, Kandinskys and Chagalls and the ones we know about—but about many smaller paintings, many of which are family portraits. What could be more cruel than to have the portrait of a deceased relative, someone who had died in Auschwitz-Birkenau or in another camp—that painting, that memory, that link with that life—taken away and somehow treated as a piece of art that has a monetary value, not its spiritual and emotional value?

I find myself agreeing very much with the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet on many occasions. She was a most distinguished Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and when I held a minor office on the other side, I never had anything less than utter respect for her. That respect has grown even more today, but if the word “respect” is to be used in the Chamber today, it must be extended to those of the Jewish community and those Jewish relatives—the relatives of the Holocaust. It must be extended to those people who suffered so grievously. We must show them not just the emotional respect that they are entitled to demand, but tangible possessions ransacked by the Nazis were returned to their rightful owners. As has been argued and galleries that were stolen in such a wful circumstances duty to ensure that any other items held by our museums and artefacts and objects, which should be returned.

and loss is very common. The 1930s and 1940s were inspirational, after he forgave the collaborator who put him in the train—but his experience of discrimination and loss is very common. The 1930s and 1940s were marked by Jewish people and minority groups having their property stolen and precious objects confiscated. In many countries occupied by the Nazis, special departments were set up to organise the stealing of Jewish property and items of value. Money, houses, jewellery and works of art were the most common items stolen. As recently as 2012, the state prosecutor in Augsburg, Germany, discovered and confiscated more than 1,400 framed and unframed paintings stolen by one of the Nazi war profiteers, Hildebrand Gurlitt. It is estimated that about 100,000 items still have not been repatriated to their original owners or families, having been looted by the Nazis between 1933 and 1945.

In my view, one that I am sure will be shared by every Member who participates in this debate, there should be no time limit on trying try to right the wrongs of the past by returning lost possessions to the families affected by these atrocious crimes. By scrapping the original expiry date, as clause 1 would do, we will be following the precedent of most other European countries, such as France and Germany, which do not have time limits on survivors and their heirs making claims.

It was absolutely right that in 2009 Parliament enacted legislation to allow our museums to return items looted during the Nazi era. Thanks to the work of the Spoliation Advisory Panel, 23 works of art have been successfully returned since it was set up in 2000. We have a moral duty to ensure that any other items held by our museums and galleries that were stolen in such awful circumstances are returned to their rightful owners. As has been argued before, many may simply be unaware that they are in possession of such pieces.

Although not many objects have been discovered in Britain, we should not treat that as a reason to shut the door on heirs and families making claims in future. After all, these objects were cruelly and illegally stolen from victims who were often left with nothing. That is why I am pleased to hear that the Government have given their full support to scrapping the so-called sunset clause of the 2009 Act. As I have said, there should be no time limit on our attempts to right the wrongs of the past. As the hon. Member for Ealing North said, we cannot undo the insidious crimes inflicted by the Nazis, but we can make sure that survivors and heirs have their rightful property returned to them. This is a moral duty as much as any other.

In 1998, 44 states committed themselves to the Washington principles, which sought to make sure that possessions ransacked by the Nazis were returned to their rightful owners and families. If we do not amend the 2009 Act to remove the sunset clause, we will do ourselves a great disservice in the upholding of our international and moral agreements, which is why I give my full support to the Bill.

12.56 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I join my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) in praising the work of the
right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) in introducing this timely Bill, which enjoys cross-party support.

I rise to speak about a curious personal story. Last year, I found out from my mum that her mum was Jewish—something that my sister and I did not know. As someone who prides themselves on being a massive gay, it has added an extra dimension when talking about rising hate. Not only would those evil Nazis not have liked me because I have fallen in love with someone of the same sex, but they would not have liked me because of the background of someone I never actually met. That is really timely, because the objects that we are talking about tell personal stories. They are not just the grand paintings that we can see in national galleries; they are the personal stories and personal objects of the people so cruelly killed by the Nazis. It was not just the Jewish community, but people from a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender background, trade unionists, socialists, Gypsies, Roma and the people with disabilities who were so inhumanely slaughtered in the pursuit of a corrupt and broken ideology. That is really important.

The removal of the sunset clause is a really important part of the Bill. I looked back at the debates in this place from 2009, when the sunset clause was described as "on the one hand, sufficient time to facilitate claims and identify objects, and, on the other," enough time to give "certainty for the public collections concerned."—[Official Report, 26 June 2009; Vol. 494, c. 1045]. Those were the words of Andrew Dismore. We should send the message from this House that although that sunset clause was deemed appropriate a decade ago, we should now remove it and allow the original legislation to continue in perpetuity, because the message that would send about those looted artefacts—be they worth millions, or if their value lies in a family’s personal connection to an object once held by a family who are no longer here—is incredibly powerful.

Just as we spoke about the need to remember those people who were lost in the holocaust with Holocaust Memorial Day only a few weeks ago, it is important that we tell the stories about why it is so important to continue to stand up against hate in all its forms. As the Member of Parliament for the oldest Ashkenazi synagogue in the English-speaking world, which is in Plymouth—a place not many people would expect to find it—I know how important it is that we tell the stories about the Jewish community and those communities that were attacked by the rise of the far right. Whether they are communities with a lot of people or, as in Plymouth, much smaller communities, we must tell the story of why we must stand up to rising hate, be it from those people we oppose or, importantly, when it comes from people who in many cases share similar values to ourselves. It is very important not to allow the creeping cancer of antisemitism into our politics and communities. I support the Bill strongly and wish it the best of luck as it goes through the parliamentary process.

12.59 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), especially as he represents my birthplace and my home town. Sadly, as he will know, the Freedom Fields Hospital is no longer there; it is now a housing estate. There is something else that we share, which is support for this Bill, and it makes eminent sense to take it forward.

The hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who has sat through one or two of my speeches on a Friday—they were slightly longer than this one will be—will be relieved to know that I have no intention of looking to beat one of my Friday records today.

[Interruption.] I hear the disappointment from the Front Bench, but I certainly do not want to put this Bill in jeopardy by attempting to do that. It is absolutely right that, with this Bill, we look to remove the 10-year time limit and the sunset clause from the 2009 Act. I can understand why, perhaps a decade ago, Parliament thought that these matters may be resolved or that we should allow a period for review. It clearly makes sense to allow claims to be made; we should not just have a legal cut-off date that was picked a decade ago. There are not just practical reasons for that, but symbolic ones as well.

We must remember that the goal of the Nazis was not just to murder their victims, but to annihilate all trace of them and to annihilate all trace of the Jewish people. They did not just murder those who were living; they demolished cemeteries, burned down synagogues and sought to erase the entire culture from Europe. That is why it is so important that where these artefacts are preserved and retained, they are returned so that they can be exhibited and shown by families again as a reminder of what once existed.

Let us be clear: the Nazis had exactly the same plans for the United Kingdom had they managed to cross the channel and invade us in 1940. The SS had already drawn up a list of several thousand people to be executed almost immediately—they were literally going to work through it A to Z. The list comprised not just political or military opponents, but anyone involved in the cultural life of this nation, because they wanted to annihilate them and subjugate the culture to their own perverted ideology in which they replaced the Bible with “Mein Kampf” and any other god in which people believed with a belief in Adolf Hitler. Thankfully, many of our forebears, including those whom we commemorate in this Chamber, stood firm against that regime, paying a terrible price for doing so, and actually brought to an end its dominance and its reign in Europe.

It is now right that we continue to commemorate and remember those who suffered and who were murdered. As was touched on by the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport, it was not just the Jewish community who suffered and were annihilated, but homosexuals and anyone who defied the Nazis. None the less, they put great emphasis on the Jewish people. Even today, there is one European city that is paved in cobbles. When those cobbles are turned upside down, one can see that they are Jewish headstones that have been used to pave the streets. Again, that was all part of the Nazis’ mission to demolish the whole community and to remove any trace of it. For me, one of the greatest victories against National Socialism is the fact that the victims are remembered. While the Nazis are condemned in history for their actions, their brutality and their murderous crimes, their victims are remembered as the people they were, as the culture they represented,
as the hopes, the dreams and the aspirations that they all had that were snuffed out in a bizarre, murderous craze that gripped the extremists of the National Socialist movement.

I am conscious that others wish to speak and that we are pressed for time. This Bill is very worthwhile. I welcome it and look forward to it achieving its Second Reading today.

1.3 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) on her stewardship of this small but important piece of legislation to remove the sunset clause contained within the original Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) Act 2009.

As a Parliament, as other Members have said, we recently came together to mark Holocaust Memorial Day with a Backbench Business debate during which we remembered the 6 million Jewish men, women and children who were systematically murdered by the Nazi regime. Although this dark episode in global history may grow more distant with every year that passes, these horrific crimes against humanity must not, and will not, be forgotten. The history of what happened on the continent of Europe during this period is often viewed through the prism of what we know happened at Dachau, Belsen and Auschwitz.

To understand the full extent of the holocaust and its lasting effect on victims and their relatives, we must also understand the events that led up to the final solution. From Hitler’s rise to power in 1933 to the passing of the Nuremberg laws in 1935 and Kristallnacht in 1938, the Nazis first marginalised and then set about eradicating the Jewish population with increasing speed and intensity. One major element of the programme was the looting and pillaging of around 20% of Europe’s cultural treasures, including hundreds of thousands of pieces of artwork owned by the Jewish community, and it is estimated that some 100,000 cultural objects remain hidden.

It should be recognised that since the war, UK institutions have been at the forefront of efforts to identify objects with uncertain provenance. Since it was established in 2000, the Spoliation Advisory Panel has advised on 20 claims concerning looted artwork. In the case of 23 cultural objects, either they have been returned to their rightful owners or compensation has been paid out.

The Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) Act 2009 has been instrumental in facilitating this process, which had been hindered by rules governing the disposal of such items from UK collections. Although I have no doubt that the consultation conducted prior to the introduction of the legislation was sincere in its conclusion regarding the need for a time limit, it has become increasingly clear that we have a moral obligation to the last remaining survivors and their families to continue to allow UK institutions to reunite them with looted objects beyond the 11 November deadline, which is fast approaching. Therefore, I offer this Bill my full support. Although we will never be able to make right the atrocities of the past, we can and should right this small injustice. I again congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet on her work on breaking down these barriers, and I look forward to the success of the Bill.

1.6 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I echo Members from across the House in congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) on her stewardship of this extraordinarily important Bill. Other Members have reflected on the power of physical objects, and that was brought home to me about 18 months ago when my mother passed away in the summer of 2017 and I became the custodian of a small box of family heirlooms. To my shame and regret, I had never really looked at them in the 54 years in which I could have done so, and I was perhaps not aware of their significance. Inside the box were some war medals, which had been awarded to my paternal and maternal grandfathers. I only met one of them; my mum’s dad was known to me, but my dad’s father died when my dad was only a very young boy, in 1930.

I had never seen those medals before, and, clearly, I never had the opportunity to meet my grandfather, but the physical act of holding the medals in my hands demonstrated the strong emotional power of physical objects and the connection that they can provide to the past. I can only imagine that that is multiplied 10 times, 100 times or 1,000 times in the case of Jewish communities in which families suffered so awfully in the holocaust. That is why it is so important that the physical objects in question are returned to the families, as my right hon. Friend’s Bill seeks to do.

The holocaust is an horrific stain on human history. The murder of more than 6 million individuals cruelly cut short their lives and potential. It is worth remembering the full horror of it, with whole villages being taken into the forests and killed, and millions being deported from their homes. As my fellow Devon MP the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) reminded us so well, it extended beyond the Jewish community to encompass Gypsies, the Romany and the gay community. It was an utterly shameful part of history.

Those horrific crimes can never be remedied. As well as taking those people’s lives, the Nazis stripped them of their possessions and property. Indeed, it is estimated that 20% of what we regard as Europe’s cultural treasures are in fact the rightful property of the Jewish families who suffered in the holocaust. We must therefore do everything in our power to ensure that Nazi-looted works of art are returned to their rightful owners.

Knowing that my right hon. Friend’s Bill was being debated today, I did a bit of research on why the sunset clause was introduced in the 2009 Act. It is intriguing that one would ever have believed it was right to say that there is an arbitrary cut-off point of 10 years beyond which it would no longer be appropriate or possible to return such objects. When one looks into the history, one can see, to some extent, the thought process that was in force at the time. In 2006, prior to the introduction of the original legislation, there was a consultation in which the majority of respondents agreed that as time passed it would become more and more difficult to determine the rightful ownership of some of these objects and some of this property.

That might have seemed sensible and measured at the time, but, as my right hon. Friend has so powerfully demonstrated in her speech today and in others that she has made on this subject, we have learned as we have
gone on that actually what was right then—what was rightly achieved by the 2009 Act—is just as right now. There is still plenty of opportunity and plenty of work to be done to identify the rightful owners of some of these objects and to return them in the same way. That is why I am very pleased to be supporting this Bill today. It is absolutely right that we amend the 2009 Act to remove the sunset clause due to take effect on 11 November this year and thereby extend these provisions indefinitely so that we can try to right some of the wrongs of the past.

During my research, I was very struck by some of the comments that my right hon. Friend made when introducing this Bill, when she said better than I certainly could why this is important:

“Surely, it would be heartless and wrong to deprive the last survivors of their right to recover treasured works of art.”—[Official Report, 13 March 2018; Vol. 637, c. 754.]

That is exactly the essence of this Bill. It removes the sunset clause. It allows items stolen during the holocaust to be returned to their rightful owners indefinitely. It is an important piece of legislation and I am pleased to support it wholeheartedly.

1.12 pm

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) for bringing this important Bill to the House today. I am glad to say that it has the support of both the Government and the Opposition. She spoke with her customary dignity and authority on an issue on which she has not only served her constituents well but served the British Jewish community well—and, indeed, the Jewish community throughout the world. That is perhaps why the Bill has enjoyed so much support across the House today. I was particularly impressed with the speech by the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) and his allusion to the idea of the Nazi Kulturkampf, because we know that if we eradicate culture, we are halfway towards eradicating humanity.

Devon has been well represented in the Chamber today. The hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) spoke movingly of his parents and of his grandparents who served their country with great valour. I am sure that they would have been proud of his speech. I could not help but be moved by the short contribution by my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who found out last year that he was actually Jewish. He is part of a richer cultural heritage for that, and he should be very proud that he has that heritage in his family.

I was also moved, as ever, by the contribution by my hon. Friend—my very old friend—the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who spoke very movingly about the power of physical objects and paid tribute to the work done on this Bill by Andrew Dismore, the former Member of Parliament for Hendon and current London Assembly Member for Barnet and Camden. As a former Friday Whip, I remember him well. Once, after he had spoken for three hours, he said, “Mr Speaker, as I begin to conclude,” and everyone cheered. But then he added, “my opening remarks,” and everyone let out a breath of dismay. He was a great Friday Chamber Member.

However, Andrew Dismore also worked tirelessly to get the Act through the House back in 2009—even rolling out his sleeping bag and sleeping on the floor of the Public Bill Office overnight to make sure he had a high enough slot to get it heard, and how proud we are of him for doing that. He was the driving force behind Holocaust Memorial Day, introducing the private Member’s Bill that established it in 2001. He was always, and has always been, outspoken against antisemitism and helped to highlight the work of the great Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. Let me use this opportunity to also praise the work of the Holocaust Educational Trust—an institution dear to my heart, and I am sure, to all of us in the Chamber—which is ably led by the wonderful Karen Pollock.

The holocaust was one of the worst events in human history. I do not need to rehearse the facts about the millions of lives extinguished and the millions more changed forever. The horror of the Shoah will never be forgotten, and we must pay thanks to the important work of all the organisations that make sure the world will never forget.

The Bill addresses a very important subject: the return of cultural objects looted by the Nazis. During the Nazi reign of terror, millions of precious cultural objects were stolen from the Jewish community. Some have been recovered, but many thousands remain missing. As the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) so ably noted, around 100,000 objects stolen by the Nazis are still missing today. It is estimated that 20% of Europe’s cultural treasures were lost during world war two.

Nothing can undo the horror of that period, but we should do everything we can now to reunite cultural objects that surface with their rightful owners. More than 70 years on from world war two, there are still families who have not been reunited with heirlooms that rightly belong to them. As many survivors of the holocaust are passing away, it is vital that their descendants have confidence that this Parliament and this Government are committed to ensuring that they get back what is rightfully theirs, and I hope this debate will assure them that we are.

The Bill repeals the sunset clause in the Act brought in by the Labour Government in 2009, which gives our national museums and galleries the power to return these special cultural objects on the recommendation of the Spoliation Advisory Panel. Since the panel was established in 2000, 23 cultural objects taken by the Nazis have been returned to their rightful owners, and we must ensure that the panel can continue its vital work. Some of those treasures have been referred to already. The right hon. Lady mentioned the John Constable painting that was stolen by the Nazis after the invasion of Budapest, which was returned by the Tate in 2015. The 800-year-old manuscript the Beneventan Missal has also been returned.

The panel has carried out its work fairly and delivered justice to the families of those whose precious possessions were stolen. It works in co-operation with our national museums and galleries, which support its work and are in agreement on the urgency and necessity of returning stolen objects to their owners.

As the right hon. Lady said, this is carefully targeted, specific legislation that works well. Once the Bill has passed, which I hope it will soon, the panel will be able
to continue its important work. It is particularly important for those whose stolen possessions have, sadly, still not been found that, once they are, the Bill will give them the power to get back what is theirs. Also, for those who may not even know about this process, and may not even harbour a hope of getting back what their families once treasured, the Bill should give them that hope.

It is important that we support this cause and the moral beliefs underpinning it when the spectre of antisemitism is on the rise once again. I was horrified to read in the news just days ago that antisemitic hate crimes hit a record number in 2018. That is something that should scare and anger us all, and we must do everything in our power to stamp it out.

Before I congratulate the right hon. Lady on bringing in this important Bill, let me just reflect on what the hon. Member for Torbay said about the much wider symbolism beyond this Bill that unites this House. Such unity is borne out of a commitment to oppose antisemitism in all its forms, wherever it exists and in every institution, and it requires a zero-tolerance response.

As we unify and commit to supporting this Bill, let us not forget our honourable colleagues on both sides of the House who have been the subject of death threats, the subject of racist abuse, the subject of misogynistic abuse and the subject of bullying and antisemitism. As the deputy leader of my party, let me say to my friend and comrade, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), as I do to honourable Members on both sides of the House that I am sure every Member of this place would echo what the hon. Gentleman has just said about the House that I am sure every Member of this place would echo what the hon. Gentleman has just said about the House who have been the subject of death threats.

I would like to end by thanking the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet once again for her work on this vital Bill, which delivers a small amount of justice to those who have suffered so greatly.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I call the Minister, I want to add on behalf of the whole House that I am sure every Member of this place would echo what the hon. Gentleman has just said about the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger). She has the support of us all, and we must all stand together to stand up for her and defend her in every way possible. We must root out the sort of behaviour that is going on, which has no place in our free democracy.

1.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): It is an honour to speak at the Dispatch Box on this important Bill, and to follow the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson). In the poignant words at the end of his speech, he spoke about a loss of culture being equated with the loss of humanity. The last time I spoke at this Dispatch Box, it was on discrimination in sports and on the fact that ugly acts of hatred are not welcome in sport. Such acts are not welcome in any part of our society or any of our political processes. The Government absolutely recognise that and will stand up for people subjected to such vile hatred.

There is therefore good reason to come together to support the very thoughtful words in the introduction from my right hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) spoke about the constituent of hers saying that there was no time limit on righting these wrongs. We also heard the personal story of the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard).

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for his, as ever, very thoughtful words. He spoke about remembering the impact of the aim to annihilate and subjugate, how culture was not to be supported and how families’ precious items were part of the murderous demolition. There was another thoughtful speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) in support of this important Bill, and we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) about the physical connections and preciousness of family objects. That is why the Government support this Bill, and we see it as an absolute imperative to do so. The Government’s view remains that it is correct to right the wrongs that took place in the Nazi era, and when it comes to cultural objects lost in such circumstances, we must provide fair and just solutions for families who suffered persecution.

As we have heard, an estimated 20% of Europe’s cultural treasures were stolen or plundered by Nazi Germany, mostly from Jewish families, and more than 100,000 works remain lost and are presumed to be in private collections. Despite their valiant efforts, the missing rolls of art historians, museum curators, professors and other unsung soldiers and sailors in the allied armies’ monuments fine arts and archives sections—could not bring everything home to those who wanted it. A massive volume of cultural artworks was lost, including works by Vermeer, van Gogh, Rembrandt, Raphael, Leonardo, Botticelli and many other artists.

Stephen Pound: I apologise for interrupting the Minister who, as ever, speaks powerfully and from a well-informed position. Given her comments about the immensity of the task, does she recognise that today we are able to send out a message to victims of the other genocides? I think particularly of the Armenian genocide of 1915, when an entire community was treated just as fouly and appallingly. Does she agree that we could send out a signal to the wider world that we are finally seeking some recompense for those sins and crimes of the past?

Mims Davies: Today, we are focused on a particular issue, but we are speaking about an extremely solemn area. I served on the Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Bill Committee, and the Bill rightly became an Act. We must look more broadly, because throughout history so much culture has been lost on a truly astronomical scale, and we must send a message that there is no time limit when people have suffered injustices. It is right to continue on our mission of returning looted art, which is no less important now than it was then. As we have heard, there is a clear consensus across the House that we want to do the right thing, and we in the UK are sending out a message because we have a perfect piece of legislation that enables us to do that.
The Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) Act 2009 allows 17 cultural institutions in the UK to return objects lost between 1933 and 1945, and it enables them to do that effectively, by using the appropriate advisory panel. Today, we heard about the importance of having a fair and just way of returning to people those cultural objects lost during the Nazi era. The institutions covered by the 2009 Act are statutory bodies that would otherwise be prevented from doing that by Government legislation, and therefore returning those objects would be too difficult. The Act from 10 years ago ensures that we can continue to reunite objects with their claimants, alongside the advisory panel, and supported by the Secretary of State.

We heard about the Beneventan missal, which was the first item to be returned under the 2009 Act. That fine example of a 12th-century manuscript was in the possession of the British Library, and a claim was first considered by the Spoliation Advisory Panel in 2005. The panel concluded that the manuscript was looted and should be returned to its rightful owner, and for that to be possible, it recommended the introduction of legislation to permit the restitution of such objects. In the absence of such legislation at the time, the British Library sought to agree a long-term loan of the missal to Italy. Only after the introduction of the 2009 Act was the claim referred back to the panel, and the missal was finally returned to the place where it had been lost after the allied bombing in September 1943. The return of the missal became highly symbolic for the city of Benevento and its cathedral, and they were delighted to have it back. It is now kept in the chapter library, attached to the cathedral, which was rebuilt after damage sustained during the war.

The principle of correcting past injustices, as exemplified in this case, has not been affected by the passage of time. In fact, arguably that principle is strengthened as memories start to fade, as we have heard today. It is not necessarily easy to make sense of what happened more than 70 years ago. With fewer survivors among us, we must rely increasingly on written testimony and second-hand accounts.

On Holocaust Memorial Day this year, my Department was incredibly fortunate to hear the personal testimony of Harry Bibring, a holocaust survivor who told us how his parents sent him and his sister, who were both in their early teens at the time, on the Kindertransport to England, along with 10,000 other children aged from nine months to 16 years. Sadly, they never saw their parents again. There are many such stories still to be told. We must continue to listen and seek redress where we can. The Bill is the right legislation to allow that process.

Today, Sir Nicholas Serota, director of the Tate from 1988 to 2017, and the National Museum Directors Council’s lead on spoliation from 1998 to 2017, issued the following statement:

“The UK has been an international leader in responding to the challenges associated with Spoliation claims. The creation of the Spoliation Advisory Panel in 2000 established a model and a procedure that has been adopted by other countries. In recent years, new claims have become less frequent, but there is a strong moral case to remove the ‘sunset’ clause that provides for a time limit on cases being considered. It is important that potential claimants should not feel that the door is being slammed in their face.”

It is worth noting that claimants are unlikely to be able to pursue a legal claim for the return of their property through the courts. Referral to the Spoliation Advisory Panel is, in nearly all cases, the sole remaining route for pursuing the return of cultural objects lost in these circumstances. Just last week, the Government announced that the UK has joined four other European countries—Austria, France, Germany and the Netherlands—to form a new network for increasing international co-operation on the return of works of art looted during the Nazi era. The UK has always sought to lead by example, so it is absolutely right that we all support the Bill.

1.32 pm

Theresa Villiers: I would like to express my gratitude to all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part in today’s debate and expressed support for this important Bill, particularly both Front Benchers, and to Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport officials, who provided me with a helpful briefing and support on this important matter. I associate myself with all comments provided me with a helpful briefing and support on this important matter. I associate myself with all comments.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).
Rivers Authorities and Land Drainage Bill
Second Reading

1.33 pm

David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am delighted to speak to a Bill on a topic that, unfortunately, can be close to us all, and sadly can have a devastating and dramatic effect on our constituents and many of us—flooding. The sad reality is that many of our constituencies have at some point experienced flooding, and some, such as mine, face the risk regularly. Flooding is a natural disaster that we have little means of preventing, and of course it occurs all over the world, as we have seen recently in Australia and America. However, we have the power to help our communities to better manage the risk of their homes and businesses being affected by flooding by taking precautionary action to be better prepared so that when the weather does turn out to be against us, there is less risk to life, livelihoods and property, and recovery is quicker.

I am sure that many of us have heard shocking accounts from our constituents, and many hon. Members will, like me, have seen such devastation themselves. The Bill will specifically help us to manage better the risk of flooding and to improve our water management and, vitally, our environment. Hon. Members will remember the devastating flooding that hit the country during the winters of 2013 and 2014. The widespread flooding covered all four corners of the country, as we experienced the wettest winter for 250 years. Some 11,000 properties were flooded, and the total economic damage for England and Wales is estimated at £1.3 billion.

In Somerset, water entirely covered the levels and moors and devastated the land; 150 sq km of land was submerged for many weeks. According to the Environment Agency, 100 million cubic metres of water covered Somerset’s otherwise green and pleasant land. By my reckoning, we were up to our necks in 40,000 Olympic swimming pools—worth of water. Lives, homes, businesses and infrastructure were all affected, and I will never forget making visits to the village of Muchelney in 2014 by road, but by boat. I stood in people’s houses that not only were waist deep in water, but had been flooded only 12 months before. Livelihoods really were driven to the brink, and people were understandably driven to despair. The cost to Somerset was estimated at £147 million.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on introducing this important Bill, which will help his constituents and many of ours. He said that flooding affects all four corners of this country. Perhaps the Minister may be able to pick this up, but the explanatory notes and the Bill’s territorial extent and application clause refer only to England. A subsequent subsection refers to the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament and so on, but will my hon. Friend or perhaps the Minister explain what will happen to the whole United Kingdom? My hon. Friend is bringing forward such important matters that the Bill should touch our whole United Kingdom.

David Warburton: My hon. Friend is right that the Bill refers to England alone. It does not cover the separate competency that the Scottish Parliament will have. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will explain more about that.

After the devastation of the 2014 floods came grief and blame, and finally—thankfully—a desire to take action. I am sure that these thoughts are replicated after every disaster. One action that was taken was the creation of a 20-year flood action plan for the area. This was done at the sensible request of my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), the then Environment Secretary. A key innovation that came from that plan was the creation in 2015 of a new body, the Somerset Rivers Authority. Since then it has overseen more than 120 projects.

The first measure in my Bill will allow for the creation of rivers authorities. They will be locally accountable flood risk management authorities with the power to issue a council tax precept. A rivers authority will bring together other local flood risk management authorities and use the precept to fund additional local flood risk management work. Such a body could be created anywhere in England where there is local support, and if proposed by a flood risk management authority.

We are fortunate in Somerset that we already have such a body, but we need the Bill to incorporate it fully. In doing so, the Somerset Rivers Authority would be able to secure its future. A flood risk management authority would have duties and would, for the first time, be able to put its finances on a stable footing as a precepting body. The Bill includes additional safeguards for local tax payers, of course, and would allow the rivers authority to plan its water and flood management schemes into the future and thereby create a safer, more secure environment for us all.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing forward this important Bill, but is there not an issue with the Environment Agency’s role? In Suffolk, it has pulled back from some of its responsibilities—in many ways, quite understandably. Would this new authority not, in effect, be performing roles that many of my constituents would argue the Environment Agency should be performing?

David Warburton: My hon. Friend reads my mind. I was about to come to that point. The Somerset Rivers Authority brings together the county council, the five district councils, the Environment Agency, the Wessex Regional Flood and Coastal Committee, Natural England and the three internal drainage boards. In other words, it does not usurp the position of any of those partners but, rather, complements them. It brings everyone together to provide this very special part of the west country with additional and vital flood protection and resilience.

The Somerset Rivers Authority is currently funded through a shadow precept on local council tax payers. This funds projects such as additional maintenance for rivers, watercourses and many locally significant structures. It also contributes towards other projects, such as upgrading and securing the River Sowy and King’s Sedgemoor drain; much-needed dredging and monitoring of silt build-up; unblocking, clearing and repairing culverts and gullies; clearing away 1,000 extra tonnes of debris from 60 miles of road embankments; maintaining a new flood alert system for two major roads; natural flood management in both rural and urban areas; and better land management and the uptake of sustainable drainage systems.
The Somerset Rivers Authority will also continue to work with and help communities, households, businesses and landowners to become more resilient to flooding and its impacts. As ever, this includes encouraging greater participation in groups and networks, and identifying and supporting our most vulnerable people. All this work has kept our waterways functioning and—so far—our feet dry, but now we need the final piece to secure the future of the rivers authority.

Alongside rivers authorities, there are other important bodies that tackle flood risk management, such as our internal drainage boards. In Somerset, we are, as ever, fortunate, because we have three—Axel Brue, North Somerset Levels and Parrett—and I am aware of others across the country and of hon. Members who support their work. These bodies maintain watercourses, reduce flood risk to people and property, and manage water levels for agricultural and environmental needs within their internal drainage district.

Some parts of England, however, do not have the benefit of an internal drainage board. Enabling the creation of new internal drainage boards, or the expansion of existing ones, requires a change to the Land Drainage Act 1991, and that is what the second measure in my Bill would do. In essence, the problem is down to incomplete ratings data. The Act requires an amendment to accept a newer ratings dataset that could be used to create new charging methodologies. It is important to stress that these new methodologies would use existing tax data and would not be a new form of taxation.

Internal drainage boards are mainly funded via charges levied on the communities they serve. The first—drainage rates—is paid by agricultural landowners, while the second, which is a special levy, is paid by households and businesses. The new charging methodologies would enable these charges to be apportioned using up-to-date council tax and business rates data. To ensure that the apportionment calculation is up to date and to reduce the risk of imbalance on either side, this measure would update both charging methodologies.

As I said at the start of my speech, we are all aware of the potential wide impact and terrible aftermath of flooding. The Bill helps to deliver greater protection through two different but equally important public bodies. Hon. Members owe it to our constituencies, communities and anyone who has been flooded or is at risk of flooding to take all possible steps to mitigate that risk. The measures in this Bill are enabling; nothing will be forced, and only where there is local support will the Government be able to act. However, without the Bill, the Government cannot act, so I very much hope it strikes a chord with Members in the Chamber and that it will have unanimous support.

I would like to put on record my sincere thanks to both the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey)—unfortunately she is unable to be present for the debate as she is opening the new Ipswich barrier—and the Government for their support in this process. I think I speak for Somerset and indeed other parts of our country when I say that we all hope that the Bill will enable local action to be taken so that we will see dry feet and nothing leaking over the tops of our wellies for some years to come.
Many of my constituents will recall the Easter of 1998 not as a time of celebration but as a time of severe devastation. Heavy rain caused a flood that closed our railway station and many roads. Approximately 125 residential and 35 commercial properties were affected, resulting in more than £12.5 million of damage. Another flood in the summer of 2007 reinforced the need for a comprehensive flood alleviation scheme in Banbury.

The geography of the valley alongside the river that runs through Banbury makes the town susceptible to flooding following heavy rain. The alleviation scheme consists of five elements: a large flood storage reservoir upstream of Banbury; a key elevated highway into the community; new earth embankments, flood walls and pile walls in strategic locations; a new pumping station; and a bio-habitat, complete with ponds, trees and hedgerows. The scheme has worked enormously well, transforming both the town and the area downstream of Banbury, where I live, which used to suffer from being flooded on purpose when Banbury was at risk.

The other thing that makes me particularly proud of the scheme is that it was funded by a combination of means, both private and public, and the model should be considered and taken up nationwide. The project was funded by the regional flood defence committee, Cherwell District Council, Thames Water and Network Rail and was brilliantly spearheaded by the Environment Agency. Prodrive, a private motorsport company, also constructed part of the defences to protect its bases on Chalker Way.

The scheme is a good example of how to deal with flooding, and this Bill is a good and sensible step forward.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I can tell that my hon. Friend is about to close her speech, but she mentioned at the beginning her expertise in prosecuting in this area in her previous career as a barrister. We do not want to anticipate that things will definitely go wrong, but things inevitably do, so what does she envision for the regulatory supervision of the new rivers authorities? What advice can she give about supervision, specifically for this Bill, given her previous expertise?

Victoria Prentis: I would not want to step on the toes of my successors in the Government Legal Service, but I am sure that they will be studying the Bill’s provisions carefully. In my view, anything that further highlights this important area is of use to those who prosecute to ensure that our water, both drinking water, in which I used to specialise, and raw water, is clean, and it is really important that we concentrate on both types. This country has some fantastic legislative provisions to protect our very good drinking water, but raw water is also important. People walk by it, play in it, swim in it and, of course, it often becomes the water that we drink. The Bill is a good and sensible step forward, and I look forward to seeing how rivers authorities will carry out their work. I am proud to support my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome today.

1.54 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak on this important Bill. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) on putting his case eloquently.

The Bill goes to a fundamental part of daily life that we can take for granted until we receive the terrible news that we have been flooded. East Anglia is probably most famous for coastal flooding, but I will address two specific issues, one technical and the other more general.

First, I have had feedback from constituents about the position of riparian mill owners. I have had a lot of correspondence and surgery attendances from constituents who happen to have purchased properties that include an old mill with floodgates. This might sound obscure, but there are quite a few of them in my constituency. The issue is that the Environment Agency has been writing to riparian mill owners to say that it will no longer have responsibility for floodgates in such cases and that those responsibilities now lie with the riparian owner.

A constituent in Hadleigh came to see me. He is not a riparian owner, but he lives next to the floodgates and has to operate them because the owner is recently deceased. He has expressed concern: if the Environment Agency is pulling out of responsibility in such areas, who will co-ordinate? His argument, and it is a fair argument, is that if there is a flood, the use of the gates has to be co-ordinated. One set cannot be operated without taking account of the gates further down the river. I therefore intervened on my hon. Friend earlier to try to clarify the relationship between a rivers authority and the Environment Agency. Now that the EA is pulling out of responsibility, what can be done to co-ordinate those who now hold that responsibility? That is an important and germane question, technical and specific as it may seem.

I am not sure whether my hon. Friend the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, has had correspondence on this, although I have spoken to and corresponded with my constituency neighbour, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), who is the Minister responsible. The latest correspondence I have received from the Environment Agency about mill owners says that, in its view, the gates do not make enough difference to flooding. That is the Environment Agency’s subjective opinion, with which many mill owners disagree.

At the moment, although it may not be widespread, there are people in my constituency who would like to see the sort of action my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome is talking about, including the greater co-ordination of efforts to deal with flooding. If the community thinks the Environment Agency is not doing enough, what else can be done? If a rivers authority is the sort of body that could take up some of those responsibilities, I would certainly welcome it.

Michael Tomlinson: My hon. Friend picks up an interesting point. My hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) said that the initiative to establish a new rivers authority must come from local flood risk management and that it must have local support. My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) has just been making that point about co-ordination, and support. Does he share my concern about what happens when there is a dispute and when the local community does not speak with one voice on whether this is the right way forward? What
happens then? Perhaps the Minister could address that point in his closing remarks. Is there a gap in the Bill that needs to be considered?

James Cartlidge: That is an excellent point. Let us be honest; most of my constituents are not mill owners and do not have trouble at t’ mill, and are not overly concerned about the duty of others to operate these gates, which is a heck of an operation.

Secondly, how do we indicate that there is support? How do we bring forward such an authority in an effective way? There will be those who are not particularly bothered about it but who will notice the new charge on their council tax. I strongly support the use of precept funding for specific services, and not just in connection with the Bill. I have always defended the current Government policy of using precepts to fund increases in police expenditure, establishing the principle that the council tax payer knows where that increase is going. Many of my constituents might say, “Look, central Government fund the police. If we want more police officers, it should come from central Government funds.” I argue that, under the precept, all the money will be spent on the Suffolk constabulary, which provides better accountability.

On the principles of this Bill, I very much like the idea of using the precept model, as it is clear what people are getting. For that to be supported, it would have to be obvious to the public at large that this area needed a greater level of co-ordination for flood risk. I guess that is, ultimately, the whole point of the Bill. I know it contains measures on drainage boards as well, because we do not have to go the whole hog of setting up a rivers authority. I just make the point that this kind of local empowerment, saying to an area, “You have this choice should you wish to. Don’t just rely on the centre,” is a good way to go in terms of public policy.

Other than that, I just want to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome on the Bill. I look forward to seeing whether the Minister is going to mention some of them, and my hon. Friend’s helpful contribution provides me with the perfect opportunity to move on—to the House’s relief—and to think he has touched on and I raised with my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge). It relates to whether there is consensus in a local area.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) talks about the historical position in Devon and the wider county that seek to do that work. I was going to mention some of them, and my hon. Friend’s helpful contribution provides me with the perfect opportunity to move on—to the House’s relief—and to do that.

Another measure in the Bill that is relevant and significant for me in North Devon is the one that addresses the obstacles for the raising of expenses for certain internal drainage boards. If I heard my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome correctly, he has three IDBs in Somerset; I have one, the Braunton Marsh internal drainage board. I have had a lot to do with this organisation because historically Braunton, a large village in my constituency, has suffered serious flooding because of its location near the coast, on the fringes of the estuary. The main period of flooding, which some Members may remember, happened over Christmas in 2012. The village was the victim of flash flooding and many people were forced out of their homes over the entire Christmas period. Many businesses suffered, and some sadly closed because they never recovered from having to be closed during the floods.

Michael Tomlinson: I am jealous, as Dorset was not mentioned in my hon. Friend’s great journey throughout the south-west. I want to make a serious point, which I think he has touched on and I raised with my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge). It relates to whether there is consensus in a local area. My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) talks about the historical position in Devon, but of course this Bill would require local support for its proposals. What would happen if that local support was not there? What measures would there then be in Devon to help prevent such flooding and provide support?

Peter Heaton-Jones: As always, my hon. Friend makes an extraordinarily good point. A number of other arrangements and organisations that seek to do that work in North Devon and the wider county that seek to do that work. I was going to mention some of them, and my hon. Friend’s helpful contribution provides me with the perfect opportunity to move on—to the House’s relief—and to do that.
I have spoken to the Minister and other Ministers about how we can deal with the victims of flooding. In particular, I have been involved in a lot of discussions about the Flood Re scheme and about the benefits or otherwise of some of the commercial insurers that provide support for businesses that might be the victims of flooding. There is more work to be done, but the Bill starts, if I may use this phrase, to build the foundations on which we can ensure provision for some of the bodies that provide valuable support and flood maintenance and flood prevention schemes, such as the IDBs, the Environment Agency, and in my constituency the Braunton Marsh inspectors, a fine body set up by a piece of legislation dating back to Victorian times. They all do sterling work. The Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) ended up dealing with endangered eels, of all things, although a Cornish Member—voice his support for it shortly.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I will keep my remarks fairly brief. I have no intention of taking the debate towards 2.30 pm, because the Bill is very welcome and will make a difference to many communities.

It is ironic that since I was elected to this House I have ended up spending quite a lot of time talking drainage. It has mostly been about the joys of the Middle Level Act 2018—yes, it is now an Act, and I see some fellow travellers on that journey present in the Chamber today, including my hon. Friends the Members for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) and for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), both of whom heard my various reflections on how to modernise the regulation of that system.

This Bill also makes sense. Having a proper rivers authority and proper authorities maintaining waterways is about not only the obvious benefits for drainage, but leisure facilities and making sure a river is accessible. The middle level itself is a massive drainage ditch that has become a leisure resource that many people want to use.

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that although drainage is incredibly important, it is also important that we see more stocks, particularly of salmon and sea trout, in our rivers? I am sad to say that, because I am in the Chamber, I will have to miss a meeting this evening about that urgent subject.

Kevin Foster: My hon. Friend may be missing that meeting, but her constituents will see her in the Chamber yet again standing up on the issues that make a difference to Cumbria and her area in particular. I agree with her comments: it is vital that rivers are living bodies of water. We can also use drainage solutions and land drainage boards to improve environmental outcomes. Before I stood to speak, I was reflecting with my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) about her time dealing with drainage issues. I think she ended up dealing with endangered eels, of all things, and providing a habitat. It is not just about providing ways to drain water off the land, but sometimes about providing a habitat to allow other species to thrive. Normally, I would have gone through this Bill in some detail, especially on the composition of the authorities. I would be interested to hear the Minister briefly outline the selection process.

Trudy Harrison: It is good that this debate has had so many contributions from the west country. As a fellow Devon MP, I will not go quite as far as the hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) did in praising the south-west. None the less, it is important to say that the south-west has been affected by flooding over many years and it is an area for which the regulatory environment has not always worked in the best way. That is why the Opposition welcome this Bill and thank the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) for bringing it forward.

The Bill is long overdue. It is important to state here that many of its measures should have been introduced long before they were proposed in this private Member’s Bill. We have had plenty of parliamentary time recently to have discussed a Bill of this technical nature. Government time should have been used much earlier on this Bill, because my fear is that regulation in relation to flooding tends to be a kneejerk reaction to a large flooding event. We need to invest time and energy in the consideration of proposals to make sure that they work for all our communities. We need measures to deal with climate change, the increased risk of flooding, and the amount of house building on our floodplains to make sure that we have a regulatory system that is fit for purpose.

This Bill aims to provide local communities with new powers to organise and protect themselves from flooding. That is hardly controversial given the increased likelihood of extreme weather events due to climate change in the next few years ahead. This Bill receives strong backing from the Environment Agency, the National Farmers Union and the Association of Drainage Authorities to name but a few.

The rivers authorities that would be established under the Bill would be a good thing. They would be locally accountable with powers to issue a precept to billing authorities, which would then collect the money from council tax payers for additional local flood risk management work. I understand from the ADA that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is not expecting a flurry of requests for the establishment of new river authorities. Local councils and authorities will not be compelled to create them; they are there for those who want to be proactive. Does the Minister think that that is the correct approach? Given the amount of pressure on our local authorities at this moment, with cuts and increased demand on services, is it right that the work is not done at a national level to help identify and encourage those local authorities,
many of which might not have the capacity or the in-house expertise to realise the benefits that could be derived from the implementation of this Bill?

I note that the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) did not go into the composition of the new authorities, but I would like to ask the Minister whether there has been any thought about the personnel on these new drainage authorities. Can he tell us how they will be drawn and selected from the local community and what effort has been made to make sure that those authorities will be gender-balanced in the future?

We must ask ourselves why these reforms have taken so long to appear and whether they should have been brought forward in Government time, rather than have this Bill sitting at the back of a line for a sitting Friday for almost a year. This Bill is being introduced to rectify well-known long-standing issues. In many cases, the data that would be used to create some of the new river authorities and internal drainage boards is quite historic in itself.

The ADA first raised the potential need for legislative change with DEFRA during proceedings on the Water Bill in 2014. I think the Government are adopting a twin-track process. A Government consultation entitled “Improving our management of water in the environment” was launched in January, alongside the efforts in this private Member’s Bill. If the Bill fails to progress via the usual channels, Ministers will have the opportunity to pick up its content in the consultation, but I ask the Minister not to rest on his laurels in that respect because it is important that we have clarity.

The debate about flooding has historically occurred at certain times of the year, and we are in one of those times of year when flooding is particularly significant. I represent a constituency that is at the end of a fragile and precarious train line, which passes not only through Dawlish—that beautiful stretch of track is in desperate need of Government funding to make it more resilient—but through the Somerset Levels, an area that is also prone to flooding. We must recognise that flooding not only affects the communities in which it occurs—where there is far too much water—but can cause disruption to large parts of the country that may not experience it in their locality.

I want to ask the Minister who should pay for some of these costs. It is noticeable that the proposals will be funded either by local authority taxpayers or by landowners, but not necessarily by those who use land for business purposes. I would be grateful if the Minister looked at whether they might be an alternative source of revenue to help to drive this activity, rather than relying on the local tax base. Has he assessed whether the “polluter pays” principle could also be used to fund some of the schemes from industries that exacerbate climate change, which causes extreme weather events?

Looking back to storm Desmond, rainfall on that scale used to be described as a one-in-100-year, one-in-200-year or one-in-1,000-year event, but more extreme weather events are now occurring every single year as a result of man-made climate change. We need to make sure that our regulatory system and our flood defences are fit to meet that challenge. George Monbiot said:

“Exceptional events are...no longer exceptional.”

The Committee on Climate Change recently warned that rises in sea level of more than one metre could occur this century, and 200 km of coastal defences in England are projected to become vulnerable to failure during storm conditions. That does not include defences on river systems further inland.

We face unprecedented challenges in defending our lowland areas and coastal communities from flooding. The Bill is welcome, and it will help communities if local authorities use the powers. We need to look at how we can incentivise communities to get there, and we need a comprehensive plan for every community at risk of flooding. If we cannot get this private Member’s Bill through Parliament, I encourage the Minister to ensure that the Government swiftly adopt the measures to make sure that communities that could benefit are not hindered by the fact that the Bill was not introduced in Government time.

2.17 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) on bringing this important Bill to Parliament. He spoke eloquently about the devastation that flooding can cause. Sadly, like many hon. Members in this House, he has first-hand experience of dealing with the matter in his own constituency; indeed, his constituency was at the centre of controversy during the floods in the winter of 2013-14. Five years ago, in January 2014—shortly after I became a DEFRA Minister in 2013, and shortly before he was elected to this House—he invited me to meet a group of his constituents at Long Sutton golf club, which had suffered repeated flooding as a result of the problems on the rivers. I recall that I was stopping off on my way back from Cornwall but I was late, because one of the bridges—I think it was the Long Load bridge—had been cut off by the flooding, and I had to go on quite a long diversion to get to the venue.

At the heart of the problems experienced in Somerset were issues about how best to manage river systems in flood plains. In my hon. Friend’s case, the river in question was the River Parrett, if I remember correctly. Many hon. Members will have had to help constituents deal with the consequences of floods. In my own constituency, there have been issues not only with coastal surge flooding but fluvial floods caused by heavy rainfall, which we are prone to get in Cornwall. To tackle this natural hazard, the Government continue to invest record amounts in protecting communities across England with new flood defence schemes and the maintenance of existing ones.

Alongside this, the Government are keen to empower communities to take further action at a local level. In our 25-year environment plan, we have committed to bringing the public, private and third sectors together to work with communities and individuals to reduce the risk of harm from all environmental hazards. Later in 2019, the Government will publish a policy statement on flooding and coastal erosion in England, and the Environment Agency will publish an updated national flooding and coastal erosion strategy.

As my hon. Friend pointed out, following the devastating floods in 2013 and 2014, there was a strong political desire for co-ordination across Somerset to devise a bespoke new local initiative. In January 2014, my right hon.
Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), the then Secretary of State, asked Somerset County Council and the Environment Agency to work with the local community to come up with a flood action plan. As my hon. Friend is aware, this plan led to the concept of a new body—a rivers authority. The plan recommended the creation of such a body in Somerset. The aim was to establish a new way of bringing together the different bodies that have a responsibility for, or interest in, flood risk management. By raising additional local funding, and through co-ordinating and utilising the expertise of individual partners, the Somerset Rivers Authority is able to provide a better level of protection than may otherwise have been possible, but it does not seek to replace existing flood risk management authorities or their funding mechanisms.

The Government fully understand how important this issue is for the people of Somerset and fully support the work of the Somerset Rivers Authority. The Government showed their support for the Somerset Rivers Authority with a £1.9 million funding package to help with its start-up costs. A review of the long-term funding options was commissioned that recommended precepting powers. Incorporating river authorities and securing the Somerset Rivers Authority’s future requires new legislation. I am pleased that this is provided for in clause 1 of my hon. Friend’s Bill.

While there is widespread support for the decision on the Somerset Rivers Authority, that decision is not taken lightly. The Government are aware that any precept will be funded by local taxpayers, as is already the case under the existing shadow precept used in Somerset. Putting this legislation into statute will make the Somerset Rivers Authority an autonomous precepting authority, making it more transparent, ensuring that safeguards are in place to protect local council tax payers and ensuring that its funding is ring-fenced solely for this important work. It will also secure its future and enable it to deliver more. The Bill also sets out how, through regulations, Parliament will have the opportunity to scrutinise further the creation and governance arrangements of a rivers authority.

My hon. Friend also mentioned internal drainage boards, which are dealt with in the second part of the Bill. As he pointed out, three of those are based in Somerset, and there are a further 109 across England. Internal drainage boards have been in existence for many years. Their main focus originally was on the drainage of agricultural land in low-lying areas, but they have since moved on and now play a much wider role as a key partner in local flood risk management. This model has worked well, but, as he said, not everywhere has such a body. There is interest in other parts of England and Wales in creating new internal drainage boards, and many of those that already exist would like to expand. However, a combination of issues has stopped the creation of new, or the expansion of existing, internal drainage boards. As he said, there have been issues with the ratings tables, which date right back to 1991 and, in many areas, no longer exist. A change in legislation is therefore required. I am pleased that this is provided for in clauses 2, 3 and 4 of his Bill, establishing a power to introduce regulations relating to charging methodologies. We can therefore have both the creation of new internal drainage boards and expansion of existing ones.

I want to turn to some of the points made by hon. Members. In an intervention, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) raised an important point about Wales. I should point out to hon. Members that these matters are devolved. We asked the Welsh Government which elements they would like to be involved with. While they do not at this point want to see the introduction of rivers authorities in Wales, they did want the ability to expand internal drainage boards in Wales and the power to establish different charging mechanisms through regulations. I draw my hon. Friend’s attention to clauses 2(7) and (8), which create powers for the Welsh Government to do just that through regulations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) gave a passionate speech, and it was interesting to hear the comments of her grandfather—I think everybody who has experienced flooding can agree that nothing beats the sound of a good, functioning drain. She also made an important point about the impact of this problem on some of our farmland.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) gave a very supportive, important speech about how certain businesses can be affected. He alluded to the question of how we will know whether local council tax payers do indeed support such precepts. I draw his attention to proposed new schedule A1, on page 20. Paragraph 2 sets out specific requirements and a duty to consult, so the Government would not even consider bringing forward regulations unless and until a local authority had carried out a consultation. An authority must consult other relevant risk management authorities and Natural England, but also “persons liable to pay council tax”, so those people would be fully involved in any consultation process.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones), while showing a distinct lack of west country solidarity, nevertheless made some important points. In particular, he raised the local issues he faces on Braunton Marsh. He also made an important point about the role and value of local knowledge in delivering solutions to some of these problems.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who has finally got through a Bill that addresses similar issues. I am pleased to hear that the Bill, which I have seen on the annunciator many times, has now completed its passage.

Finally, I want to touch briefly on some of the issues raised by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard). He raised a specific issue about the composition of the authority and who would be on it. It is open to us, through regulations under proposed new section 21C, to stipulate what provision should be put in place for that, so the issue can be dealt with through regulations by the Government of the day.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about the “polluter pays” principle. I can reassure him that, while the focus of these measures is very much on flood risk management, the “polluter pays” principle is at the heart of much of what we do, and it is an approach taken by Natural England and the Environment Agency in all their work.
In conclusion, this is an important Bill. We have made good progress today, and we have had some interesting contributions. The Government fully support the Bill going to the next stage.

David Warburton: I thank the Minister for his support and indeed for remembering his wet visit to Somerset four years ago. I also thank the Government and the shadow Minister for their support.

It was lovely to hear from so many hon. Members. It was interesting to hear the reflections of my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) about the winter of 2015-16. We also heard about trouble at ‘t’mill from my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge). My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) was quite rightly envious of Somerset. It was also nice to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) forgo his customary forensic analysis in the case of this Bill.

I am grateful to everybody for their support, and I look forward to this level of consensus continuing as the Bill moves forward to its Committee stage.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).

Business without Debate

POSTAL VOTING BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 15 March.

VOTER REGISTRATION (NO. 2) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, if it is very helpful to the House, let us do it now and get it over and done with.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 15 March.

HOSPITAL (PARKING CHARGES AND BUSINESS RATES) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 15 March.

DRONE (REGULATION) (NO. 2) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 15 March.

KEW GARDENS (LEASES) (NO. 2) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 15 March.

CHILDREN ACT 1989 (AMENDMENT) (FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION) BILL [LORDS]

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 15 March.

HEALTH IMPACTS (PUBLIC SECTOR DUTY) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March.

CREDITWORTHINESS ASSESSMENT BILL [LORDS]

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 15 March.
Community and Voluntary Services: Derbyshire

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Wendy Morton.)

2.32 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I rise to pay tribute to our community and voluntary services across Derbyshire. They are the fabric that holds our rural and often isolated society together. In my own constituency of High Peak, we have four offices—in New Mills, in Whaley Bridge, in Buxton and at the Bureau in Glossop. They organise volunteers, provide services for frail, elderly and isolated people, and give the volunteers a sense of purpose and wellbeing.

One of the volunteers told me that his volunteering “gives me a purpose, a reason to get up in the morning. It makes me feel like I’m giving something back, rather than being an outcast. I’d lost my wife who died from cancer and my job on the same day. I was her carer for 18 months until she died and I had a breakdown.”

Now, however,

“I can hold my head up high… I’ve reduced my medication for depression”,

and he feels

“part of a family again and feeling stronger and more confident.”

That is what our voluntary sector can do for us as a society. Another volunteer said:

“While I’m here it takes my mind off what’s happening at home. I care for my wife and my son. My wife has mental health issues and my son has ADHD and neurofibromatosis.”

These are very giving people. They give in their life at home to their family, but they are also prepared to give to others.

A befriender from my constituency said:

“The person I befriend has become so much chatterier, less depressed and healthier in general since we have been seeing each other. I honestly believe befriending and regular companionship is the remedy to loneliness, and if this service is cut then it’s going to be devastating for those who rely on their befriender for social contact, and feeling like someone cares. My ‘friend’ has told me about how it feels to be lonely: they don’t speak for days at a time and they haven’t been touched by another human being for weeks, until they go to the shop and the cashier gives them their change, or until the nurse gives them an injection. It is heartbreaking because these lonely people have so much left to give and no one to give it to, and it is something that is all too common in today’s disconnected society.”

That is why I and communities across Derbyshire are so devastated that our community and voluntary services are facing more than half a million pounds of cuts—part of £51 million of cuts made by Derbyshire clinical commissioning groups, more than £100,000 of which fall on the High Peak and Dales CCG. Those cuts led all affected GP services in High Peak to write and raise their concerns about the decision of the new clinical commissioning group to make cuts of almost £100,000 to the community and to voluntary health and care provision. They say that the cuts will affect many of our patients, in particular the elderly, the frail and the isolated.

There is a night sitting service—the only one available—and it supports carers when patients come out of hospital. Without it, more patients will wait in hospital when they could have come home. The “home from hospital” service, which also faces cuts, has the same effect wherever it operates. Community transport is facing cuts, even though it is often the only option for patients to attend medical appointments where there is no public transport and they cannot afford a taxi. I have already heard about patients who sent in a sample for bowel screening but were not able to attend the follow-up appointments. They say that the next time they will not bother doing the screening because they cannot get to the follow-up appointment. Community transport drivers offer companionship as well as a driving service, and they keep an eye on frail patients.

As I have set out, the befriending service is appreciated by people who are isolated and lonely. Their regular social contact gives them something to look forward to and helps to prevent depression, which affects their physical as well as their mental health. GPs say that providing activity and support also helps volunteers, and it gives them a sense of purpose and wellbeing in helping to care for people who value their support and company. That is especially helpful for people who are newly retired, who live on their own, or who are recently bereaved, because it helps them to keep well.

The cuts will impact on GPs and already over-stretched health and care services, yet there has been little to no direct consultation with individual GPs or their practices. The services are extremely cost-effective, and although the cuts bring short-term gain, they will cost the NHS considerably more in the long term. Our GPs believe that the cuts contravene the aims of better care closer to home and the proposed model of community services that support health and care. If the cuts go ahead and our voluntary services are drastically reduced, it will be extremely hard to set them up again to support localities, as envisaged by the NHS 10-year plan.

Ironically, on the 70th anniversary of the NHS, all voluntary sector organisations across Derbyshire received letters stating that their funding from clinical commissioning groups was to be cut. The voluntary sector provides friendly, personalised local care for far less than any other service could. For example, last year the night sitting service supported 93 people with more than 2,000 hours of care, at a total cost of just £34,000—on average, just £369 per person for three nights of support each. Just one of those nights in a hospital could have cost the CCG more than that.

The CCGs have themselves calculated that for every £1 spent on voluntary services, they save £8. On that basis, the £500,000 saved this year will cost £4 million in extra care next year, and every year thereafter. That comes on top of all the other cuts to health and social care in Derbyshire. We have seen our county council lose more than half its revenue support grant since 2010, so in large swathes of High Peak, it is impossible to get a care package and the only help is from the voluntary sector.

My constituent Debbie has a son with autism who wanted to live independently but needed the support of a care package. The package could be provided only by the voluntary sector, but the CCG cuts meant that it could no longer be afforded, so they were facing the prospect of residential supported care, which would have cost far more, until I intervened.

The lack of care packages means that people are stuck in rehabilitation beds, such as an 82-year-old constituent of mine with a muscle-wasting disease. She could not walk unaided and could not get a company to
[Ruth George]

bid for her care package, but she received four letters from the CCG and her social worker, telling her that she was no longer able to stay in the rehab ward. They reduced her to tears. That wait is the only one of its kind in my constituency—Fenton ward in Buxton—but it is due to lose more than half its beds, despite a waiting list of patients in our acute hospitals needing those beds, even during the summer months.

We have seen the loss of our local dementia assessment and support ward in Buxton, a gold-standard service that took the most difficult patients with dementia and helped them back into care in their own home in an average of less than six weeks. We are seeing community hospitals across Derbyshire facing the loss of 84 beds. Anyone would think that we are seeing a reduction in the number of patients with dementia, or elderly and frail people who need rehabilitation to get them home from hospital. Of course, we are not. Instead, there has been an explosion in need for those services, at a time when our NHS is being forced to make short-term cuts, by the end of March, that will have long-term implications for the care of our patients and for the skilled staff we need to keep in the NHS. At the same time, we are seeing cuts to our voluntary sector services, which provide care much more cost-effectively.

Given all the rhetoric from the Department of Health and Social Care about sustainability, why is that happening? Why are short-term financial decisions impacting so hard on frontline health services and on voluntary services, which are vital for that long-term sustainable service and for the frail and vulnerable people who need them?

What is happening in North Derbyshire is in stark contrast to what is happening in the other part of my constituency, in Glossop, which is part of the devolution of health in Tameside and Greater Manchester, where the Bureau is providing a fantastic social prescribing service that is assisting people across the area. That is in stark contrast to what is happening in North Derbyshire, which has not seen the devolution of health or a Labour council supporting local services to deliver much more cost-effectively. We are seeing our healthcare needs rise at 3.5% a year, but our CCG says that it will have to cut costs by 5% a year, and not just this year but for the foreseeable future, despite the long-term plan for the NHS. That will have a devastating impact on our health services. Without our voluntary services, they will be even harder hit.

In my debate in September, the Minister told me:

“It is unhelpful to scare local people ahead of those consultations, because those decisions have not been taken.”—[Official Report, 4 September 2018; Vol. 646, c. 62WH.] She said that there would be full consultation with patients, GPs and other stakeholders, but, as GPs have made clear to me, that consultation has not happened. The decision to cut £500,000 of voluntary sector funding was made just before Christmas.

How can our NHS deliver a low-cost model without our voluntary sector? As one of my constituents asked me:

“Please put up a good fight for these services! I doubt any of the people making the decisions have ever been as lonely as my friend has been, it takes only a smidge of empathy to understand why these services are vital. I am really passionate about combating isolation and loneliness … however, this latest news feels like a big step backwards.”

That is why I am asking if the Minister is prepared to meet me and local GPs in High Peak to discuss all the cuts that are being made across health, social care and the voluntary sector in High Peak and across Derbyshire to make sure that we can get a sustainable service that delivers for local people on the ground without the sort of suffering that the cuts will create.

2.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I thank the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) for bringing forward this important matter for debate.

First and foremost, I would like to reiterate the vital role that the voluntary sector plays in ensuring that people have access to the services that they need in the places where they live. Indeed, I go much further: I am an extremely firm advocate of encouraging NHS commissioners to commission services from the voluntary sector to get much better coverage nearer people’s homes and achieve better outcomes for patients at good value for money. I defer to no one in my support for the voluntary sector. The principle of making use of and commissioning services from the voluntary sector is a key theme in the long-term plan, and we will be investing at least an extra £4.5 billion a year in primary care and community health services.

This is the first time in the history of the NHS that real-terms funding for primary and community health services is guaranteed to grow faster than the rising NHS budget overall. Clearly, that is not reflected in the comments that the hon. Lady has just made. I understand her concerns about the cuts in funding for services in Derbyshire. I am advised by the CCG that it has confined the cuts to those services that are not associated with delivery of their statutory services and that of a potential £1.25 million that was earmarked as meeting those criteria, only £300,000 has been cut. It is worth putting into context why that is.

Clearly, the Derbyshire CCGs have a duty to ensure the long-term sustainability of health services in the area. In the light of well-known financial challenges, that CCG has had to make difficult decisions on where to prioritise funding. As part of asking taxpayers to contribute £20 billion more a year to the NHS, it is right that we ask how effectively that money is spent and that we ensure that local areas are not running at a deficit. This is absolutely essential if we are to have an NHS that is financially sound and sustainable in the long term. Owing to their financial position, all Derbyshire CCGs are required to scrutinise their financial spend to ensure the best outcomes for patients for the investment made and to deliver financial balance. They have been working on that in close collaboration with NHS England. The joint saving plan agreed with NHS England states that if the CCGs make savings of £51 million, the remaining £44 million will be absorbed by NHS England. It is very much a joint approach to tackling the financial position in which the Derbyshire CCGs find themselves. None the less, they need to live within their means, and that is why they have had to review the overall spend and identify where savings can be made. Indeed, I go much further: I am assured that the absolute top priority of the CCGs is to minimise the impact that cuts have on patients.
I listened with sympathy to some of the points the hon. Lady made about spending on services provided by the voluntary sector that keep patients out of hospital and support them to live independently, and clearly I want to encourage all CCGs to commission exactly those services. I am reassured that those services that continue to be funded by CCGs, rather than remaining with grants, have been issued with NHS commissioned contracts—that has been done for stroke support, eating disorder and bereavement services—and I am satisfied with the efforts of CCGs in that area.

**Ruth George:** The Minister says that the cuts are to services that do not deliver such good statutory support. How does she think that community transport does not deliver for patients struggling to get to, say, follow-up appointments for bowel screening?

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** The advice I received from the CCGs was that they had reduced grants only for services not part of their statutory functions, which fall to other agencies, particularly local authorities, with which they are working closely to make alternative funding available for some of the organisations that have been cut. I cannot answer the hon. Lady’s specific question about transport, but I understand that the total cut to transport amounts to £24,000 out of £300,000, so we are talking about quite a small part of what have been significant savings of £44 million that the CCGs have had to find. Support for local transport and accessibility normally falls to local authorities.

The voluntary and community sector has been an important part of the health system for many years, and partnership working between the voluntary sector, local government and the NHS is crucial to improving care for people in their communities. I expect all local CCGs to build much stronger relationships with local authorities to better join up all support services for patients. I welcome the scrutiny of this process by the health overview and scrutiny committees. I appreciate that it has been extremely political, but it is important that those decisions be taken transparently.

We also recognise the important role the community can play in helping people to maintain their health and wellbeing. Social prescribing is crucial. We are encouraging CCGs to look much more at such solutions, and not just at the medicalised solutions, and we will be using part of the £4.5 billion investment set out in the long-term plan to recruit more than 1,000 social prescribing link workers. I hope they will be able to work with the voluntary sector in the hon. Lady’s constituency.

We will also be looking at funding expanded community multi-disciplinary teams, meaning that in five years all parts of the country will have improved the responsiveness of their community health response services to deliver crisis services within two hours and reablement care within two days.

I appreciate that it will always be difficult to tackle a financial deficit of the size of that of the Derbyshire CCGs, and I welcome hon. Lady’s engagement in that process and the public scrutiny. I also pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), who has been representing the concerns of her constituents in this respect. I am assured and satisfied, however, that the Derbyshire CCGs have done the best they can to support funding for the voluntary sector where it has been delivering a valuable service to the rest of the health sector. Indeed, one of the overriding criteria for making decisions regarding these cuts was that it would not lead to additional demand on health services and additional spending elsewhere, and I am satisfied that the decisions have been taken on that basis.

**Ruth George:** The GPs on the CCG themselves stood up in the meeting and said there was a recognised risk that these service cuts would create cost pressures on other areas of services, so I am sorry, Minister, but it is simply not guaranteed at best, very likely at worst.

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** I say respectfully that we expect the CCGs working with NHS England to properly interrogate the implications of their decisions, and they have done that; I have been given that advice, and I stand by the advice I have received from them on that.

I recognise, however, that those local commissioners in Derbyshire have had to make very difficult decisions, and we do believe that they are best placed to make those decisions. They have access to the local expertise and clinical knowledge needed to make an informed decision.

While I recognise the hon. Lady’s concerns, I hope she can reassure her constituents that the local CCGs are working to provide sustainable services that meet the needs of the people living in Derbyshire. The Government will continue to work with the local CCGs and NHS England to help progress with ongoing work and to help create those sustainable services for the future.

Question put and agreed to.

2.56 pm

*House adjourned.*
PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Speaker’s Statement

Mr Speaker: Order. I have received a letter today from the operations manager of the central criminal court informing me that Fiona Onasanya, the hon. Member for Peterborough, has been sentenced to a period of imprisonment of three months. I shall cause the text of the letters to be published in the Votes and Proceedings and in the Official Report.

[The letters will appear at the end of today’s proceedings.]

On an altogether more upbeat note, I hope that the whole House will want to join me in offering the warmest possible congratulations to the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) on the occasion of his birthday—87 years young today. I hope that the hon. Gentleman is with us in this Chamber for many years to come.

Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Universal Credit: Food Insecurity

1. Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effect of the roll-out of universal credit on food insecurity.

Mrs Hodgson: The Secretary of State may be aware of the cross-party children’s future food inquiry that I am co-chairing. Over the past year, I have heard from charities, families and, most importantly, young people themselves about their experiences with food insecurity. The matter is complex, but they tell me that universal credit is making their situation worse. Will the Secretary of State join me in April for the launch of the report, and will she tackle children’s food insecurity as a matter of urgency?

Amber Rudd: I can reassure the hon. Lady, who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on school food, which I briefly co-chaired some while ago, that I am as committed as she is to addressing food insecurity, particularly for children. I believe and hope that the changes we have made in terms of access to early funds will have reduced food insecurity, but I will of course take an early interest in the report that she is producing. I look forward to seeing it.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that someone on universal credit is making their situation worse. Will the Secretary of State join me in April for the launch of the report, and will she tackle children’s food insecurity as a matter of urgency?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend draws attention to a real failing of the previous system. There was such a high rate of tax—sometimes up to £9 out of every £10—that there was no incentive for people to get into work. I thank him for reminding us that universal credit adjusts to such situations and ensures that work will always pay.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Secretary of State is, no doubt, right that delays in payment were part of the problem, but does she recognise that the fact that people are not entitled to any money for the first five weeks makes a big contribution to the problems that we are seeing?

Amber Rudd: I have acknowledged that people having difficulty in accessing money on time was one of the causes of the growth in food bank usage, but we have tried to address that. One of the principal ways of doing so is to ensure that every applicant can receive advance payments on the day that they apply. In fact, I visited a jobcentre just before Christmas and was told about a number of claimants who came in for the first time on the Friday before Christmas and got those advance payments.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): One recent change has actually made things worse. A bunch of my constituents, who were merely changing address with the same landlord, who were covered by the alternative payment arrangements, suddenly found that they were 10 weeks in arrears on the housing benefit element when the bulk payments element was brought in, putting them in even worse debt. All the things that the Secretary of State is talking about today have made things worse in recent weeks, so I hope she will look at the matter.

Amber Rudd: Of course I will take a look at any particular cases that the hon. Gentleman brings to me. I have addressed the issue of direct payments of rent to landlords being made more frequently by saying that
alternative payment arrangements should generally be more available. The fact is that universal credit is a more effective, more transparent system than what it replaces. One of the best ways to ensure that is actually delivered on the ground is for MPs to engage with their jobcentres to make sure all that information is available.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): We know from a series of academic and stakeholder reports that the rise in food insecurity can, at least in part, be put down not just to the implementation but to the value of social security benefits. The Secretary of State has acknowledged that, I think for the first time, this afternoon. We also know from Library figures that higher than expected inflation means that the benefits freeze will save an extra £1.2 billion in the coming year. Does the Secretary of State agree that those low-income families who are being driven into food poverty deserve a break and that a series of academic and stakeholder reports that the rise in food insecurity can, at least in part, be put down to the implementation but to the value of social security benefits. The Secretary of State has acknowledged that, I think for the first time, this afternoon. We also know from Library figures that higher than expected inflation means that the benefits freeze will save an extra £1.2 billion in the coming year. Does the Secretary of State agree that those low-income families who are being driven into food poverty deserve a break and that the benefits freeze should stop this year?

Amber Rudd: May I just point out to the hon. Gentleman that, by 2020, payments made under universal credit are expected to reach £62 billion, compared with £60 billion under the previous system? [Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of the amounts, and I am merely pointing out to him that, with the changes in place, the amounts are larger under universal credit than they would have been under the previous system. 1

**Universal Credit Roll-out**

2. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What recent progress she has made on the roll-out of universal credit. [909108]

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): We have now successfully rolled out universal credit full service across the country, with 1.6 million people now claiming universal credit. For the next phase, referred to as “managed migration,” we will test and refine our approach in a pilot, with up to 10,000 people moving from legacy benefits to universal credit. That pilot will start in July 2019.

Martyn Day: It has now been a calendar month since the High Court found the DWP unlawful in its universal credit work assessment periods, yet hard-pressed families are still being penalised for receiving payments on a four-weekly basis. Will the Secretary of State give a commitment to make a statement to this House on how to rectify that appalling anomaly?

Alok Sharma: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point but, as he is aware, the Department is considering the High Court judgment carefully—I have said this before in the House—and it therefore would not be appropriate to comment further at this stage.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Can the Minister confirm that, because of the Budget, there will be £4.5 billion available in additional measures over the next couple of years?

Alok Sharma: Yes, we set out in the last Budget that there will be £4.5 billion available, with a large amount of that obviously coming through the increase in work allowances.

they should still report the actual pay date to the real-time information system, so that the UC claim is unaffected. Guidance is available from Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs on that.

Mark Pawsey: (Rugby) (Con): I think the Minister has just referred to the situation that affects my constituent, who is paid on the last Friday of every month, so as the calendar date varies, there are occasions when there is a nil award for UC. Will he confirm that that issue is being looked at and considered?

Alok Sharma: Yes. As I have said, this is a matter where employers need to take action, and guidance is available from HMRC. As I understand it, employers were once again reminded before Christmas that they need to get the right payment date in place.

Helen Goodman: (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): My constituents in this situation are still being harassed by the Department. Is the Minister going to make the change in line with the High Court judgment from 11 January or for all claims that fall into this category from the very beginning?

Alok Sharma: I completely understand why colleagues are asking these questions and why they want answers, but I have to repeat myself at this stage and say that the Department is considering the High Court’s judgment. I hope therefore that the hon. Lady will appreciate that it would not be appropriate for me to comment further.

Mr Speaker: Very good of the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) to join us. He will be pleased to know that he is just in time.

Carol Monaghan: (Glasgow North West) (SNP): My constituent received an unexpected late payment for temporary work during his UC assessment period, which resulted in a nil award. Surely the time has come to ensure that the assessment period recognises when the money was earned and not when it was received.

Alok Sharma: We had a discussion about what happens where there is a fixed payment date, but I point out that where two awards had been made in one assessment period it would mean that the claimant would be entitled to a maximum UC award in the following assessment period.

Alok Sharma: We had a discussion about what happens where there is a fixed payment date, but I point out that where two awards had been made in one assessment period it would mean that the claimant would be entitled to a maximum UC award in the following assessment period.

Work Capability Assessments

5. Tom Brake: (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): If she will make it her policy that work capability assessments must be conducted by public sector employees. [909111]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): I will allow the right hon. Gentleman to catch his breath, by saying that all people who carry out work capability assessments are fully qualified healthcare professionals, including nurses, paramedics, occupational therapists, physiotherapists and doctors. Most have two years’ post-registration experience, most have worked in the NHS and some combine working part-time in the NHS with being employed to undertake WCAs. As I said to the Select Committee during its recent inquiry on the WCA, future contracts will be open to all sectors.

Tom Brake: I thank the Minister for her reply and for giving me time to recover my breath. As a constituency MP, I am sure that she, like me and many others, will know many constituents who feel that they have been ignored, bullied or interrogated during WCAs. Given that in the past the Ministry of Justice has had to spend some £100 million in arguing court cases and appeals, will she at least undertake to examine whether the public sector is not in fact better placed to carry out these assessments than private contractors, who have a very poor reputation?

Sarah Newton: Let me make it absolutely clear that I want to make sure that every person claiming a benefit from the Department for Work and Pensions has a really positive experience. We look at independent research on our claimant experience, and the vast majority of people are treated with respect and dignity, and the right decision is made the first time. However, one person’s poor experience is one too many, and we are constantly working with disabled people and stakeholders to improve our processes.

Greg Hands: (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): It is so important to discuss how we can help those who cannot work, but we should also recognise that 900,000 more disabled people are in work since 2014. Will the Minister outline what more she can do to get even more disabled people into work?

Sarah Newton: My right hon. Friend makes a really important point. We have a strong safety net for people who cannot work, but it is also wonderful that so many more people are able to work. I am delighted to announce that from 1 April we will uprate the Access to Work grant to just under £60,000 per person per year, which will provide tailor-made support to enable people to work.

PIP Reassessments: Lifelong Disabilities

6. Anna Turley: (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment her Department has made of the effect of personal independence payment reassessments on claimants with lifelong disabilities. [909112]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): Our new guidance, which was introduced last August, now ensures that claimants with chronic conditions that are unlikely to change over time will receive an ongoing award, with only a light-touch review every 10 years. This is an important step in preventing those long-term claimants with the highest needs from having to undergo unnecessary reviews of their condition.

Anna Turley: I appreciate the Secretary of State’s response, but will her Department review the cases of those who have already had decisions overturned? For example, I had a constituent with three brain tumours. She was awarded the highest rate of daily living and mobility allowance in 2016, but then reassessed in 2018 and not awarded anything. We had to appeal that decision, the appeal was of course successful, and she received a backdated payment of £5,000. I am sure the Secretary of State would agree that that was cruel and inhumane for someone at my constituent’s point of life.
Is the Department going to look back at how many people slipped through the net over the past few years, before the Secretary of State made changes?

Amber Rudd: It is difficult to make policy based on individual cases discussed across the Chamber, but if the hon. Lady wants to show me that individual case, I will certainly look to see whether it should impact on the changes we have already made and will look at going forward.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): When does that start from?

Amber Rudd: I am happy to say that it has already started.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Since 2013, nearly 8,000 disabled people have died within six months of being found ineligible for personal independence payments—yet more evidence that the assessment process is not fit for purpose. If the Secretary of State is not prepared to scrap this inhumane process, will she at least support the Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), which would remove the arbitrary and cruel six-month time limit for people with a terminal illness?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady will be aware that under disability living allowance there were also assessments and difficulties with getting people paid on time, so let us not pretend that this is a wholly new change in terms of the consequences. I have started to look at the proposal from the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), to make sure that people with a terminal illness are treated correctly and get the support that they need as soon as possible.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): The personal independence payment reassessment process is taking far too long for my constituents, with an average delay of more than 40 weeks. That causes a problem for people with significant health concerns. What action is my right hon. Friend taking to substantially reduce the waiting times in the Bolton and Wigan area?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter. I very much support the Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), which would remove the arbitrary and cruel six-month time limit for people with a terminal illness.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): It is all very well for nice cuddly words we get from the Secretary of State, instead of their being used as a brutal and inhuman way to take people off benefit?

Amber Rudd: I would caution the hon. Gentleman about being so negative about an assessment that, yes, works for the vast majority of people. Only a certain number of the appeals get through and only 5% of the total number of assessments are overturned. I do not want people generally who are listening to and watching this exchange to think that the assessments are something to be fearful of. The people who conduct these assessments are sympathetic, thoughtful people who try to give the right answers. [Interruption.] Yes, they are. I urge the hon. Gentleman to let me know if he has a particular case or cases, because I or the relevant Minister will always talk to him and make sure that the outcome is settled.

People with Learning Disabilities and Autism: Celebrating Achievements

7. Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): What steps she is taking to celebrate the achievements of people with learning disabilities and autism in employment and outside of employment.

Amber Rudd: Most recently, the high-profile November and December campaign reached more than 16 million people on Twitter alone. We are investing in new support and employment opportunities too, and we also work with charities such as Autism Exchange and the Speaking Out Forum.

Sir Oliver Heald: My constituent, Sam Prowse, has been chosen as a winner on the inaugural Learning Disability and Autism Leaders’ List announced recently. He was chosen for his work with Hertfordshire County Council as an adviser supporting the library service on autism and on making information easy to read. Does the Minister agree that this list is a good way of celebrating the achievements of people such as Sam who give a great deal to the local community?

Sarah Newton: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for raising this matter. I very much support the inaugural Learning Disability and Autism Leaders’ List. I thank Sam for his contribution to his community and congratulate him on his achievement. There are so many unsung heroes in all our communities and it is always a pleasure to have an opportunity such as this. The Prime Minister’s award, Points of Light, provides another excellent way of highlighting the contribution of disabled people to our society.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I must congratulate the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) on his magnificent tie.

I had thought that perhaps it depicted fireworks, but I was advised by a scholarly source that it would be more accurate to say that it depicts tropical foliage.
Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): For the information of the House, I am wearing a Beatles “Magical Mystery Tour” vintage tie. I feel that, at the present moment in this country, I am on a magical mystery tour.

May I use this question to beg the Front-Bench team not to be condescending and patronising about people with different abilities? So many of the people on the autism spectrum—people who are neuro-diverse—are unusual; they think differently. Many companies today are looking for people with that sort of quirky talent in the tech industries and much else. Let us not condescend; let us put more money, influence and resources into finding that talent and supporting it.

Sarah Newton: I absolutely share the hon. Gentleman’s passion and enthusiasm for speaking up and out for people with autism, who do have many special skills and talents. It is a pleasure to work with so many people on the autistic spectrum—people who are neuro-diverse—and to hear of their experiences in setting up businesses and in making real contributions to their places of work. I absolutely join him in speaking up for the huge benefit they bring to all of us in society.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Recently in my constituency, I held a Disability Confident event where I signed up many new employers in Angus and heard success stories of constituents of mine who have benefited from the scheme. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should be encouraging Members across this House to have a similar event so that we can see the successes of the Disability Confident campaign?

Sarah Newton: I congratulate my hon. Friend on taking that initiative. She is an absolute champion of enabling people to reach their full potential in society through work. I pay tribute to the many hon. Members across the political divide who have joined Disability Confident and who are getting out and having events in their constituency. We should all be proud that, for the first time in our country, there are more disabled people in work than out of work, so the nation can draw on that rich talent pool.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I support the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman). Is it not true that, because of their recruitment processes, many employers are missing out on the talent and the enrichment that employing someone with autism would bring? People do not even get that first opportunity. What more can the Minister do to support employers to think again about the way they go about recruiting people and to give the opportunity to a wider range of people to get that first chance?

Sarah Newton: The hon. Lady makes a really important point. We do not want employers to miss out on this fantastic talent pool of people. Through Disability Confident, we are able to provide free and extremely valuable resources to employers to show them how they can make reasonable adjustments regarding the recruitment, retention and management of people on the spectrum in the workplace. That is really important. I am sure that her question will raise awareness of the free, fantastic resources that are available to all employers through Disability Confident.

Universal Credit: Social Security Advisory Committee

8. Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): What recent progress her Department has made on implementing the recommendation of the Social Security Advisory Committee on alternatives to claiming universal credit online.

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): Universal credit is primarily a digital service, but it can also be accessed via telephone and in a jobcentre, where in-person support is available. We also provide assisted digital support as part of our current universal support offer.

Danielle Rowley: The Secretary of State told Sky News that she will ensure that no deflection script strategy is used by the universal credit helpline in the future. Is she therefore admitting that a deflection script has been in use, and that there has been a culture of rushing people off the phone and diverting them online? If so, will she now apologise for the Department having denied this tactic?

Alok Sharma: The hon. Lady has already been sent a copy of the universal credit digital channel document, which Department for Work and Pensions staff use as a guide when taking calls from claimants. She will be aware that this document says clearly that staff must use a common-sense and sensitive approach in resolving queries ahead of any digital discussion. Let me be absolutely clear that there is no intention to deflect and there are no targets for getting claimants to use a digital channel.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): On 15 January, the First Minister of Wales agreed with Plaid Cymru and Labour MPs that the devolution of certain aspects of welfare benefits should be explored. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how universal credit can be better tailored to the needs of the people of Wales, particularly with regards to claiming online and the needs of Welsh speakers?

Alok Sharma: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have now put in place mechanisms so that Welsh speakers do benefit. I am happy to meet him and any other colleagues to discuss any issues that they may wish to raise.

Employment Level

9. Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): What assessment the Government has made of trends in the level of employment since June 2010.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): I am pleased to say that, because of the changes made by this Government, we have record levels of employment—up 3.4 million since 2010—and the female unemployment rate is currently at a record low.

Mark Menzies: Recent figures show that unemployment in my constituency continues to fall. What plans does the Secretary of State have to reduce it further by working with businesses and further education colleges to ensure that young people have the skills needed for today’s workplace?
Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for the good work that he does in his constituency to ensure that unemployment continues to fall. We are committed to providing targeted support to young people, so that everyone—no matter what their start in life—is given the very best chance of getting into work. The Jobcentre Plus support for schools programme helps to improve the employability of young people and has resulted in thousands of children being better equipped for today’s labour market.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Unemployment in my constituency has actually risen by 30% over the past 12 months. Given today’s economic figures, which show very low economic growth over the last seven years, and given the impending doom of no deal, what contingency plans is the Secretary of State making so that unemployment does not rise still further?

Amber Rudd: I urge the right hon. Gentleman not to be so despondent about the growth figures today. We are seeing growth. Overall employment continues to rise. If he would like to speak to one of us regarding any scheme he has to boost employment in his constituency, I would be pleased to see him.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): The hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) asked about employment trends, but one trend that he did not mention is that zero-hours contracts have quadrupled since 2010. This week is HeartUnions Week, so will the Secretary of State join me, the TUC and the Labour party in pledging to ban these disgraceful contracts?

Amber Rudd: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman may have his facts wrong. Zero-hours contracts are down; 780,000 people are currently on zero-hours contracts, down from 883,000 in the same period in 2017. Overall, we estimate that 2.4% of the employment market are on zero-hours contracts.

Universal Credit: Debt Repayments

10. Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What assessment has she made of trends in the level of debt repayments by people in receipt of universal credit.

[909116] The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): The Government have recently reviewed the maximum rate of deductions, which will be reduced from 40% to 30% from October 2019. We are also taking action through the introduction of a Breathing Space scheme and the setting up of the Single Financial Guidance Body, which will consider the needs of people in vulnerable circumstances.

Alison Thewliss: The Minister will be aware that I recently met the Minister for Employment regarding my constituent Georgina Woods, whose historical repayments soared from £11.12 a month to £79.46 a month when she moved from tax credits to universal credit—a situation that she cannot get resolved because she tried to save the Government money by not applying for tax credits. It is really difficult to resolve this case due to a lack of communication between the Treasury and the DWP, and that issue will only get worse as universal credit rolls out and it is more difficult for constituents to get this resolved. Why is the Minister’s Department treating people more harshly than the Treasury is?

Guy Opperman: I know that the hon. Lady has met my hon. Friend the Minister for Employment on the issue of her constituent and that the Department awaits more details to investigate it in more detail. The wider point is that the Minister for Employment is looking into this issue with Her Majesty’s Treasury and will, I am sure, update her.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the reduction in the maximum deduction rate, but what analysis has the Minister done of what that may mean for the poorest households and how will he communicate the impact of the change?

Guy Opperman: We believe that it is a positive step in the light of the review that took place. I draw my hon. Friend’s attention to the Breathing Space scheme that is being introduced by Her Majesty’s Treasury to assist people on an ongoing basis. That scheme came in in the legislation that we introduced last year.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Why does the Minister not stop universal credit until such time as the Government get the result of the pilot scheme? Anywhere else, if people have a pilot scheme, they wait to implement it and learn the results from it before rolling the system out. You would do that in the private sector. Why not do it here?

Guy Opperman: With respect, the answer is twofold. First, there has been a gradual introduction of universal credit and, secondly, the pilot scheme is in respect of managed migration.

Care Leavers: Employment Opportunities

11. James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): What steps she is taking to increase employment opportunities for care leavers.

[909117]

18. Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): What steps she is taking to increase employment opportunities for care leavers.

[909125] The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson): Building on recent announcements, I have just held two roundtables with care leavers and care leaver charities. The next step is to meet employers to explore how we can further improve job opportunities for care leavers.

James Cleverly: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Prior to universal credit, under the legacy system, care leavers and other vulnerable jobseekers were just left to sign on but now, with tailored support and work coaches, that has changed. Now that youth unemployment is at record low levels, what is the Minister’s Department doing to make sure that work coaches are helping care leavers to find not just a job but the right job for them?

Justin Tomlinson: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who has championed this area for a number of years, particularly during his time under the former Mayor of...
London as his youth ambassador. We recognise that the key is to build a personalised and positive relationship between the work coach and the care leaver. We have been working very closely with the Children’s Society and Barnardo’s to improve both the guidance and the training for all our frontline work coaches.

Will Quince: Care leavers are one of the groups at highest risk of homelessness. What support does the Department offer to help care leavers and vulnerable claimants to secure housing?

Justin Tomlinson: Last Thursday, my hon. Friend held a powerful debate in Westminster Hall covering some of this area. The Government take the issue very seriously. We are providing additional funding for 47 local authorities that have the highest numbers of care leavers at risk of rough sleeping. That funding will allow them to appoint specialist personnel advisers to provide additional support to small caseloads of those at risk. I am also keen to look at opportunities to open up the jobcentres to care leavers six months before their 18th birthday in order to look at all the different opportunities and support available to them.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Given that care leavers are, by definition, vulnerable and have a host of challenges, including in housing, getting into work, and skills and training, what discussions is the DWP having with local authorities so that rather than drip-dripping a few special projects the Government get really address the chronic underfunding of local government that has let care leavers down, among many others?

Justin Tomlinson: Our whole strategy of supporting care leavers, which was set out as part of the care leaver covenant, is about closer partnership working with not only the Department for Education but local authorities, to ensure that there is consistent support across the board. As I said in my previous answer, I want to start that earlier, giving young care leavers the maximum time to prepare for the transition as they reach 18.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): The Government deserve some credit for the care leaver covenant. What specific joint work is being undertaken with the Children and Families Minister the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), to ensure that every young person leaving local authority care leaves with a specific offer of a job, apprenticeship or further training? Have the Government considered making that a legal obligation?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Gentleman; I know that he has raised similar issues before. It is right for this work to be joined up and consistent. At the moment, in the DWP, we look at this 28 days before care leavers are due to start UC. As I said, I think that should be brought forward to six months, with advice and training on the different opportunities that are available. It is vital that all groups work in partnership. They have supported all the roundtables that I have held and I will continue to work closely with them.

In-work Poverty

12. Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): What recent assessment her Department has made of trends in the level of in-work poverty.

19. Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What recent assessment her Department has made of trends in the level of in-work poverty.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson): There is clear evidence that work offers people the best opportunity to get out of poverty. A working-age adult living in a household where every adult is working is about six times less likely to be in relative poverty than one living in a household where nobody works.

Louise Haigh: Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows that the real-terms cut in social security is the single biggest driver of in-work poverty, leaving those struggling to make ends meet on poverty pay losing hundreds of pounds a year. If the Secretary of State is looking forward to the benefits cut not being extended, as she told Sky News, why do the Government not end it now, rather than wait to review it in 2020?

Justin Tomlinson: This Government are not only delivering record employment in all regions of the UK—it is accepted that work is the best route out of poverty—but targeting support at the most vulnerable in society, with increases in the national living wage, which will see the fastest pay rise in the last 20 years, changes to the income tax threshold and a doubling of free childcare.

Dr Huq: Crash-era debt was owed to commercial lenders and stemmed from lifestyle desires, but Turn2us reports that the bulk of its 9,000 users in Ealing are in-work adults who are struggling to meet the bare basics—their debts are to council housing departments, energy providers and water companies. If the Government will not unfreeze the benefits cap now and end the scandal of zero-hours contracts, what are they doing about that worrying trend, noted by the London School of Economics, the National Audit Office and Citizens Advice?

Justin Tomlinson: As we know, there are 1 million fewer people and 300,000 fewer children in absolute poverty. The hon. Lady raised that theme at the last DWP oral questions, when she set out the distressing case of a claimant who she claimed was left with just £10 over Christmas because her payment was due on Christmas day. We looked into that case and I took a personal interest in it. The claimant actually received £10 over Christmas because her payment was due on Christmas day. We looked into that case and I took a personal interest in it. The claimant actually received £10 over Christmas because her payment was due on Christmas day. We looked into that case and I took a personal interest in it. The claimant actually received £10 over Christmas because her payment was due on Christmas day. We looked into that case and I took a personal interest in it.

Mr Speaker: That is a testament to the effectiveness of repetition. As I have often had cause to observe—I say this as much for the benefit of those observing our proceedings as for Members—repetition is not a novel phenomenon in the House of Commons.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): That more are in work is welcome. That one in eight are the working poor, with working parents struggling to clothe and feed their children, is shameful. Does the Secretary of State recognise that working poverty consigns millions to a hand-to-mouth existence and, because people fall beneath the threshold for auto-enrolment, working poverty is all too often followed by a retirement in poverty? That cannot be right.

Justin Tomlinson: Auto-enrolment is a success, with 10 million new savers, and we intend to lower the starting age from 22 to 18 and remove the lower earnings limit.

Social Security Benefits: Disabled People

14. Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ensure that disabled people can access the social security benefits to which they are entitled.

Sarah Newton: It is absolutely right that we should be focused on making the right decision first time. We have had independent reviews of both the work capability assessment and the PIP assessments, and we are working rigorously to implement each of the steps that have been identified.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Under schedule 2 to the Universal Credit (Managed Migration) Regulations 2018, the compensation for severely disabled people who have moved on to universal credit for the loss of premiums is a flat rate of £80 per month if they have been placed in the limited capability for work group. This is considerably less than the actual loss of income, which is approximately £180 per month. Will the Minister give a full breakdown of how that figure was reached, and will she listen to Labour’s demands and commit to ensuring that the compensation reflects the real loss of those premiums?

Sarah Newton: I fear that you, Mr Speaker, will not allow me the time I need to answer such a detailed question, so I am very happy to write to the hon. Lady. I do want to say, because I think the whole House will be pleased, that we have now enabled people who have single-tier pensions to be held back on the legacy benefits until the managed migration regulations come into effect.

Marsha De Cordova: Under universal credit, for working disabled people to qualify for in-work support, such as the work allowance, one must be found unfit for work under the work capability assessment. This is unlike the legacy social security system, under which a disabled person will qualify for in-work support, such as the disability element of working tax credit, by being in receipt of disability living allowance or PIP. Does the Minister agree with me that it is absurd that a disabled worker must be found unfit for work to qualify for in-work support, and will she commit today to reviewing this?

Sarah Newton: Universal credit provides tailor-made support for all people, including those with disabilities. Once somebody meets their work coach, they will have a personalised journey to support them into work and to make progress into work, and that can happen even before the work capability assessment is taken.

Breathing Space Scheme

15. Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): What plans the Government have to include debts owed to her Department in its new Breathing Space scheme.

Sarah Newton: We work very hard in the DWP to make sure that decisions are made accurately the first time. However, where there have been mistakes, we work really quickly to remedy them as soon as possible. The hon. Gentleman is quite right that we are going through some wide-scale administrative exercises on both employment and support allowance and PIP, and I regularly provide written ministerial statements to the House—the most recent ones were in December—setting out exactly what we are doing.

23. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What steps is the Department taking to improve the general assessment process and the oversight of individual assessors to reduce the rate of cases going to appeal?

Sarah Newton: It is absolutely right that we should be focused on making the right decision first time. We have had independent reviews of both the work capability and we rigorously to implement each of the steps that have been identified.
overpayment of universal credit is 15%.

Guy Opperman: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, in relation to Breathing Space, the Government are considering the responses to our recent consultation and will respond in due course, and that the standard deduction rate for the repayment of a non-fraud overpayment of universal credit is 15%.

Location of Jobcentres

16. Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): What criteria her Department uses to determine where jobcentres are located.

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): The DWP has a network of over 630 jobcentres across the UK. We consider a number of factors when making decisions about the future DWP estate, including the potential demand for services, the accessibility of our buildings and value for money.

Mrs Badenoch: I have a vulnerable constituent who lives in Stansted Mountfitchet but has to travel an hour and a half by public transport to Braintree in order to access a jobcentre. Will the Minister please review jobcentre provision in my constituency, specifically in Uttlesford district?

Alok Sharma: I thank my hon. Friend for the work she does on behalf of her constituents. I can confirm that we will continue to work with community-based partner organisations, including Saffron Walden Town Council, to ensure support and the delivery of outreach. Also, for vulnerable claimants and those in remote areas, alternative attendance arrangements can be introduced.

Mr Speaker: Just before I call the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), I can tell her that this morning I conducted my usual weekly Skype session with school students, and today it was with students at the outstanding Elm Wood Primary School in her constituency. I engaged with those quite superb, articulate and personable students, and with their class teacher, Stephanie Kamara, and the headteacher, Ms Myrtle Charles, who made a guest appearance. What a credit those students are to their teachers and parents.

Social Security Benefits: Windrush Generation

17. Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Home Secretary on supporting people of the Windrush generation to access social security benefits.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): I take a particular interest in ensuring that the Department for Work and Pensions liaises closely with the Home Office to make sure that the Windrush generation are properly supported. So far we have helped over 400 customers to swiftly confirm their status and access benefits.

Helen Hayes: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am always proud of the students at Elm Wood Primary School, which is indeed an excellent school with brilliant students.

I have been writing to the Secretary of State for many months on behalf of my constituent, who was the first Windrush citizen to return to the UK in May last year. She has since been denied access to attendance allowance because she was not in the country during the assessment period. The only reason she was not in the country at the time was the illegal action of the British Government. I have been told by the DWP that she must wait until the Windrush compensation scheme is published and include within her claim compensation for benefits she is due now. That is absurd and unacceptable. Why is the Secretary of State, who presided over the Windrush scandal as Home Secretary, continuing to compound and extend the injustice that Windrush citizens are suffering by failing to put in place the support they need to access all the benefits to which they are entitled?

Amber Rudd: I would like to reassure the hon. Lady that I have looked into this case, and do take seriously, as she and the House would expect, the issue of ensuring that the Windrush generation are supported correctly by the DWP. We have reinstated the claimant’s pension credit and have awarded arrears to date. With regard to the attendance allowance, I will be writing to the hon. Lady, and officials are working to resolve the matter. I will provide the letter as a matter of urgency.

Topical Questions

T1. Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): Today I am delighted to confirm that 10 million workers have now been automatically enrolled into a workplace pension. Since 2012 this policy has been transforming savings culture. The increase in pension uptake has been particularly marked in younger workers, women and those on low earnings. For many, a private workplace pension was once a pipe dream. Thanks to the action we have taken, it is now a reality. Today I am also bringing forward plans to strengthen the Pensions Regulator to protect final salary pensions, including a new prison sentence of up to seven years in certain circumstances. These measures show that the Government are on the side of workers saving for retirement and that we will protect their incomes from the reckless behaviour of a small number of unscrupulous bosses.

Eleanor Smith: I have many female constituents who are self-employed or on zero-hours contracts. They do not have a set regular monthly wage, yet the DWP insists on a four-week assessment period to assess their earnings and determine their benefits. Those women are being forced into hardship by sudden cuts to their benefit payment and a lengthy appeals process, which can take up to three to four months. Why can the DWP not recognise the situation that those on fluctuating incomes are put in and revise its guidelines accordingly?
Amber Rudd: I hope the women in the hon. Lady refers to are engaging with their work coaches, who try to provide a tailored service to enable individuals to realise how much better supported they are under this system. I would also point out that female employment is at a record high—jobs and support are out there. With the help of work coaches, we want to ensure that the women she refers to do not just get the average jobs they may start on, but have a real opportunity to develop careers.

T6. [909136] Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): I join the Secretary of State in welcoming the fantastic news that 10 million people are involved in auto-enrolment. Could she tell us a little more about the measures the Government will be taking to enable them to increase their savings once they are in auto-enrolment?

Amber Rudd: I thank my right hon. Friend for his support. In his constituency, 21,000 people and 4,290 employers are now auto-enrolled. It is working well in his constituency. In April, we will increase the amount of contribution from employers.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Social security sanctions can be detrimental to the health and wellbeing of claimants, and, in extreme cases, push people into destitution. The Government’s response to the Work and Pensions Committee report was shocking. Apparently, they are only prepared to consider increasing the length of sanctions, not reducing them. What has happened to the concept of compassion? Will the Secretary of State end the Government’s cruel and counterproductive sanctions regime?

Amber Rudd: I do not recognise the hon. Lady’s description. I have been around jobcentres. I always make a point of speaking to work coaches, asking them about the way they impose sanctions and when. They always say to me that it is a last resort only done after a series of engagements. This is a personal choice that work coaches make. They have a lot of discretion and in my experience they are using it correctly.

T8. [909138] Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): How will the Government ensure that the roll-out of universal credit continues to support the benefits of being in work, while providing the required flexibility for people who are often moving through life-changing circumstances as we support them back into the workplace?

Amber Rudd: I am happy to say that that is exactly the aim of universal credit: to ensure that it helps people while they are in work, gives them the additional funds they may need, and ensures that the taper rate, the amount of tax they pay as they move into more employment or a higher level of pay, does not adversely affect their ambitions and their ability to earn more.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The Government are about to enact an element of policy passed seven years, two Parliaments and two Governments ago without a debate or a vote. Mixed-age pensioner couples are set to lose £7,000 from their household income if the changes to pension credit go ahead. Surely, with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation saying that 300,000 more pensioners are in poverty now compared to 2012, the Secretary of State must seek a new mandate from this House for these cuts and have a debate and a vote?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): The reality is that the absolute poverty rate for pensioners has fallen to a record low, with over 200,000 fewer pensioners in absolute poverty before housing costs. The state pension has also increased by over £1,000 in cash terms since 2010 by reason of the triple lock, as well as many other reasons.

T9. [909139] Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): Will the Minister explain how today’s announcement will deter reckless bosses from mismanaging pensions?

Guy Opperman: My hon. Friend’s constituents in Southport will be reassured that the Government are cracking down on the mismanagement of existing defined benefit pensions, so that his constituents can ensure they get the pensions they deserve and have saved for.

T2. [909132] Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): European Union citizens who have worked in this country primarily through agencies are at risk of failing the habitual residence test although they have lived here for many years, because their employment might not have been continuous. Will the Minister meet me to outline what protections are available for those EU citizens?

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): Yes, of course I will meet the hon. Lady. As she knows, there are set criteria in place before people are able to claim benefits or universal credit, but I am of course very happy to meet her.

T10. [909140] Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Last week, I was interviewed on Bolton FM—[Interruption.]

Last week, I was interviewed on Bolton FM by a group of young carers who make an immense contribution, but who are concerned about the level of support they receive. Will my right hon. Friend outline what support is available?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson): I am sure that it was a fantastic interview, which we will all be looking to hear in the archives online. As set out in the earlier questions, we are doing a huge amount to support care leavers. I am very grateful for the support of charities such as the Children’s Society and Barnardo’s, who are helping to shape that. Only last week, I met a group of care leavers from the Big House charity in London, who were able to give me their personal wish list of things that we can do. We will continue to work with care leavers, charities and support organisations so that they can have the maximum opportunities, which many take for granted.

Mr Speaker: It is always pleasing to see a happy Member. The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) is convulsed with mirth. She is in a state of almost uncontrollable hysteria. Well, I hope she is very happy. I do not know what it is that has amused her, but it is good to know that she is a happy spirit in the Chamber.

T3. [909133] Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Oxford & District Action on Child Poverty recently met me to discuss the devastating impact of the two-child limit on working families in Oxford. It said, “You literally could not have designed a better policy to increase child poverty than this one,” with estimates
suggesting that over a quarter of a million children will be pushed into poverty as a result. Will the Minister listen and not just tweak, but scrap this punitive policy in its entirety?

Amber Rudd: This was a policy that was introduced and voted on in the House in 2012. It is right that some people who are paid very low wages and are paying taxes should not have to pay for other people to make different life choices that they feel they cannot afford. The hon. Lady is probably aware—I hope she is—that we changed the retrospective nature of that policy to ensure that families who were already in existence before 2012 were not adversely affected by it. I think that is the right balance.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): The House will know that the Government are doing more than ever to support people with disabilities in the workplace. Will the Minister tell us what is currently being done to safeguard the dignity of long-term sufferers on employment and support allowance and universal credit?

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Safeguarding the dignity and wellbeing of people with the most severe lifelong conditions is of paramount importance. A number of Members have raised cases with me where people were receiving the highest levels of support, including in personal independence payment, and they were then reassessed as not needing any support. I was very concerned to hear about that, so I am now ensuring that DWP decision makers review all such cases to make sure that we get the right support to the right people at the right time.

Amber Rudd: As I was able to say earlier, only under 2.5% are on zero-hours contracts. The facts do not support the hon. Gentleman’s approach. He can have his own views; he cannot have his own facts.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Additional cold weather payments are paid over the winter months when average ambient temperatures fall below zero degrees for a period of seven days. It is a welcome measure, particularly in Scotland, but may I ask my hon. Friend, on behalf of my constituents around the Banff and Buchan coast, if wind chill factor could be taken into consideration in any future review?

Justin Tomlinson: My hon. Friend has been campaigning hard on this issue, which is important to his constituents, and, following the fantastic private Member’s Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams), we have committed to carrying out a full review, working with the Met Office, so that we can get more detailed assessments of where cold weather payments are needed, using technology such as satellites, technology on ships, buoys, and so on.

Amber Rudd: I certainly hope that that does not come forward, but I think this is the responsibility of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, so I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will want to put that question to its Secretary of State.

Andrew Bridgen: Some people are paid four-weekly, not monthly, so one month of the year, they will get two payments. Will the Minister ensure that universal credit can cope adequately with this situation?

Alok Sharma: As my hon. Friend knows, we discussed this in an earlier question. Of course, the key thing is to get support to people, and where they have two payments in one assessment period and none in the following period, they should expect to receive their full universal credit payment.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): Does the Secretary of State think that, if the regulator had the power to commit to prison for seven years individuals who wilfully or recklessly mishandle a pension scheme, Sir Philip Green would now be in prison?
Amber Rudd: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the extraordinary work he did that has led in part to our announcement that there will now be prison sentences for people who commit the sort of criminal activity we have seen. I cannot be drawn on that individual case, unfortunately, but I believe we will see a different regime going forward.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): We have now had 10 consecutive months of real growth in wages. Can the Secretary of State confirm that this is the strongest real-terms wage growth in this country for 10 years?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing attention to that fact. It is good news for people who are earning and people living on lower incomes, and I certainly hope that it continues.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Many people across the House will have been shocked by the pictures of my constituent Stephen Smith, who has a progressive lung disease and was hospitalised at 6 stone. He had repeated failed appeals and tribunals, and the Liverpool CASA, his advocate, said:

“We were unable to solicit any reply from the DWP”.

He was readmitted to hospital because he was so unwell, and it was only after I intervened that the DWP overturned its decision, but it should never have got to that. What will the Secretary of State do to ensure that no one in our country faces such an injustice in seeking the support they are entitled to and deserve?

Amber Rudd: I share the hon. Lady’s indignation. We have apologised to Mr Smith and his ESA payment has been repaid and reinstated in full. I will take a personal interest in ensuring that, where errors were made, they are corrected.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): Under our benefits system, serious or terminally ill students have to abandon their courses to claim benefits. It is wrong for us to be telling students to give up on the hope of getting better and to abandon their courses just to claim benefits. We have to put this right.

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for his campaign. I share his view that we need to take action. We are developing policy and I will make sure that he is the first to know what action we do take.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Turning back to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), does the Secretary of State not share the outrage of many people that her Department is pushing through cuts to pension credit with no legislative procedure? Will the Government bring the statutory instrument to the House for debate so that Parliament can discuss this enormous cut to low-income pensioners and the double whammy to many women born in the 1950s?

Guy Opperman: This year, we continue to spend more than £120 billion on benefits for pensioners, including £97 billion on the state pension, which goes up. Mixed-aged couples already claiming pension credit or housing benefit for pensioners will continue to receive those benefits and will not be affected while they remain entitled to either.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): On 2 November, my constituent won his ESA appeal—the DWP did not even bother to attend—but three months on, it is still arguing about whether he should get the full back pay. At what point did the Department become above the law?

Sarah Newton: Something has clearly gone amiss, and I should be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and see what we can do to sort it out as soon as possible.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I recently met a group of people who, despite having severe and unstable epilepsy, had been denied benefits. The questions asked by the assessors appeared to be completely irrelevant to their condition. For instance, one assessor’s report referred to a person’s complexion. How does the Department intend to ensure that assessors are appropriately trained to deal with different conditions?

Sarah Newton: I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady to go through the report. I assure the House that healthcare professionals are thoroughly trained and often work with leading national charities that represent people, including those with epilepsy, but of course there is always more we can do, and I should be delighted to meet the hon. Lady to discuss that.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): I am told that many PIP claimants in Coventry with severe mental illnesses are being forced to attend medical assessments miles away in Birmingham. The assessors are rarely mental health professionals, and many of them fail to understand the complexities and fluctuating nature of the claimants’ conditions. Will the Minister commit herself to ensuring that Coventry claimants are assessed in Coventry and that all assessors are appropriately qualified?

Sarah Newton: Let me reassure the hon. Lady. People with severe conditions, including severe mental health conditions, can have home assessments; and many more people are benefiting from PIP than benefitted from the legacy benefit, disability living allowance.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry to disappoint remaining colleagues, but demand exceeds supply, and we must now move on.
3.41 pm  

**Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab):** Urgent Question: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on the cancellation of a contract with Seaborne Freight as part of the Government’s contingency planning for a no-deal Brexit.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): In December, following a collective Government decision and a procurement process involving my Department and the Treasury, we contracted with three shipping companies to provide additional ferry capacity as part of contingency planning for a potential no-deal EU exit. Let me make it absolutely clear that in the event of a no-deal Brexit, the Government’s priority will be to ensure the smooth operation of both the port of Dover and the channel tunnel, and we are introducing measures at the UK end to contribute to that. However, any sensible Government plan for all eventualities. That is why we agreed contracts worth around £100 million, with the bulk of the award—£89 million—going to DFDS and Brittany Ferries to provide services across seven separate routes. Built into those agreements are options to add capacity on two other routes from those companies, should they be required. That capacity could be needed to guarantee the smooth flow of some key goods into the UK, particularly for the NHS. It is worth my reminding the House that, in the event of no deal and construction on the short strait, the capacity would be sold on to hauliers carrying priority goods.

In addition to the £89 million-worth of contracts with DFDS and Brittany Ferries, the Department entered into a £13.8 million contract with Seaborne Freight to provide ferry services from the port of Ramsgate to Ostend. At the time of the award, we were fully aware of Seaborne’s status as a start-up business and the need for it to secure vessels and port user agreements to deliver a service. However, the shorter distance between the two ports meant that the route could provide us with shorter journey times and lower cost, making it a potentially attractive part of the package.

Seaborne’s proposition to the Department was backed by Arklow Shipping, Ireland’s biggest and one of Europe’s largest shipping companies. For commercial reasons, I have not been able to name Arklow Shipping or mention its involvement to date, but its support for the proposition from the outset and the assurances received by the Department provided confidence in the viability of the deal. Arklow confirmed to me that it intended to finance its involvement to date, but its support for the proposition was “both viable and deliverable”. Those assurances included clear evidence about the availability of suitable vessels from the continent and about the formal steps that Seaborne, via Arklow, had taken to secure the vessels. However, releasing that information to the public domain could have driven up the cost of the vessels significantly and might even have resulted in their being removed from the market, where supply is extremely scarce. I have therefore had to refrain from saying anything publicly about this to date.

My Department monitored closely Seaborne’s progress towards meeting its contractual commitments. By last week, the company had secured firm options on ships to operate on the route, had reached provisional agreement with Ostend and was close to doing so with Ramsgate. However, late last week, despite previous assurances, Arklow Shipping suddenly and unexpectedly withdrew its backing from Seaborne. In the light of this, and after very careful assessment, I took the decision to terminate this contract. My Department concluded that there were now too many major commercial issues to be resolved to enable Seaborne to establish alternative arrangements and finance in the time needed to bring ferries and ports into operation.

As I have repeatedly made clear, not a penny of taxpayers’ money has gone, or will go, to Seaborne. The contracts we agreed with the three ferry companies are essentially a commitment to block-book tickets on additional sailings after the UK leaves the European Union. So actually we have taken a responsible decision to make sure that taxpayers’ money is properly protected.

I can confirm that the contracts with DFDS and Brittany Ferries remain on track and will provide us with valuable additional freight capacity into the UK in the event of disruption following EU exit. We also have contractual options to replace the Seaborne capacity with additional capacity on routes in the North sea, and this is an option we will be discussing across the Government in the coming days.

While the focus of this Government is to secure a deal with the European Union, as a responsible Government we will continue to make proportionate contingency plans for a range of scenarios. That is the right thing to do.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): What began as a debacle has now descended into a Whitehall farce. This Minister is rewriting the textbook for ministerial incompetence in office. I repeatedly warned the Secretary of State that this was the wrong decision at the time, as did industry, yet he chose to ignore those warnings. He told the House last month that this procurement was done properly. It has since emerged that the Department for Transport took shortcuts on the Seaborne Freight procurement. The deal was signed off by a sub-group of a sub-group and the main form of oversight, the procurement assurance board, never looked at it.

The Secretary of State points the finger at Arklow for the contract cancellation. Is it really a good time to further insult the Irish, and is the Arklow angle not a distraction from his decision? He has produced a letter from the company more than a month after the contract was signed; it does not prove anything regarding due diligence. He told this House that the Seaborne contract award was “responsible stewardship of public money.”—[Official Report, 8 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 191.]

Sadly, the exact opposite is true, yet again.

The Secretary of State’s decision to award the contract to Seaborne led Ramsgate port owner Thanet Council’s budget deficit to grow by nearly £2 million in the last year. His personal intervention to halt the budget vote last Thursday has compounded those losses. Two days later, he pulls the plug on Seaborne, leaving the council high and dry with mounting losses. What is more,
taxpayers face a legal bill of nearly £1 million to fight Eurotunnel following his decision. So can he say how much cancelling the contract will cost the taxpayer and specifically the costs incurred in his own Department? He simply cannot keep blaming others for his own mistakes. This disastrous decision sits squarely with him and his office. Is this Transport Secretary’s approach to transport and wider Brexit contingency planning not off the Richter scale of incompetence? And for the good of the nation and the sake of some semblance of faith being restored to this shambolic Government, should he not now, at long last, do the decent thing and go?

Chris Grayling: I have to say that the hon. Gentleman brings new meaning to the term “utter hogwash”. First, he clearly was not listening when I said that we have spent no money on this contract. My Department is doing a lot of work on no-deal Brexit preparations, as are other parts of Whitehall—that is the prudent thing to do—but we have not spent any money on this contract. The contract was in fact assured jointly by my officials and officials in the Treasury.

The hon. Gentleman says the letter is worth nothing, but let me just quote from the letter, from the managing director of Arklow Shipping, one of Europe’s biggest shipping companies with operations in Rotterdam and Ireland, which covers chartering, technical and crewing, and finance. He said:

“Arklow Shipping has been working with Seaborne for twelve months in connection with Seaborne’s proposals to develop new freight services between the UK and continental Europe. Arklow Shipping is therefore familiar with Seaborne’s agreement with Her Majesty’s Government to provide additional freight capacity in the event of the UK’s departure from the European Union on a no-deal basis. 3. In support of the current proposals to develop the shipping route between Ramsgate and Ostend, Arklow Shipping intends to provide equity finance for the purchase of both vessels and an equity stake within Seaborne which will be the operating entity of this project. 4. Seaborne is a firm that brings together experienced and capable shipping professionals. I consider that Seaborne’s plans to deliver a new service to facilitate trade following from the UK’s departure from the EU are both viable and deliverable. I will be working closely with the team at Seaborne to ensure that they have appropriate support from Arklow Shipping to deliver on their commitments to Her Majesty’s Government.”

Enough said.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my disappointment that Arklow Shipping, a major Irish shipping company and the main backer of Seaborne, has pulled away from this contract? Can he give assurances to Thanet District Council and local taxpayers that the cost of keeping Ramsgate in a state of readiness as part of the Brexit contingency planning, which we are all happy to do, will not fall on local taxpayers?

Chris Grayling: I share my hon. Friend’s disappointment. We are spending a lot of money on contingency planning and resilience in Kent, and I personally regard the port of Ramsgate as an important part of that. He knows that I am committed to continuing to work with Thanet District Council, and I would like to see ferries come back to Ramsgate. Whatever happens, we must make sure that we keep open opportunities for the future, in my view.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Last month, the Secretary of State said that he had full confidence in Seaborne, and just last week he lobbied Thanet Council on its budget plans for Ramsgate. Does this not tell us everything we need to know about his judgment? His argument that Seaborne accounted for only 10% of the proposed additional services and that it did not matter if it did not deliver was nonsensical. Flouting EU procurement rules on unforeseen events by arguing that this was an emergency situation was also fundamentally flawed, given that he awarded a contract to a company with no ships. He says that he has been in negotiations with Seaborne for 12 months. How is that an emergency situation? He has now created his own emergency procurement process.

How many representations has the Secretary of State’s Department received on the procurement process, and are those representations still live, given the two contracts worth £89 million that he has awarded? Are we ever going to see the legal advice and the due diligence that was supposed to have been undertaken? Also, he has not answered the question on why this contract was not referred to a procurement assurance board. What will this missing 10% of capacity mean for Dover? What impact will it have on the port there? To keep HGV freight moving, what is his Department doing about the backlog of 9,000 ECMT permits? Given that he has now reached a stunning new level of incompetence, which must have been really hard to achieve, when will he go?

Chris Grayling: I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman was listening to a word I said. He asked a question about no ships. I can confirm that, as of last week, two ships had been identified and that options were in place to operate the route. This makes it even more disappointing that Arklow was not able to continue its support. He asked a question about negotiating for 12 months. That was Arklow, not my Department. He asked a question about the legal position. The legal position was signed off by officials in my Department and by the Treasury and by my accounting officer. The hon. Gentleman also asked about extra routes. As I mentioned in my remarks, we already have options for additional capacity in the North sea. Those routes are clearly longer and more expensive, but they are available to us. He asked about the ECMT permits. The current position is that the European Union has been very clear that we will continue with the current arrangements. I know of no reason why that should not happen, but we have bilateral arrangements that we can fall back on if it does not.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): Setting aside the utterly synthetic outrage dribbling from Opposition Front Benchers, and further to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay), I should like to tell the Secretary of State that Councillor Bob Bayford, the leader of Thanet Council, has made it plain that Thanet wishes to act in the national interest and will continue to seek to do so, but it cannot act alone. There is a contract that Thanet has not yet signed, and will not now sign, with Seaborne Freight. That contract is ready for signature. Is there...
any reason, given the precedent set with Manston airport, why the Department should not sign that contract and take over the port itself for the duration?

**Chris Grayling:** As my hon. Friend knows, I have had discussions with the leader of Thanet District Council over the past few days, and I have been clear that there is a strong case to include Ramsgate port in the resilience work being done in Kent to prepare for a potential no-deal Brexit. We must also be mindful of the council’s financial position and ensure that it is not exposed to financial risk as a result of the broader resilience work happening across Kent.

**Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): Questions remain about the legality of all three contracts for additional ferry capacity. The Government used an accelerated procurement process to award the contract to Seaborne Freight, which can be done only in urgent and unforeseeable circumstances. The Department said that the circumstances were the “unexpected and unforeseeable limitations on the extent to which the market had... been able to” put “in place contingency plans” for a no-deal Brexit. Given that the Government have consistently provided reassurances that there will not be a no-deal Brexit, how was it “unexpected and unforeseeable” that the market was unable or unwilling to put in place contingency plans for this scenario?

**Chris Grayling:** The particular prompt for this procurement exercise was a change in the assumptions last autumn about the level of potential disruption around the channel ports. That prompted us to look again at what the capacity requirements might be to maintain supply of essential services into the United Kingdom, particularly for the NHS. It would be prudent for any Government in such a position to plan for all eventualities. I want the UK to leave the European Union with an agreement, and we are working hard to achieve that, but we would not be doing our job properly if we were not preparing for all eventualities.

**Mr Mark Francois** (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I offer strong support to the Secretary of State because, unlike the Labour party, he is actually undertaking contingency plans for all eventualities. On that point, will he update the House on the other two ferry contracts, their status and when they will come into operation?

**Chris Grayling:** My right hon. Friend makes an important point. I have heard nothing from Labour bar attempts to disrupt the Brexit process. There has been no support for contingency planning or for a deal. All Labour Members seem to want to do is to act against the national interest, which is typical of the Labour party today. Its Members are more interested in themselves than in the country.

As for the other two contracts, they are proceeding according to plan. The routes will be ready, but I hope that they will not be needed, because I hope that we will leave the European Union with a deal. However, we must be ready, and we will be ready.

**Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): The Secretary of State spent a great deal of time maligning the RMT union, which had simply been asking that Ministers ensure that the Brexit ferry contract ships are crewed by British seafarers on decent pay and terms and conditions negotiated through the recognised trade unions. Can the Secretary of State answer a straight question? In answer to the previous urgent question, he talked about the advantages of developing a facility at Ramsgate, so will he confirm whether Ramsgate will be now be used at all in the event of a no-deal Brexit?

**Chris Grayling:** I believe in competition, so I would like Ramsgate to operate a ferry service whether there is a no-deal Brexit or not, and I know that the leader of Thanet District Council would like to see the same. It is a good port that has played an important role in the past. However, we will continue to work with the council not only to secure the short-term needs of the port of Ramsgate, but to help it promote the port as a viable option for the future.

**Mr Robert Goodwill** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): We have heard a lot of nonsense about the company not owning any ships, but is it not the case that the majority of rail operators in this country do not own any trains and that many airlines wet lease aircraft, meaning that not only do they not own the planes, but they do not directly employ the crew?

**Chris Grayling:** My right hon. Friend makes an important point. I have said that the Labour party does not like business any more, but it does not understand business any more. Many Labour Members will go on holiday this summer using airlines that own no planes, because that is how business works, but they lost any understanding of how business works long ago, and I see no sign of that changing.

**Ms Angela Eagle** (Wallasey) (Lab): Last month, the Secretary of State came to the House waxing lyrical about his support for start-up businesses, meaning Seaborne Freight. Is he not even remotely embarrassed that the project has fallen to pieces despite Government support? Will he not at least say sorry to the House for the mess that he has made?

**Chris Grayling:** This is a start-up business that did not succeed because its principal backer changed its mind. That is to be regretted and it is a great shame but, as a Minister, I will never make an apology for the Government trying to work with new small businesses. Again, the Labour party does not like small business and does not want us to work with small business. When we do, it shouts and screams. Well, I think the Government should do more for small business, and I am going to carry on doing so.

**Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg** (North East Somerset) (Con): My right hon. Friend cannot possibly be criticised for entering into a contract, which cost the taxpayer no money, with a new business backed by one of the biggest shipping owners in Europe. Is it not eccentric of Arklow to behave in the way it has and to abandon a contract it supported a fortnight ago? Is there any question of the Irish Government’s involvement either to help or to hinder one of their biggest businesses?

**Chris Grayling:** It is not for me to ascribe any motivations to Arklow for the decision it has taken. I regret it having taken that decision, and I think it is a shame, particularly
as it gave clear commitments to Seaborne at Christmas time and to my officials and me in January before changing its mind suddenly. I do not know what prompted that decision. I just think it is a very great shame.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What will it take for this Secretary of State to get the sack? Let me see if the following would cause the Prime Minister to issue him his P45: breaking EU procurement rules. Does the Secretary of State really believe he can claim no deal is an emergency that came to light only in October? If it did, it is his fault for underestimating the disruption caused at the ports. Is he confident that this argument is going to stand up in court?

Chris Grayling: I have been absolutely clear that this procurement was dealt with very carefully by officials in my Department and in the Treasury who fully understood the legal implications of it, and it was approved by my accounting officer. I will not comment on any other legal matters.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): The whole House knows that the Secretary of State has been one of the most assiduous Cabinet members in working on contingency plans to make sure that we execute the national interest in leaving the European Union. Has he looked at the possibility of not simply Dover to Calais and Dunkirk but Dover to Zeebrugge? That is a short sea route going to Belgium, not France.

Chris Grayling: Absolutely. I am also aware that the port of Zeebrugge has made a lot of preparations for the post-Brexit world. One of the things that can help to ease pressure on Dover would be an additional route from Dover to Zeebrugge. I am very keen to see the port of Dover carry on through the Brexit process without significant disruption, and I will do everything I can to help it achieve that goal, but it is sensible to have some easing of pressure on both Dover and the tunnel to give guarantees on services such as the NHS. I will be doing everything I can to make sure things remain as normal as possible for Dover.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Given that this is just one example of hapless contingency planning that we are aware of, and that there may be all sorts of other haphazard things going on, should not the Secretary of State commit to more transparency about contingency planning more broadly? He knows that the Operation Yellowhammer papers on trade and transport went before the Cabinet last week, and there was a discussion at full Cabinet about whether those papers should be published. Which side of the argument was he on? Was he for publication?

Chris Grayling: Let us be clear, first of all, that Cabinet minutes are not published. I have been pretty transparent over the months in explaining what we are doing on the aviation front and the haulage front. We have been having regular contact with industry, and we are working very closely with the aviation sector and the haulage sector. I do not think we can be accused of hiding what we are doing. The reality is that I am standing here today precisely because we did not hide what we are doing, as we published the detail of these contracts.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): May I send a message to the Secretary of State? The south-west and Plymouth are open for business, and I am sure that my constituents who work in that city would really welcome any further opportunities that a contract would present.

Chris Grayling: I am grateful to my hon. Friend; it has been good to see Members from around Plymouth welcoming the extra traffic that would flow through Plymouth as a result of these contracts. I should also take the opportunity to provide a message of reassurance to Hampshire, where we have done extensive work around the port of Portsmouth in respect of just a couple of extra sailings a day. Let me put it clearly on the record that there is no expectation of major road disruption affecting the surrounding areas of either Plymouth or Portsmouth.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The UK Government have been aware of the possibility of a no-deal Brexit since article 50 was triggered in March 2017, so can the Secretary of State tell us why this contract, which was awarded only at the end of December 2018, proceeded under regulation 32 of the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 without competitive tendering? Will he state clearly for the record, as I have asked this question of him and other Ministers five times now: what were the reasons of extreme urgency and the unforeseeable events that justified his Department proceeding without competitive tendering under regulation 32?

Chris Grayling: The hon. and learned Lady was not listening a moment ago when I answered that very same question from the Chair of the Select Committee. I said that the thing that prompted the move was a change to the assumptions on the levels and length of disruption that might arise in a no-deal Brexit scenario.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Part of the criticism that my right hon. Friend’s Department has received has arisen because Seaborne Freight was seen as a company that had no track record in shipping. We now know that Arklow was the company behind Seaborne Freight, and it had a huge amount of experience in shipping. What more can be done, in terms of no-deal preparations and more broadly, to ensure that when new start-up companies that are backed by well-established companies present themselves to Government the House can understand the relationship between those start-ups and the companies backing them?

Chris Grayling: We always have to take steps to be careful about commercial confidentiality, particularly when a company is in a complex negotiation, as was the case in this situation in respect of new ships. I was clear to the House when I spoke a few weeks ago that Seaborne Freight had substantial backers. It is really important that when Ministers stand up and say, “Look, we know they have substantial backers”, the House does not disbelieve that, because actually it has proved to be true.
Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State has said that no money has been spent on this process, so could he tell us how many of his officials were working for free during this process? He says no money has been spent, but what about the embedded cost? The time each official and each Minister has spent on this project is cost, so will he publish the costs of how much time has been spent on this debacle? If he will not resign, will he at least apologise for this mess?

Chris Grayling: Dear oh dear, they keep trying, don't they? We have hundreds of civil servants across Whitehall working on no-deal preparations to make sure that we are ready in case it happens. I am clear that we do not want no-deal, but we are taking the necessary precautions. The problem is that the Labour party does not believe that should be happening.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): With regard to no-deal preparations, will the Secretary of State confirm to the House, once again, that we have signed the common transit convention, which means that import duties and customs declarations do not have to be sorted out until goods arrive at their final destination? In his reply, will he also mention that the mayor of Calais has said that Calais will be open for business even in the event of no deal?

Chris Grayling: Both of the points made by my hon. Friend are absolutely correct. My view is that the common transit convention solves many of the problems. We cannot be 100% certain, because we have not had confirmation from the French yet about how they would manage border posts in Calais, notwithstanding the common travel convention, but he is absolutely right that it should enable trade to flow through smoothly. I have been clear in saying regularly that I expect those operations to work well, but we have contingency in place just in case that is necessary.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): A fake lorry traffic jam in Kent, rail timetable chaos, which is still affecting commuters and local businesses in my constituency, and now a cancelled contract with a ferry company that owns no ferries—is the Secretary of State proud of his record?

Chris Grayling: There was no fake traffic jam; it was an exercise to test the movements of vehicles into and out of Manston in Kent. The timetable troubles were caused by a project where Government were investing in rail infrastructure in the north-west—something that never happened under Labour—which ran late. As I said a moment ago, this shipping company identified and got firm options on two ships but was unfortunately not able to carry on because its backers pulled out.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Despite the hogwash and doom-mongering from the Opposition Benches, the Secretary of State is absolutely right to ensure that there is contingency planning for every eventuality. For the avoidance of doubt, will he confirm that the taxpayer's interests have not been damaged and that he will continue to take all necessary steps to ensure that we are ready, deal or no deal?

Chris Grayling: Absolutely. This is essential Government spending across Government. We have to be ready for all eventualities. I make no apology for the fact that the Government are spending money on preparing for no deal, but my view is that the best kind of contract for the Government is one for which we pay no money until the service is delivered and, of course, that is what we had in this case.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Over the past year, a new start-up based in my constituency, Carmarthen Bay Ferry, has successfully operated an excellent service for the people of Carmarthenshire and tourists, linking Glanyfferi in my constituency and Llansteffan on the other side of the Towy estuary. In the light of the collapse of their arrangement with Seaborne Freight, will the British Government have a look at the Carmarthen ferry model to see how to run a successful ferry operation?

Chris Grayling: I am not sure that operating a freight haulage operation across the English channel is quite the same as operating what I am sure is a fine business in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, but I wish it well for the future anyway.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): “When the facts change, I change my mind” is a quote widely attributed to John Maynard Keynes, someone normally highly supported on the Opposition Benches. Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State confirm that the facts have changed and it is only prudent that Government policy changes to reflect the new reality?

Chris Grayling: Absolutely. We set out a plan, and I was clear that we did not expose the taxpayer to risk. The events of last week happened, so we changed our mind. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The best thing for the Government to do is to pursue the right policy at the right time.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): It is touching to see this arch-Brexiteer Secretary of State relying on the good will of an Irish shipping company and the Dutch dredging firm that dredged the port of Ramsgate. Will he tell us whether that dredging was carried out under the appropriate licences and who will pay for it? He talked about due diligence; Arklow told “Channel 4 News” that it did not agree to the contract with Seaborne and blamed the UK Government for moving too fast. If Arklow could do the due diligence on Seaborne, why could not the Secretary of State?

Chris Grayling: I can only refer the hon. Lady to what I quoted earlier:

“I will be working closely with the team at Seaborne to ensure that they have appropriate support from Arklow Shipping to deliver on their commitments to Her Majesty’s Government.” It is there, plain, in black and white.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): There has been much ridicule of Seaborne Freight because it did not own any ferries but, to build on the theme of the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill), is the Secretary of State aware that Uber does not own any taxis and, indeed, Airbnb does not have any hotels, either? Does he
agree that it would be more ridiculous if the Government had not planned for a no-deal scenario and had refused to award any finances to it, as the shadow Chancellor advocated?

Chris Grayling: This is the point: the Labour party wants to disrupt Brexit. It wants us to leave the European Union but will not approve the deal and does not want us to prepare for no deal, so it has no policy at all. Frankly, as I have said on more than one occasion, Labour is not fit to be an Opposition, let alone a Government.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Did the Secretary of State's decision to cancel the contract with Seaborne predate the letter from Arklow—yes or no?

Chris Grayling: No.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): In the light of the decision to end Seaborne's contract, what discussions has the Secretary of State had with other providers about their providing extra capacity?

Chris Grayling: We made provision in the contracts that we signed with Brittany Ferries and DFDS for additional capacity on other routes, that were not in our original mix. Those are options that we are free to take up and we will have cross-Government discussions in the next few days to assess current needs and forecasts and see whether that is required.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that there are no costs to Government, so for the avoidance of any doubt, will he place in the Library the costs of any legal fees and the numbers and types of civil servants working on both the pre-work and the cancellation? Will he tell us the total cost of all that to the taxpayer?

Chris Grayling: My Department is accruing a bill of many, many millions of pounds, preparing for a no-deal Brexit in a wide variety of different areas—we are working on maritime, aviation and haulage—and I regularly answer questions about those amounts through written questions. I am also always happy to place information on those amounts in the Library of the House.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure that, like me, the Secretary of State finds it interesting to come into this Chamber one day and hear complaints about the potential impact of no deal, and to come in here the next day and hear complaints about the efforts to mitigate those impacts. Will he confirm what work has been done to ensure that the main routes across the English channel—the Eurotunnel and the main crossings between Dover and Calais—will continue working even in a no-deal scenario?

Chris Grayling: My Department and I are working on detailed plans to ensure that the pressures on both the tunnel and the port of Dover are as small as possible. I am very confident, as I have said on more than one occasion, that things will move pretty smoothly through there. The purpose of this additional capacity is to ease some of those pressures and to prepare for contingencies if they are required.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The Secretary of State has mentioned several times now his reliance on his Department, but in the end the buck stops with him. When evaluating these bids, it is worth noting that Deloitte did not make a formal assessment of Seaborne's financial stability because it was not incorporated until April 2017. Mott MacDonald provided a technical assessment of that and the review flagged up significant execution risks relating to the Seaborne bid. We may not all be experts in everything we talk about, but surely the public expect a level of common sense when it comes to things as big as this. Where was the common sense of the Secretary of State when it came to this contract?

Chris Grayling: The common sense came in two forms: first, when Arklow Shipping confirmed to my Department in writing in December that it was supporting this; and, secondly, because we had a contract where no payment was made until the service was delivered.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Spectators of this debate may think that the greatest of catastrophes has happened, but all this debate really reveals is the Conservatives' support for innovation, for small business and for delivering on Brexit, and the Opposition's opposition to that.

Chris Grayling: I keep saying that I find it baffling that the Opposition should be opposed to giving a chance to a small business when the taxpayer was exposed to no financial risk at all, particularly when that small business had a major international backer. It is inexplicable.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): On successive occasions, the Secretary of State has assured the House that he carried out full due diligence tests of this contract before he awarded it, but I for one am none the wiser about what those due diligence checks consisted of. Today, will he answer the question that he failed to answer when he last appeared before the House on this matter? In April last year, Seaborne Freight issued an investor briefing that claimed:

"Detailed port agreements with Ramsgate and Ostend negotiated and agreed."

We now know that no such agreements existed. Did his due diligence checks not reveal that and, if not, what kind of due diligence was it? Or did they reveal that and, if so, what weight did he attach to the fact that Seaborne had issued an inaccurate investor briefing?

Chris Grayling: The comfort that we had was that the three professional advisers advised us that credible plans were in place. That was reinforced by written confirmation from Arklow Shipping that it was supporting the proposal and by the fact that we protected the taxpayer's interests by ensuring that no funds would be paid over unless this was delivered. The fact that, last week, we had a firm that had options on ships and agreements reached in principle with both ports, suggested to me that it was on the right track. It was just a shame that the backers did not feel able to continue.
Chris Grayling: As you will be aware, Mr Speaker, the European Commission has already said that it wants haulage to continue. It does not expect a permit-based system to be required. But in the event of a no-deal Brexit, we have bilateral agreements with a number of other EU member states that come into effect. We have put in place a system to distribute the ECMT permits precisely because we want to make sure that all bases are covered. However, we wrote to hauliers last week saying that they were being issued as a formality. Nothing that has happened so far would lead us to believe that those restrictions will be there.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his answers so far. Has he had the opportunity to review the unexplainable action of Irish firm Arklow Shipping in relation to its agreement with Seaborne Freight? Was there a signed contract or is it the case, as some stories today indicate, that the Republic of Ireland and the EU are doing all they can to frustrate Brexit?

Chris Grayling: I do not want to attribute any possible reasons for Arklow Shipping pulling out. It was a shame that, just at the point when everybody had draft contracts in place ready for signing, the company backed away. It is a regret that that is the case. I would have liked to have seen this new service come into effect, if only to ensure that the port of Ramsgate had alternative business for the future, but I am afraid that it is not for me to comment on the motivations of the company involved.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Perhaps when the Secretary of State is finally fired for his incompetence over this issue, he might get the consolation prize of being invited on to Comic Relief’s special edition of “The Apprentice”, where we can see him on “Team Seaborne”, trying desperately to fill in the capacity that he has failed to provide as Secretary of State. I think we could all do with a laugh on that front. The reality is that the financial risk is neither here nor there. There are barely 50 days to go and the Secretary of State has still failed to provide that vital freight capacity, so where is it coming from? Is he going to ask the Ministry of Defence to provide this emergency capacity, so where is it coming from? Is he going to ask the Department of Health?

Chris Grayling: Oh, oh dear. I will simply say that I am always going to do what I believe to be in the national interest, and that is what I and my team in the Department have been doing.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): One of the many things that this shambles reveals is the Government’s utter lack of preparedness for a no-deal Brexit. To avoid any more embarrassments for the Secretary of State, is not it high time that his Government ruled out a no-deal Brexit?

Chris Grayling: If the hon. Lady wants a non-no-deal Brexit, she should line up behind the deal that the Government have reached with the European Union, but if she is not prepared to vote for it, she should not complain when Ministers are preparing for all eventualities.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) has been very unfair. I am sure the Secretary of State is handling this to the best of his ability.

The Secretary of State was very careful not to answer the first part of the question from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who directly asked whether there was a contract between Arklow and Seaborne. Is it not the case that the Secretary of State knows full well, as reported in The Irish Times today, that there were numerous discussions between Seaborne and Arklow, but there was no contract or even formal agreement in place—and yet he went ahead?

Chris Grayling: I do not think that Opposition Members are listening at all to what I have said. The agreements were all in place and ready to be signed, but the reality is that, at this moment, Arklow took a step back and did not want to continue. We had commitment now, a month ago and at Christmas time that Arklow was backing this proposal, but to be on the safe side—to be sure—we set up a contractual structure that meant that the taxpayer had no exposure unless the service was delivered. That was the right thing to do.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Last month, the Secretary of State said to this House: “We contracted with Seaborne Freight because the service it proposes represents a sensible contingency”—[Official Report, 8 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 190].

Given what we now know and with the benefit of hindsight, will the Secretary of State have the humility to come to the Dispatch Box and say sorry?

Chris Grayling: It was a sensible contingency. If we require that capacity now, we will have to use longer routes through the North sea, when it would be better to go from Ramsgate to Ostend. We have the resources, facilities and capacity available to deal with what we have identified as the needs of organisations such as the NHS.
Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) asked the Secretary of State whether, at the point of signing off the contract, he knew that Seaborne Freight had not got in place the agreements with the port authorities in Ramsgate and Ostend that it was saying it had got. This is about due diligence—was it done?

Chris Grayling: I can only think that Opposition Members have not been listening to a word I have said. I said at the start that we knew that they had not got the arrangements in place. That is why we put in place a tight contractual structure that involved no financial commitment from the taxpayer until they had got those things sorted out.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): We have heard today that there was no legal contractual agreement between Arklow Shipping and Seaborne. The Secretary of State has confirmed that the reason for pulling out of this contract was the announcement on Friday. If that is the case—if he only knew about it on Friday—then how can the DFT spokesperson be correct that he is in advanced discussions with other shipping companies?

Chris Grayling: Precisely because, as I said, we already had secured options that would enable us to provide alternatives.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Throughout this ridiculous Brexit shambles, Brexiteers have liked to lean on historical events to justify the metaphors for some of their Brexit fantasies. Was this calamity actually engineered by the Secretary of State, so that he could paint himself as some kind of latter-day Horatio Nelson—"I see no ships"? Well, we see no competence. Will he resign?

Chris Grayling: Actually, I did see ships—they were lined up ready to go on this route. It is a shame the backers pulled out.

Universities: Financial Sustainability

4.26 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Education if he will make a statement on the financial sustainability of universities in England.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): I thank the hon. Lady for the opportunity to discuss the higher education sector today in what is my first urgent question.

This Government recognise the importance of the higher education sector and the massive contribution that it makes to this country. We recognise the multiple challenges that the sector is facing and that these will require institutions to adapt to a more competitive and uncertain environment. It is true that the current context presents significant challenges to institutional management, efficiency and financial planning in the HE sector, but it is wrong to characterise the HE provider sector as teetering on the brink of financial collapse. In its final annual report on the financial health of the sector published in March last year, the Higher Education Funding Council for England—the Office for Students’ predecessor—concluded that the HE sector continues to be in a sound position financially.

The new regulatory framework under the Office for Students brings a risk-based approach to monitoring financial viability and sustainability in order to protect students’ interests. Financial sustainability is a condition of registration. This means that the OfS, as regulator, will pay greater attention—and, importantly, require more specific action—where there is greater institutional vulnerability. Where the OfS identifies particular risks to a provider’s financial sustainability, it will indeed take action. This may include enhancing its monitoring or imposing a specific condition of registration on a provider to improve its financial performance. It may also require a provider to strengthen its student protection plan. This will enable action to be taken before a provider faces major financial difficulties.

The Department for Education is also working closely with the OfS to understand the sector’s wider financial risk in worst-case scenarios. We are working with the OfS, other Departments and other relevant national partners to develop full contingency plans to deal with unforeseen and/or major HE provider failure. This will set out roles, responsibilities, triggers and actions to be associated with instances where HE provider market exit falls outside the normal business-as-usual approach of the OfS in implementing its regulatory framework and requires Government action. But ultimately, as autonomous bodies, the financial viability of universities is a matter for the leadership of the HE providers themselves.

The terms of reference of the post-18 review that has been led by Sir Philip Augar include a focus on ensuring choice and competition across a joined-up post-18 education and training sector. The review will look at how it can support a more dynamic market in provision while maintaining the financial sustainability of a world-class higher education and research sector. We have been clear that the review recognises the need to preserve and protect the existing strengths in the system, and the stability of providers is key to a strong system.
The HE sector does face challenges, but we are confident that universities will rise to these challenges and continue to be providers of world-class higher education.

Angela Rayner: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. I want to take this opportunity to wish my comrade, my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner), a happy birthday.

Serious concerns were revealed this weekend about the financial situation of Reading University and there are reports of at least three more universities facing a significant risk of insolvency. I hope that the Minister will tell us in a little more detail what steps he is taking to address the situation at Reading, as well as across the sector, because the consequences of such a failure would be disastrous for students, staff and entire local communities and economies. Can the Minister reassure us that it is the Government’s policy to prevent such a disaster? I do not feel reassured from his response that he has a grip of this.

The Minister said that he is working with the Office for Students towards establishing student protection plans. Can he clarify how many universities do not have plans in place? When will he ensure that they all do? What will it mean in practice? Will students be left with a refund but no qualification after years of study? HEFCE had a list of universities of financial concern. Can the Minister tell us whether the new regulator has such a list and how many providers are currently of concern? Last year, it granted at least one £1 million emergency loan. Can he tell the House how many others have been issued? The new regulator has now said:

“The OfS will not bail out providers in financial difficulty.”

Is that Government policy and from when does it apply?

Can the Minister confirm that his Government have also handed universities a £200 million pensions bill but no new funding to meet those costs? Is he lobbying the Treasury to change that? The Office for National Statistics has demanded that the Government end the “fiscal illusion” of pretending that all loans for fees are repaid. When will the Government follow that ruling? Given the uncertainty that universities now face, can he tell the House whether the Augar review will be published this year? Will he guarantee that any proposals on tuition fees will not lead to cutting universities’ funding?

This crisis is a direct result of the Government’s failing free market experiment. Is it not time they faced the fundamental fact that education is best provided as a public service for the public good? If this Government will not change, it is time for a new Government.

Chris Skidmore: I will respond to several of those points, but I do not think it is appropriate for the Government or the OfS to comment on the position of individual providers.

In terms of the role of the Office for Students in HE financial sustainability, as I have stated, the new regulatory framework that has been created brings a risk-based approach to monitoring financial viability and sustainability, in order above all to protect student interests. The reforms have provided for that framework, and it means that the OfS, as regulator, can pay greater attention and require more specific action if there is institutional vulnerability.

Ultimately, these are autonomous bodies and leaders of HE providers are responsible for ensuring their institutions’ financial viability. They are not part of the public sector; they are autonomous institutions. During the passage of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, a key point voted on by Labour Members was that universities would remain independent and autonomous. The OfS will therefore work closely with providers in financial difficulty; but neither the OfS nor the Department for Education will prop up failing providers. The OfS may enhance its monitoring or impose a specific condition of registration, requiring a provider to improve its financial performance, but we need providers at risk of any financial difficulties to come forward, so that we and the OfS can work with them on improving those registration conditions, which may require a provider to strengthen its student protection plan.

I turn to the issue of HE provider failure. The aim of the new HE regulatory approach is that the Office for Students will be able to act in anticipation of developments such as course closure or market exit, rather than in reaction to them. As I have said, under the new regulatory framework, providers must meet a set of registration conditions aimed at ensuring that they are financially viable, sustainable and well-managed organisations. The new HE regulatory framework has been designed to promote diversity, innovation and choice in HE, in the interests of students, and achieving that does not equate to propping up any particular failing HE provider.

In a competitive market, providers that fail to meet quality standards for students’ expectations may see their financial position come under even greater pressure. There is an expectation that providers may, in a small number of cases, exit the market altogether as a result of strong competition. However, the OfS’s primary interest is ensuring that any such closures do not adversely affect students and their ability to conclude their studies and obtain a degree. Students are making a considerable investment when they commit to a programme of study—investing their time, energy and money—and it is important that they should be able to complete those studies.

On protecting students and student protection plans, the OfS has the powers to ensure that all registered HE providers have these plans in place to safeguard students’ interests against the risk of financial failure. It is a registration condition that they have such a student protection plan in place. Student protection plans will set out what students can expect to happen in the event of a course, campus or department closure or if an institution exits the market. The plans must address the specific risks faced by the provider, and may include measures such as the transfer of students to another provider or financial compensation. In addition, the new regulatory framework sets out that all providers must have a refund policy.

On the pensions issue that the hon. Lady mentioned, the Government’s consultation on the teachers’ pension scheme changes closes this Wednesday—13 February. I encourage all providers to participate in that consultation, which is an important one. It is right that this live consultation should seek views on the impact of the
proposal on higher education institutions, and we will finalise funding decisions once the consultation has concluded.

The hon. Lady mentioned the post-18 review being led by Philip Augar, which is still ongoing. More information on the review will be available in due course, and it will be published in due course. I will not speculate on what recommendations the independent panel will make on HE tuition fees, or on what the final conclusions will be. However, the post-18 review terms of reference include a focus on ensuring choice and competition across the joined-up post-18 education and training sector. The review will look at how to support a more dynamic market in provision while maintaining the financial sustainability of a world-class higher education and research sector. I look forward to the review being published in due course.

When it comes to the hon. Lady’s own position on the financial sustainability of the HE sector, I have to say that of all the universities I have visited and all the vice-chancellors I have spoken to, not one supports Labour’s position of removing tuition fees and completely crippling the HE sector’s financial position. The removal of fees completely would ensure that instability returned and student number caps returned. When it comes to access and participation plans, the money spent on them has risen from £430 million to £860 million in recent years, and that money would end up being capped. Labour does not have any answer on what it would do to ensure that the finance of our universities is protected for the longer term.

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): May I congratulate my hon. Friend on the excellent start he is making on what is the best job in government? Universities’ financial sustainability and our soft power as a country depend on our ability to compete successfully for international students around the world. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that we should put in place a competitive offer for international students by restoring the two-year post-study work visa that we mistakenly abolished in 2012?

Chris Skidmore: I thank my hon. Friend for the work he put in as one of my predecessors as Universities Minister. The establishment of the Office for Students was very much down to his hard work. I remember the Higher Education and Research Act as the most amended piece of legislation in the history of this place, and he did a sterling job in making sure that we have the regulatory framework in place to ensure that we protect against financial failure in the market.

When it comes to international students, the Government are absolutely determined to press forward and look internationally at what we can do. Our universities are world-class and world-leading organisations. We have had roughly 460,000 applications from the EU and internationally this year—the highest level of applications ever seen. We will be publishing an international education strategy in the spring. We are clear that we have removed the cap on international student numbers, and we want to do more to ensure that we can increase our ability to compete not just nationally but internationally with other countries that also recognise the value of higher education at the international level.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): The University of Reading is an example of the recent trend of universities running into financial difficulties. It has got a short-term loan, but it is very unclear what this Government intend to do, as the Office for Students said last year that it would not bail out universities any more. Is it or is it not the Government’s position to offer financial aid to universities with cash-flow issues?

Universities UK is extremely concerned about all the issues that universities are facing, such as pensions and the Brexit strategy being pursued by the present Government. Will the UK Government look at universities—the place they hold in society across the UK and the amount of cash they generate for the UK economy—and help them to get through this real and immediate crisis?

Chris Skidmore: I made it clear in my opening remarks that the Government do not intend to bail out any independent, autonomous institutions, which is what HE providers are. What we have done is provide the regulatory framework by which the OfS can step in to help universities by signposting and working with them in advance to ensure that market failure does not occur. I have to say that our ability to provide record levels of investment in universities has been the result of increased tuition fees, which we have not seen in Scotland. As a result, some of the poorest students are able to access universities in a way that does not happen north of the border.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Just before I ask my question, will the Minister join me in congratulating Trinity College, Cambridge on appointing its first ever woman master, Dame Sally Davies?

Students are right now thinking about which courses to accept for next year and what university to go to. Can the Minister confirm that the regulator, the Office for Students, has given all registered institutions the bill of health that means they are financially secure for at least the next three years?

Chris Skidmore: The Office for Students is currently undergoing a registration process for all HE institutions, including FE providers. I understand that around 250 institutions have now been registered and, having spoken to the OfS, I am confident that it will finish the process over the course of this year. I of course congratulate Dame Sally Davies on her appointment. We need more women in leadership positions in higher education—the more, the merrier—so I offer many congratulations.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Reading University is an outstanding, research-intensive university with high-quality teaching, as I am sure the Minister is aware, as it scores excellent marks in the Government’s own teaching excellence framework. It also provides thousands of high-quality jobs in Reading and the wider Thames valley region. Will he reassure students, the university and the many local people who rely on it that he is willing to help, and will he meet me and the university’s vice chancellor to discuss the issues involved?

Chris Skidmore: I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman, as a constituency Member of Parliament, at his request. However, the Government’s position is not to comment
on the financial sustainability of individual institutions. I will arrange the meeting, but I urge him and Reading University to contact the OfS to begin discussions on any concerns they might have. The OfS is there to provide early signposting and pick up on issues, rather than to react to late decisions or financial circumstances.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Minister will have seen the growth in the universities sector over the past few years, particularly as the student caps have been removed, and he will be aware that Torbay hopes at some point to have an institution of university status. Will he reassure me that we will not return to the era of caps, which would make that impossible?

Chris Skidmore: I entirely agree. I am proud to be a member of the Government who reduced the student number cap between 2012 and 2015, and eventually abolished it in 2016, allowing a record number of students to access higher education. We know that, going into the 2020s, we will need a knowledge-based economy, so it is right that we allow more people the opportunity to succeed in their ambition to achieve a degree. Abolishing student finance by looking at fee levels would simply give away a fee freeze to the children of millionaires while capping the number of students who could attend university.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister has said that the Government will not bail out universities in financial difficulties, yet virtually his first act as Universities Minister was to take through Parliament a 20% increase in tuition fees, albeit just for accelerated degrees at this stage. Can he reassure the House that he has no plans to allow other degrees to see a 20% hike in tuition fees as a result of the financial problems currently facing universities?

Chris Skidmore: I welcome the measures we are putting in place to increase course innovation and flexibility within the HE sector. I passionately believe that that is the future and where we need to go. People may need to train and retrain across the course of their lives, so we will need course provision that allows people to access the HE market at every stage of their lives, right the way through their 20s and 30s. Two-year degrees are not a silver bullet—in fact, they were put forward in a Labour party amendment to the Higher Education and Research Act—but we have tried to ensure that they open up the market and we have encouraged more HE providers to take up two-year degrees. At the moment, they have been capped by the financial ability or the lack of financial ability to do so. Ultimately, it is £22,000 for a degree as opposed to £27,000. It is not necessarily an increase in fees; it provides people with an opportunity to study at a time of their choosing.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What would make universities less financially sustainable than making them entirely dependent on Government finance, particularly if it is a Labour Government?

Chris Skidmore: Absolutely. If we began to return to a stage where universities are financed entirely by taxation it would not only put an increased burden of £12 billion on the taxpayer—an increase of about 2p to 3p on income tax rates—but mean that HE would have to compete with Government funding priorities on the NHS and welfare. Ultimately, we would return to student number caps and the situation we see in publicly funded universities in other countries where people struggle to find seats in lecture theatres. It is right that we have a sustainable financial system that protects students’ futures.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Government still put billions of pounds into the higher education sector through research grants. If the Minister is not going to bail out institutions that are struggling financially, will he indicate to the House what action he is taking to safeguard the taxpayer pound being spent by institutions on research?

Chris Skidmore: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman on the value of research and development in the HE sector. The Government are committed to spending 2.4% of GDP on R&D. Some university grants relate to Horizon 2020 and the Government have made an underestimate guarantee extension to protect all currently allocated grants. We want to work with the sector to look at how we can increase money for R&D. The return on investment is fantastic. In the space sector, for every pound spent on R&D £10 is returned, so I could not agree more that we do need to do more as a Government. We have not done more in the past to bring ourselves up to the OECD average. Universities will be at the front and centre of that.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does the Minister recall that in 2010 the system we inherited for funding higher education was completely unsustainable? Does he agree that that was demonstrated by the fact that it was the previous Labour Government who commissioned the Browne review?

Chris Skidmore: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Our inheritance from the previous Government meant that we had a cap on student numbers, low numbers of people from disadvantaged backgrounds going to university, and low numbers of women entering science and mathematics degrees. All those trends have been reversed by investing in access and participation plans, investment to ensure that universities can expand geographically and—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) is chuntering from a sedentary position. [Interruption.] I do apologise. The hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) is chuntering from a sedentary position. I say again that turning back the clock to taxpayer-funded degrees would simply be a fee cut for the children of millionaires and I simply do not agree with that.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Minister will know that, whatever HEFCE said a year ago about the financial stability of the sector, a perfect storm is gathering with the potential drop in EU student numbers, EU research income and the Augar review. Does he agree that one way of mitigating the risks would be to take advantage of available sources of income? Does he accept that it would be a positive thing for him to embrace the recommendation of the all-party group on international students for an ambitious target for international student recruitment?
Chris Skidmore: I recently had a meeting with the Higher Education Commission, led by an all-party group in Parliament. I was keen to receive that report, and as I said, our international education strategy will be published in the spring. I look forward to that and to receiving all views while we consider what our policy proposals will be.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): At a time when Her Majesty’s Opposition are expressing concern about the stability and viability of university finances, does the Minister share my outrage at the sky-high salaries and rocketing salary increases of some of these vice-chancellors and other senior university officials, which are far beyond anything that they are worth and are particularly insensitive to students, who always have to manage on a tight budget?

Chris Skidmore: Universities receive significant amounts of public funding, so it is right that their senior staff pay arrangements both command public confidence and deliver value for money both to students and taxpayers. We want to see senior staff pay in universities that is fair and justifiable, and the process for setting pay must be transparent. We have asked the OfS to pay close attention to the elements of the regulatory framework that will deliver value for money, as well as conditions of registration relating to senior staff pay, which will improve transparency in this area. I note that tomorrow, the OfS is publishing the first of its new annual reports on provider senior staff pay.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I have two universities in my constituency. Looking back—given some of the remarks that have been made by Government Members—I can remember that when the Major Government were in trouble, the proportion of students was only about 20%. Under a Labour Government, it has risen—figures were published last week—and I welcome the fact that we need to highlight the opportunities that will be available in our world-leading universities.

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): Does the Minister agree that Labour’s policy to scrap tuition fees, even for the wealthiest people in our society, would put the whole sector in mortal peril and risk tens of thousands of students not being able to go to university at all?

Chris Skidmore: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. What I have seen, going around to universities, is institutions that have been able to develop scholarship opportunities and help some of the poorest students in society to access higher education in a way that they would only have dreamed of a decade ago, at the same time as investing in capital, buildings, research and making sure, above all, that they improve the student experience by ensuring that the buildings, facilities and accommodation are really top-quality. The investment that has gone in, as a direct result of making sure that we have the finance and capital available for universities, has been spent well by them, in contrast to returning to a dark-ages position of our simply having no ability for students to pay fees. This would mean that we would return to the bad old days of student-number caps.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I was delighted to hear that the number of EU students has gone up, but one has to wonder whether it would have gone up even more had they had clarity about fees earlier. I used to help to run university admissions when I was a teacher. I can tell the Minister that the conversations we were having were in the year before the year of final exams, and July is too late. When are we going to get the clarity needed for the 2020 intake?

Chris Skidmore: We have set out clearly in the Government guarantee, when it comes to EU students studying at UK institutions, that we want to put financial provision in place for those students up to 2020. There is obviously a separate issue, which I am working on, about exchanges when it comes to the Erasmus scheme. Ultimately, I say to Members that a lot of the exchanges that take place and a lot of the ability to create educational partnerships rely on a deal with the European Union. The Prime Minister’s deal set out clearly the opportunity to protect those education partnerships. If anyone has any concerns about making sure that those can continue, I urge them to vote for the deal.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Staff at the universities in Leeds talk to me constantly about the twin threats they face: first, financial sustainability; and secondly, Brexit, including the issues of Erasmus, Horizon 2020 and the £30,000 threshold the Government want to apply to EU migrants. What assessment has the Minister made of universities’ ability to recruit and retain staff?

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. This is not just about the financial numbers; it is about ensuring we have the human capital and that we are a welcoming place for higher education leaders and academics to come and continue their research. On the immigration White Paper, there is a consultation period, so we are consulting on the £30,000 cap, and I am keen to ensure that all HE institutions can feed into that consultation, both through the Home Office and by writing to me. I have also commissioned the Government Office for Science to model the potential impact on the
Legislation against Female Genital Mutilation

4.56 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) (Urgent Question): To ask the Minister for Women and Equalities if the Government will introduce further legislation to protect vulnerable young girls against female genital mutilation.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): I am grateful for the opportunity to address the House on this important matter. Female genital mutilation has no place in our society. It is an extremely painful and harmful practice that blights the lives of many girls and women. The Government have taken the lead in tackling this barbaric crime. We strengthened the law in 2015 to introduce FGM protection orders and help prevent this appalling crime, and nearly 300 of these orders have now been made. Lord Berkeley’s Bill, supported by my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith), would improve the powers of the courts to protect children, and it is disappointing it was objected to on Friday. I am pleased to say, however, that we are working to bring it back in Government time.

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the Minister for her response and I welcome the Government’s commitment on this issue.

We need greater protection for girls at risk of female genital mutilation. The statistics clearly prove that female genital mutilation is on the rise, yet successful instances of protection orders being obtained are as rare as ever, and only four cases have ever been prosecuted. Can the Minister update us on the implementation of the legislation?

The successful prosecution 10 days ago of a mother who had inflicted this practice on her young daughter illustrates the flaw with current legislation: prosecutions only take place after the crime has been committed, and even then rarely. Further protections are needed to ensure that young girls do not have to go through the brutal, life-changing and sometimes life-threatening trauma of female genital mutilation. Can the Minister assure the House that the Government are willing to explore all legislative options, including amending the Children Act 1989, to ensure that young girls do not stay in a home where they are at risk of female genital mutilation?

We have an issue with serial objectors to private Members’ Bills. Mr. Speaker, you will be aware that my private Member’s Bill on upskirting met the same fate last year. Since the failure of Lord Berkeley’s private Member’s Bill on female genital mutilation, seven Ministers and the Conservative Chief Whip have come out in support of the proposed legislation. Can the Minister explain how the Government plan to deal with those of their own Back Benchers who serially object to private Members’ Bills that the Government seem to support?

In 2016, the Procedure Committee made recommendations for improving the process of private Members’ Bills that would prevent this type of situation from arising. Given the outcry caused by last Friday’s objection, will the Government commit to reviewing these recommendations?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Lady, who I was pleased to work with on her private Member’s Bill on upskirting, raises some very important issues. She is right that we
need to protect these vulnerable women, and I am pleased to say that, as she said, we have recently had a successful prosecution in this area.

Since 2015, the Government have introduced a number of measures to protect women and girls from female genital mutilation. We have created several offences, including failing to protect a girl from FGM. We have introduced civil protection orders, and there is a mandatory duty to report known cases involving under-18s. As I mentioned at the beginning, the Government will present a Bill in Government time.

As for the broader question of private Members’ Bills, the hon. Lady will know that many have passed through the House successfully, including important measures involving my own Department relating to emergency workers, to mobile phone technology, and—last Friday—to Finn’s law.

**Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I welcome my hon. and learned Friend’s commitment to ensuring that the Bill will be given Government time, but will she give me an indication of when she expects this amendment to the Children Act to be presented to the House?

**Lucy Frazer:** I cannot give my hon. Friend a precise indication, as that is not within my power, but the Government intend to act very swiftly.

**Caroline Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on raising this pressing issue.

Female genital mutilation is an abhorrent practice, which can have dreadful consequences for the women and young girls who fall victim to it. Since legislation in 1985, there has been only one—very recent—conviction, although the NHS reports that nearly 15,500 cases presented at hospitals with symptoms of FGM in the past two years. The absence of successful prosecutions in our country indicates the failure of the current procedures. It is essential that we recognise the secrecy and fear surrounding the practice and address the fact that it makes people unlikely to report suspicions or instances of FGM.

The Serious Crime Act 2015 provides for protection orders, which offer a legal means of protecting and safeguarding potential victims. Since 2015, more than 240 orders have been granted to help victims and those at risk, which demonstrates that such protections are effective and can be used as a means of proactive assistance.

The clear need for increased protections makes the actions of the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) even more shocking. His reputation for objecting to important Bills precedes him. Today, I am not using the term “honourable” when referring to our colleague, because “honourable” implies “principled”, and the Member for Christchurch displayed no such principle in the Chamber last Friday. His objection to the FGM Bill sank to new depths. However, the issue should never have been left to be dealt with through a private Member’s Bill.

The Bill will protect countless women and girls, and any delay in its passage puts them at unnecessary risk. The Government should have introduced legislation long before now. Relying on a private Members’ Bill was a risky strategy, given that, as we know, worthy Bills have been talked out or objected to on many such occasions. We cannot now leave this Bill on the sidelines. If the Member for Christchurch has done nothing else, his antiquated and appalling behaviour last Friday has exposed the Bill’s importance. I seek an assurance that it will be back before Members during Government time, and very shortly, so that we can pass an essential piece of legislation.

**Lucy Frazer:** The hon. Lady cares deeply about protecting vulnerable people, and I am pleased to have met her to discuss a number of matters in the family justice sphere. She makes a number of important points.

It is essential to protect women and girls, and since 2015, the Government have introduced a number of measures to ensure that they are protected. As I have said, the Bill will be dealt with in Government time, but let me clarify what it does. It is not the case that without it, women and girls do not have protection; we introduced protections in 2015. What the Bill will do is enable a judge to make a care order during the same proceedings.

The hon. Lady makes another important point about the number of protection orders. She said that more than 200 had been issued since September. In fact, the number has gone up to 296; so just under 300 protection orders have been granted since their introduction at the end of September 2018.

I want to make a final point because a number of Members rightly identified that not enough prosecutions are successful, and this is a very important point that we must tackle. We are tackling it in a number of ways, through funding for education and through the bringing of legislation, but these are very difficult cases to prosecute for a number of reasons: cultural taboos, lack of information from affected communities and the fact that the age of the vulnerable girls might prevent them from coming forward. The issue we have in this country is not isolated; there is a very low prosecution rate for these kinds of offences across Europe, but this Government are committed to doing whatever we can to protect these girls further from this terrible crime.

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): FGM is barbaric and also illegal, and I thank this Government for bringing in FGM protection orders. Can the Minister confirm that closing this specific loophole to make sure the protection orders can come within the definition of family proceedings will be dealt with not only in Government time but as a matter of urgency within Government time?

**Lucy Frazer:** As my hon. Friend identifies, this is an important matter. It will come before the House in Government time; as the Chief Whip has indicated, this is a matter that he would like to proceed with, as would the Government.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): FGM is a violation of human rights. Data released over the weekend showed that in the past two years medics in Scotland’s cities have treated victims of FGM on more than
230 occasions, which is horrific and quite chilling to think of, but we still know very little about the extent to which it is practised despite women being treated who have already suffered FGM.

In Scotland, we have laws in place to tackle this illegal practice and are looking at introducing protection orders also for women and girls at risk, which would give judges the power to prevent a woman or girl believed to be at risk of FGM from being taken out of the country. I know from some of my own constituency cases that that is a very real concern, and some of my constituents have raised it with me. We also have a national action plan to prevent and eradicate FGM.

The more crucial point about this today, however, is that it is disgraceful that this Bill has been blocked. It is becoming increasingly frustrating in this House to have the will of the House circumvented by one male Member, whom such issues will not affect, standing in the way of progress when we want to get on and do good things that would prevent women and girls from being harmed. So what will the Minister do, and will she speak to her colleague the Leader of the House and others to ask for measures to be put in place to prevent this abuse of the House from happening again? The private Member's Bill system has already been said by the Procedure Committee, on which I serve, to be broken and discredited, and we cannot have faith that Bills will progress if somebody can object to them as easily as we saw last week.

Lastly, the Minister has not given a date for when this Bill will return to the House. I understand that the Leader of the House will make a statement tomorrow in the House after the Prime Minister’s statement; will there be any update on when this will happen then?

Lucy Fraser: I am very pleased to hear of the measures being taken in Scotland, because of course this is not a domestic problem that affects any region in particular but is an international problem. The Home Office is working with all regions to deal with this issue, and I am very pleased that when we brought in the legislation in 2015, we extended the reach of extraterritorial offences to ensure we could help prosecute in relation to cases affecting the UK that were carried out elsewhere.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am pleased to hear the Minister stating that this Government regard dealing with the harms of this awful issue of FGM to be of the utmost importance. We must give a clear message on this, and does the Minister agree that the best way to do that would be by giving time to bring this amendment in this Bill forward as quickly as possible?

Lucy Fraser: I am happy to confirm to my hon. Friend that the Government think that this is a very important matter. Across the Departments, we think that it is an important matter, and the Chief Whip has indicated that he does, too. We will be bringing forward this Bill in Government time.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Like everybody else in this building—and, frankly, in the country—I am disgusted by the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope). If I were ever to be in charge of a political party, I certainly would not allow him to keep his Whip, should he ever do anything like this in this place again. He is a total disgrace. New laws are very nice but they are often just words on goatskin to the women who are affected by these and other crimes, so what will be in this Bill to make sure that the services that used to exist in Birmingham for victims of FGM and their families will be put back?

Lucy Fraser: I know that the hon. Lady takes a great deal of interest in women’s issues, and I have been pleased to work with her on a number of issues that cross my Department. I know that many of them stretch beyond my Department as well. She talks about funding and the importance of working in the community, and she is right to identify the fact that this is not simply a matter of making laws. It is about action, education and understanding. Of course, laws must set the boundaries and tell people what is right and wrong, and this crime is absolutely horrific and must be stopped, but that is not the extent of the Government’s actions on FGM. The Home Office’s FGM unit is driving a step change in our nationwide outreach, and it has done more than 100 events across the country to raise awareness. The Department of Health and Social Care has provided £4 million for the national FGM prevention programme in partnership with NHS England. The Department for Education has provided nearly £2 million for a national programme to improve the social care response to FGM, and it has announced a further £1.7 million to continue that work. That is what is happening in this country; the Department for International Development does an extensive amount of work overseas in addition to that, to ensure that women worldwide do not suffer from this horrific practice.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I am glad that the Minister is granting Government time for this Bill. When I sat on the Opposition Benches and was a regular attender on a Friday, the Labour Government Whip would, as a matter of course at the end of each sitting, object to every Bill that was listed but undebated, whatever the merits of those Bills. That was also my duty on Fridays when I became a Government Whip. Why has the Government Whips Office abandoned that duty to my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch? If we want more debating time for legislation, as I certainly do, we know where we can find it, don’t we?

Lucy Fraser: This was a Government-backed Bill, which we have supported.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Women who have been subjected as children to the abhorrent practice of female genital mutilation are much more susceptible to contracting cervical cancer, and it can also make smear tests much more painful, both emotionally and physically. I am proud to be an ambassador for Jo’s Trust, the UK’s cervical cancer charity, and I wonder whether the Minister would commit to meeting me to discuss how we can further support the survivors of FGM.

Lucy Fraser: I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady. She has pointed out some of the terrible consequences of this horrific act, and I should like to take a little bit of time to refer to some of the others. In a leading judgment in the Supreme Court in a case concerning FGM, Lady Hale said that
“these procedures are irreversible and their effects last a lifetime. They are usually performed by traditional practitioners using crude instruments and without anaesthetic. Immediate complications include severe pain, shock, haemorrhage, tetanus or sepsis, urinary retention, ulceration...Long term consequences include...urinary incontinence...and sexual dysfunction...It is likely that the risks of maternal death and stillbirth are greatly increased”.

This is a horrific activity, and we must do everything we can to prevent it.

[Lucy Frazer]

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) is delayed elsewhere, on the Committee corridor, but I know that if he were here, he would start by paying tribute to what the Government have done so far and by echoing the dismay being expressed by all Members today at the behaviour of one of our colleagues on Friday. He would also say that it is a pity that our hon. Friend is not here to give an account of himself, because there might be a perfectly good reason for this. Will my hon. Friend the Minister please convey to those who manage procedure and Government business that many of us are just fed up with this kind of behaviour? We want a different system in which this sort of thing does not happen.

[Lucy Frazer: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his comments and to my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) for his sponsoring of the Bill, which the Government supported and continue to support. I am sure that those in charge of parliamentary procedure are listening and have heard those comments.]

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): From talking to colleagues across the House, I know that we are all upset by the actions of the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), so I am pleased that the Minister intends to bring legislation before the House. I understand that business will be quite light next week, so I wonder whether she might take the opportunity to bring a Bill to the House then.

[Lucy Frazer: My portfolio is quite large, but I am not in charge of parliamentary business. However, I am sure that those who are in charge of it are listening to this debate. The Government are keen to bring legislation forward in Government time and will do that shortly.]

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Female genital mutilation is abhorrent and barbaric and should never be inflicted on any girl or woman in this country or, indeed, any country. In the spirit of equality, will the Minister update the House on the Government’s policy on male genital mutilation?

[Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend has a number of concerns relating to family justice that I am happy to have talked to him about over recent months. This Bill was about female genital mutilation, and the Government will be bringing forward legislation to address that matter.]

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Some people, although possibly very few indeed, will accuse the MPs condemning the behaviour of a Government Back Bencher of virtue signalling. Expressing abhorrence at the deliberate mutilation of young girls and changing the law to protect them is our duty, but if the Government are also to avoid the charge of virtue signalling, will the Minister indicate when the Bill will be brought forward?

[Lucy Frazer: I am happy to repeat that the Government take this matter seriously. The Chief Whip has identified this subject as a matter of importance, and it will be given Government time shortly.]

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Female genital mutilation is an abhorrent crime and must be dealt with severely. The Minister keeps saying that this is an important issue and that it is horrific, but let us look at the reality. This crime was made illegal in 1985—34 years ago—but there has been just one prosecution. The Government need to make a little change to the Children’s Act 1989 to include the FGM amendments, but they have relied on a private Member’s Bill, introduced in the other place two years ago, to get the changes through. Until just the other week, the Government had not committed to allocating days for the consideration of private Members’ Bills, so it is completely inappropriate for Her Majesty’s Government to rely on a private Member’s Bill to make these important changes. The Government now say that they will allocate Government time to get the legislation through, and it is about time, too. They should have done that in the first place.

[Lucy Frazer: I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to those points. Under this Prime Minister, the Government have taken a number of actions over several years to ensure that the offence of FGM is properly identified and prosecuted, that funding is allocated to addressing it and that girls are protected. The Government have introduced both a new offence of failing to protect a girl from FGM and civil protection orders, which have been well used since their introduction last September, and have made it a mandatory duty to report known cases involving under-18s. While the matter is important and the Government will bring forward new legislation, I reiterate that these changes would enable a judge to make a care order in the same proceedings. The protections that have existed since 2015 remain in place and will continue to protect individuals.]

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Further to the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), the legislative programme for next week is not exactly heavy. The public will simply not understand how such important legislation can be stopped by the shout of one man when it has cross-party support. I repeat the call for the Minister to speak to the Chief Whip about bringing forward a Bill next week. Such a Bill would have bipartisan support and would go through the House very quickly.

[Lucy Frazer: I hear what the right hon. Gentleman says, and I understand that the measure has cross-party support. When the Government introduce a Bill, I look forward to its swift passage through the House.]

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Like one or two other Members here today, I was present on Friday. The Minister will know of the cross-party support not only today but on Friday, too, so I welcome her announcement that a Bill will be
introduced in Government time. Will she take back my concern that a Bill be introduced as soon as possible? I echo Opposition Members: if there is time next week, so be it. Let us bring it forward.

Lucy Frazer: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments and for being in the Chamber for the private Member’s Bill on Friday. His comments have been heard.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I share the deep concern of the Labour Front Bench and other Opposition colleagues about the actions of the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope).

How many young girls does the Minister think Britain would be leaving more at risk of female genital mutilation if the proposal by some Conservative Members for a multibillion-pound cut to the work of the Department for International Development were implemented?

Lucy Frazer: What we do know is that there are victims of female genital mutilation in the UK, where FGM is being carried out. In November 2018, the Department for International Development announced £50 million to target and prevent female genital mutilation in African countries, and that is part of a wider investment by DFID. So far, through its support, DFID has protected 3 million girls worldwide from FGM.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: That is a difficult choice. I believe the hon. Member for Hendon is a doctor. Let us hear from the fella.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Unfortunately, Mr Speaker, not a medical doctor.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is a philosopher.

Dr Offord: That is correct.

I thank my hon. and learned Friend the Minister for making a statement today. I also welcome that she does not see a moral equivalence between brit milah and female genital mutilation. There is no moral equivalence between the two. I urge her to bring forward legislation as soon as possible, because I would like to hear the reasons why my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) opposed the Bill. I do not believe it is sustainable to say, “I objected to the Bill because of procedure rather than its content.” Let us bring forward a Bill as quickly as possible so that not only can we hear that defence but, more importantly, we can hear the will of the House by taking a vote on the issue.

Lucy Frazer: I can confirm that we will shortly bring forward a Bill in Government time, and I look forward to the cross-party support that I am very pleased to see today and that I experienced during the recent passage of the upskirting Bill, which I co-sponsored, to ensure we do as much as we can to continue protecting vulnerable children and women.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I also thank the Minister for her positive response and for her commitment to act and legislate quickly. Like her and everyone else in the House, I believe we must do all we can to stop this horrific and barbaric mutilation of girls. Will she outline the steps that will be taken to educate communities at an early age, especially given that the first guilty verdict for FGM was against a mother? There is a need to change the thinking in some communities.

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Often we change the law, but what is really important is that we change the culture. That is why the Government are spending sums across Departments to ensure that we educate people. As I mentioned, the Department for Education has provided nearly £2 million for a national programme to improve the social care response to FGM, and it has announced a further £1.7 million to continue its work. That Department is also providing grant funding for two projects to help safeguard girls from FGM. The Home Office’s FGM unit has participated in over 100 engagement events across the country.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I was one of the few Members here on Friday afternoon. I have also used the “object” procedure, mostly to object to Bills that my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) is moving to progress without debate. I therefore find some of his reasoning somewhat questionable. It is vital not only that we change the law to bring in this provision, but that it is then used. What work is the Minister engaged in with those who deal with child protection to ensure that once the law is changed, the orders are used?

Lucy Frazer: That is also an important point, because laws need to be implemented and be a matter for a number of other agencies, including the Crown Prosecution Service, to look at in taking forward prosecutions.
Counter-Daesh Update

5.25 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Mr Speaker, with permission, I will update the House on the campaign against Daesh, one of the most brutal and depraved terrorist organisations the world has ever seen. Since Daesh’s reign of terror started, investigators from the United Nations have discovered more than 200 mass graves in areas of Iraq once held by the terrorists, containing between 6,000 and 12,000 corpses. The UN has concluded that Daesh’s onslaught against the Yazidi minority in northern Iraq amounted to the crime of genocide, as testimony from remarkably brave individuals, such as the Nobel peace prize winner Nadia Murad, makes clear.

Daesh once imposed its rule of terror on an area roughly the size of the United Kingdom, but now has been driven back to an isolated enclave in eastern Syria. However, the House should not mistake territorial defeat for final defeat. Military action by many nations, including the UK, has broken Daesh’s grip on thousands of square miles of Syria and Iraq—and we can draw encouragement from that success, at the same time as we salute the extraordinary courage of the coalition of armed forces that made it possible—yet as we drive Daesh out of territorial strongholds we are seeing its operatives turning to guerrilla tactics and forming more conventional terrorist networks. So we must press on with the military campaign, even as we employ every diplomatic and humanitarian lever to address the conditions that led to the birth of Daesh in the first place.

Today, I will outline the measures that Britain is taking to guard against the re-emergence of Daesh in the middle east and to protect our people at home. I turn first to the current situation. The Syrian Democratic Forces have cleared Daesh from large areas of the Euphrates valley, expelling its fighters from significant population centres and confining them to a small area near the frontier with Iraq. Their action, alongside the armed forces of all the countries from the global coalition, has liberated millions from tyranny. Of course we take particular pride in the courage and professionalism of the men and women of the British armed services, and the whole House will want to congratulate Flight Lieutenant Thomas Hansford, a Typhoon pilot from 1 Squadron, who was decorated with the Distinguished Flying Cross in November after destroying four Daesh truck bombs during a single mission over Syria.

On 19 December, President Trump announced the impending withdrawal of American troops from eastern Syria, where about 2,000 US personnel have been deployed. Contrary to what many anticipated at the time, there has been no hasty or precipitate departure. As the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, confirmed to me when I met him in Washington last month, the US Administration recognise the importance of conducting the withdrawal in a way that allows the immense progress achieved against Daesh in Syria to be maintained. We must also do everything within our power to address the conditions that allowed the rise of Daesh, to which I now turn.

The central requirement is for political progress in Iraq and Syria. The new Iraqi Government, under President Salih and Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi, are seized of the importance of winning the peace through democratic politics and economic reform, and the UK will do everything possible to help them. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister visited Iraq in November 2017 and proposed an enduring security partnership. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence and the Minister for the Armed Forces have since visited Iraq to take forward that pledge, and in January my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East visited Baghdad, where he met the President and the Prime Minister and announced a new £30 million funding package. The UK has helped to train nearly 90,000 members of the Iraqi security forces. We will press ahead with this essential work, including at the re-established military academy.

In Syria, the civil war that gave Daesh its great opportunity has been raging for almost eight years. The House knows the history of this terrible conflict. From the beginning, we have done our best to promote a political settlement, but our efforts have collided with Assad’s determination to subjugate his country at whatever cost and by the most brutal methods. We will continue to work to advance a peaceful settlement. In the meantime, we have mounted our largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis. The Government have committed more than £2.7 billion of humanitarian aid to the Syrian crisis, providing more than 27 million food rations and 10 million vaccines since 2012. Now that Daesh has been cleared from large areas of Syria, there is an urgent need for humanitarian assistance in those regions. On behalf of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development, I can announce that UK Aid has provided another £20 million of help for areas of Syria recaptured from Daesh, including Raqqa, bringing the total to more than £40 million in this financial year.

The Government continue to believe that Daesh poses the single greatest terrorist threat to this country, so finally I turn to the measures that we are taking to keep our people safe here in the UK. We are using a range of tools to reduce the threat posed by fighters returning from Iraq and Syria. Those who do come back to the UK should expect to face investigation and, where appropriate, prosecution. Those fighters detained by partner forces in the region must also expect to be brought to justice for any offences, in accordance with due legal process, regardless of nationality.

In the internet age, Daesh has no need to control territory in order to spread poisonous propaganda. Supporters around the world increasingly produce their own propaganda, as well as sharing content from the terrorist group’s outlets. The Foreign Office hosts the global coalition’s strategic communications cell, which works with international partners to counter Daesh’s propaganda. The Government have also mounted extensive cyber operations to destroy Daesh’s online capabilities.

When Britain joined the campaign against Daesh, we knew that we were embarking on a protracted struggle against a movement dedicated to medieval, obscurantist barbarism. Although we can take heart from the crushing territorial defeats meted out to Daesh, the struggle to combat its ideology will take much longer and is far from over. Until then, we must be vigilant, and the Government will continue to fulfil their first duty by doing whatever is necessary to protect the British people. I commend this statement to the House.
Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): May I say that our first thoughts are with the members of our armed forces who are involved in the campaign against Daesh and who every day put their lives on the line in the service of their country? We also recognise the heroism of Flight Lieutenant Thomas Hansford. We owe them all a very great debt.

I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement for this, the first supposed quarterly update on Daesh since 3 July, almost seven months ago. That is all the proof we need—if we need it—that this truly is a Government who do not know their quarters from their halves or their halves from their elbows. There is a serious point, though, because the commitment to provide Parliament with quarterly updates on the campaign against Daesh was included in the motion on which this House voted when it authorised intervention in Syria. It is not acceptable that we have had to wait for more than half a year for this statement, and I hope the Foreign Secretary will apologise for that failure to comply with the terms of the 2015 motion.

In the time I have, I wish to ask the Foreign Secretary to address a much more serious and profound issue regarding the status of the 2015 motion. As the whole House will recall, that motion stated explicitly that it was designed to “eradicate the safe haven”—that ISIL had—“established over significant parts of Iraq and Syria”.—[Official Report, 2 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 323.]

During the debate in December 2015, the former Prime Minister repeatedly made it clear that the motion had been worded in that way explicitly to address the concerns of Members that this military action should not lead to a wider open-ended intervention in Syria. That was the rationale on which many Members supported the motion, and now we are in a position where we have been told that that rationale no longer exists by the President of the United States himself, who claims that Daesh has been all but destroyed and that, as a result, US troops will be withdrawn within a matter of weeks.

Before we get to the implications of that announcement for our own engagement in Syria, may I ask the Foreign Secretary to address the implications for Kurdish cities and towns in northern Syria? Does he agree that, after all the sacrifices made by Kurdish forces in the war against Daesh, and still being made by them today, it would be a disgrace for America and the world if they were now abandoned and left to the mercy of Turkey and its militias? Will he make it clear that that will be avoided at all costs?

Next, what estimate has the Foreign Secretary made of the remaining strength of the Daesh forces still in Syria in terms of numbers and firepower and does he agree with the White House that it is just a matter of weeks until they are destroyed? Furthermore, does he agree with the President’s conclusion that, once those Daesh remnants have been destroyed, the coalition’s military engagement in Syria can be brought to an end?

We are all aware that many people, including President Trump’s own advisers, strongly oppose that conclusion and argue that an ongoing military presence is required to prevent the re-emergence of Daesh until such a time as Syria is peaceful and stable, with a new, strong and unifying Government in place who are able to tackle the threat on their own. Indeed, many of the President’s advisers argue that continued military presence is necessary for other reasons, including the need to contain Iran. However, if the Foreign Secretary subscribes to the views of the President’s advisers, rather than the President himself, can he spell out for us where, in the 2015 motion, it was made clear to the House that our intervention was not just designed to eradicate the safe haven established by Daesh, but would include maintaining an open-ended military commitment in Syria in case Daesh should ever return? Given that that was never the policy that this House was asked to support, will the Foreign Secretary accept that the 2015 mandate for military action will need to be renewed if our engagement in Syria is going to continue even after those Daesh remnants have been destroyed?

I am afraid that I must close by asking the Foreign Secretary about the civilian death toll from coalition airstrikes in Syria. As he will know, there is a large disparity between the official military estimate of just over 1,000 civilian deaths, and the estimates produced by organisations such as the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which puts the toll at 3,300, including 1,400 women and children. May I ask the Foreign Secretary what estimates the Government have made of the true level of civilian casualties from coalition airstrikes and, based on the investigations into those airstrikes, how many does he estimate have sadly been caused by British planes and British drones?

Mr Hunt: First, I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for the tone of her questions. I will do my best to answer them as clearly as I can. I apologise for the fact that we did not keep the House updated as frequently as we promised and that this statement is long overdue, so she has my apology without reservation for that. We did lay a written statement just before Christmas, but that is not good enough; the commitment was to verbal statements.

The right hon. Lady is correct in what she said about the 2015 motion. There is a very important matter that we need to address in my response to her comments. The motion did talk about eradicating safe havens, but it is very important to say that the territorial defeat of Daesh does not mean the defeat of Daesh. The President of the United States has talked about a territorial defeat. Daesh now holds just a few square kilometres of the Middle Euphrates valley, so its territory has come down massively from an area nearly the size of the United Kingdom, and it is possible that it will lose that even this week, according to some of the comments that the President has made. But that does not mean that it will be defeated. However, it also does not mean that we are saying to the House that our commitment to a military campaign is indeterminate. The right hon. Lady used the phrase “open-ended military commitment” and that it is not. We are committed to the defeat of Daesh in Syria. That is what the mandate is and we will stick to that mandate.

The right hon. Lady talked about the Kurdish SDF fighters. I want to put on record to this House the incredible courage of those fighters. I stand in the House today to report what I think most Members would consider to be an extraordinary and—dare I say it—rare success in foreign policy, whereby it is possible to see an evil organisation a shadow of its former self.
That would not have been possible without the incredible courage of the SDF fighters. It would absolutely not be acceptable to this House, the Government or the country if we were there to be adverse consequences to those fighters from other regional powers. I had that discussion with the United States when I visited there on 24 January, and it shares that view. Indeed, Turkey also knows our opinion on that issue. The SDF plays an important role for us right now, because it holds a number of foreign fighters captive and is responsible for looking after them, so its role will continue to be extremely important for some time.

In this battle, it is important not to claim victory too quickly. If we do so, we risk Daesh re-establishing a territorial foothold. Indeed, concerns are already being expressed that that is beginning to happen in parts of Iraq now. We do not want to declare victory too quickly only to find shortly afterwards that the very thing that we thought we had defeated is back. That is why we need to continue until we are confident that Daesh will not be able to establish a territorial foothold, but that is not an open-ended commitment. This is a military commitment to make sure that the military job is properly completed.

On the deaths from coalition strikes, I am not aware that the Government have an internal estimate that is different from the estimates that the right hon. Lady told the House, but I will find out and write to her, if I may.

I fully recognise that the whole matter of military intervention overseas is a very difficult issue for many Members of this House. It is something that this House takes its responsibilities on extremely seriously, and that we rightly debate very carefully. I think that we can all think of military interventions that have not been successful in the way that was promised, but this is not in that category. This is a military intervention—not by Britain alone, but with a global coalition of allies—that has been extremely successful in reducing the threat to British citizens. It has also been one in which Britain played a particularly important role, because we led the part of the campaign that was counteracting Daesh disinformation and online propaganda, which was one of the main recruiting sergeants. We can, as the right hon. Lady rightly did, pay enormous credit to the members of our armed services who have done such a remarkable job.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, although there can be no guarantee of a peaceful future for Iraq, interventions such as that by the coalition can indeed be successful if the fighting is done by local rather than foreign troops, if airstrikes are conducted according to the strictest rules of engagement, and if the military campaign is properly underpinned by a political process of reconciliation and reform that tackles some of the root causes of the insurgency?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend of course speaks with great wisdom on this because he was responsible for a lot of the training of overseas armies that makes precisely that strategy possible. We have now trained 70,000 Iraqi forces as a result of the programme that I think he may even have set up when he was Secretary of State for Defence. He is absolutely right that coupling that with a programme of political reconciliation is the key. I would go further and say that that is really the key lesson from what happened in the original Iraq conflict, which ended up so much more problematically than anyone in this House was hoping for at the time. Local boots on the ground and proper political reconciliation is the way to make progress.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I, too, thank the Secretary of State for early sight of the statement. I join him in recognising the risks faced by and the capabilities of members of the armed forces. As someone who comes from a forces family who served in Iraq, and also Afghanistan, I know of the risk that they put themselves in in fulfilling their duties.

The Iraq Government have stated that they need £88 billion to rebuild the country following the prolonged conflict. While, as the Secretary of State said, Daesh’s state-building may be close to defeat, the organisation still holds a powerful sway in many parts of the world, including the Philippines and Somalia. He talked about reconciliation. At the heart of reconstruction, there is a lack of truth and reconciliation for a new Iraq, and that could possibly allow for a resurgence of Daesh. Does he recognise that with less than half of the sums required for reconstruction being available, if we fail to invest adequately in Iraq, that runs the risk of allowing Daesh to regain a foothold?

Will the Secretary of State expand slightly more on what we have learned in this process to enable us to combat fanaticism in this region and beyond?

Finally, does the Secretary of State recognise that more work is required to be done through truth and reconciliation, especially if Iraq is to be fully reintegrated, and that that includes the innocent women and children whose Daesh husbands and fathers cast them aside for the sake of fanaticism—an issue that was most recently given steam in The New Yorker by journalist Ben Taub?

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He speaks of some very important issues.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that reconciliation has to be central. Sometimes that costs money. In this country, we can be proud of the fact that we have put £2.7 billion into that process, which has had a huge humanitarian impact. But part of reconciliation in this case, which is a specific case different from the original Iraq war, is the need for justice against the perpetrators of the genocide that Daesh was responsible for. On 17 January, I had the privilege of meeting Nadia Murad, the Nobel prize-winning Yazidi campaigner against sexual violence in conflict. In her book, she talks about the perpetrators of sexual violence against her who have still not faced justice and are still in the region somewhere. She says that for someone like her, there will be no closure until those people face justice. Part of that process of closure is justice, but part of it is also for people like her to be able to go back to the villages near Mount Sinjar that they were driven out of, at a time when many of their family members had been murdered. That is beginning to happen. All these things matter.

I think we have learned a number of things, but probably the most significant has been the need to engage in cyberspace as well as with boots on the ground, because it was the dissemination of propaganda that probably allowed Daesh to grow much further than we anticipated in the early days.
Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I welcome the Foreign Secretary’s proper tribute to the fight of the Syrian Democratic Forces in our interests, noting that they have sacrificed 8,000 soldiers, including men and women, with 5,000 permanently disabled. The Foreign Secretary says that, having liberated all that territory from ISIS and then taken into custody thousands of foreigners, they are responsible for the investigation of those people. Surely the states from which those people come must bear the burden of investigating and prosecuting their own citizens who are being looked after. When will the Foreign Secretary instruct his officials to negotiate with the forces of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria the repatriation to the United Kingdom and the proper investigation and prosecution of British citizens who will range from the wholly innocent to the rather eccentric to the downright murderously dangerous, who need to be put in British custody as soon as reasonably practical?

Mr Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. First, in terms of the courage of people who have been fighting in Syria, there is one group that we have not mentioned so far, and that is the White Helmets, who did an extraordinary job in Syria—not so much in the particular conflict against Daesh, but we can be proud that this country has resettled 29 families of White Helmets and was instrumental in getting about 400 White Helmets out of Syria towards the end of last year.1

The issue that my hon. Friend raises—I will not pretend to him; he speaks with huge knowledge of the region—is immensely complicated. The complicating factor is not that we do not want to take responsibility for these individuals, although frankly we would be happy if they never came back, because they have gone to fight for enemy forces who have been committing the most appalling atrocities. The issue we have is ensuring that they face justice, and sometimes that is not as easy as simply bringing them back here. That is why we are working through this as quickly as we can to try to find the right solution, to ensure that we can look the victims who have suffered in the face and say that we have brought the perpetrators of these atrocities to justice.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Given what the people of Iraq and Syria faced when ISIS/Daesh suddenly acquired control of large parts of territory, what has been achieved in the years since is really quite remarkable. I am sure the whole House will want to join the Foreign Secretary and the shadow Foreign Secretary in welcoming the near-final defeat on the battlefield, if not in ideology, of this bunch of fascists.

The Foreign Secretary referred to the mass graves that have been uncovered. Since the UN report in November, further graves have been found in places such as Tabqa and Palmyra. Who is taking responsibility for collecting forensic evidence, so that those who have committed these crimes can be brought to justice? Given the difficulties that he just referred to in working out who will take that responsibility, does he think there is any potential for the United Nations to agree to an international tribunal where these cases may ultimately be brought, so that the individuals who murdered people in cold blood and raped and tortured them can finally face the justice that they deserve?

Mr Hunt: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for asking that question. He is right that unless we are able to demonstrate justice for these atrocities, we will not persuade people that as a world, we have sat up and taken notice of what has happened. The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), recently met Karim Khan of UNITAD, which is the United Nations investigation body, and we are strongly supporting its work. The UK strongly supported the international, impartial and independent mechanism, to ensure that we have a proper mechanism for investigating these people, and we brought forward Security Council resolution 2379, which sets up an independent investigatory body. It is none the less not easy. Finding evidence that can be traced back to an individual perpetrator in whichever part of the world is extremely challenging, but that does not mean that we should leave any stone unturned in this process.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Having given evidence in war crimes trials, it is my understanding that people charged with genocide or crimes against humanity should be brought to book in the country in which they have carried out their crimes. Will those who have carried out genocide against the Yazidis be tried in Iraq, or will the International Criminal Court have some responsibility for dealing with that matter?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is right; our first intention is that they should be tried in Iraq if it is possible to get justice for them in Iraq, and there is no reason why it should not be, with the new Government in Iraq. Of course, there are cases in which it is not possible for people to get justice in the country where the atrocity happened. That is when the ICC has a role, and that is why we support the ICC. It has a very important role to play internationally, despite a number of challenges that it currently faces.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The Secretary of State is right; the defeat on the battlefield is to be welcomed, but the ideology continues to grow. The fact that they have been defeated on the battlefield does not mean that they are not planning and are not capable of carrying out further attacks. Can he say a bit about what we are doing to track the money that is laundered to fund such attacks? The crucial thing that we need to do is cut off access to the money.

Mr Hunt: Absolutely. We have taken a number of measures to try to find out what is happening with that money and cut off access to it, including the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018, the Criminal Finances Act 2017 and the Proceeds of Crime Act, which I think become law in 2010; I cannot remember which party was responsible for it. We can always go further, and for that we need to work with not only UK-based banks but Crown dependencies.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): My right hon. Friend knows well that the Kurdistan region of Iraq and the valiant Peshmerga were essential allies in defeating Daesh on the battlefield. We all appreciate that the ideology of Daesh has not yet been defeated. Given the Kurdistan Regional Government’s vital and positive role in challenging continuing extremist ideologies
and upholding security in the region, will he increase his efforts to strengthen the KRG in Iraq and help them achieve a full and fair political settlement with Baghdad?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We are helping to train the Peshmerga at the moment. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa was in Baghdad and Erbil just two weeks ago, and he met President Salih and Prime Minister Mahdi to talk about that important reconciliation and inclusion of the Kurds in the reconciliation process.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Due to this conflict, approximately 5.5 million Syrian people have become refugees and undergone experiences that are very difficult for us to imagine. Half of those people are children. In the borough of Lewisham, we have made a commitment to be a sanctuary borough for Syrian refugees. How many refugees have we received in the UK, and what is our target?

Mr Hunt: I believe that over 14,000 Syrian refugees have come to the UK. We should also pay tribute to neighbours such as Turkey, which has 250,000 Syrian refugees. That is an important reason why we as a country must have a humane policy when it comes to asylum seekers.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The Foreign Secretary will know that the self-governing regime and the Arab-Christian coalition in the north-east of Syria are under huge pressure from the Assad regime. What is the Government's latest thinking on the safe haven plan of President Erdoğan of Turkey?

Mr Hunt: We are looking at that plan very closely, and we are talking to our allies in the United States about it. We understand the strategic reason why President Trump wants to withdraw American troops, but our concern is to make sure that there are unintended consequences. That is why we think it encouraging that, although the original announcement suggested this withdrawal would happen very quickly, the United States has behaved with considerable pragmatism in practice.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I, too, pay tribute to our armed forces. What they have done in recent times gives us good cause to hold our heads up high.

United Nations Security Council resolution 2254 says that free and fair elections must take place under UN supervision and that the political transition should be Syrian-led. Given that the resolution was by definition unanimously approved by the Security Council, which includes Russia, and that Russia's subsequent position and activities in effect block its implementation, what, if any, recourse does the UK have to go back to the United Nations and make some attempt to remove this completely illogical blockage and ensure the implementation of a resolution that is fundamental to the future of the country?

Mr Hunt: I completely share the frustration that the hon. Gentleman has expressed about the role of Russia. We were on track, with the potential for a political settlement that could have removed Assad and meant the people of Syria did not have to suffer from someone who was prepared to use chemical weapons against his own people to impose his bloody rule. However, the Russians then intervened in the process, and it now looks as though Assad is here to stay, to put it very bluntly, so I think the Russians have to take responsibility for the way in which they have changed the situation. Like us, they have a veto at the Security Council, and we cannot stop them exercising that veto. What we can do is to support the work of UN special envoy Geir Pedersen, who has just started and will I think do a very good job. We hope that he can find a way forward, but we do not underestimate the challenges.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement, and I particularly welcome the progress that has been made on degrading Daesh. Does he agree with me that the continued influence of Russia and Iran in Syria and across the middle east actually presents the biggest threat to the rules-based international order that we have seen for a long time and that Britain needs to redouble our efforts to try to rebuild that rules-based international order over the long term?

Mr Hunt: I absolutely do agree with that. I think we have to be aware of the limits of our power and of the mistakes that we have made in our own foreign policy over the years in the middle east. As a new Foreign Secretary, I am very conscious that this is not an area of the world that someone can come to understand quickly, so we need some humility as we approach policy in this area. He is right, however, that one of the challenges we have is the involvement of Russia, which has become a more influential player in the region, and we should also say that about the activities of Iran. Taken together, these do present real risks to stability in the region of which we need to be aware.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement and the ongoing efforts to defeat Daesh in the field, but he will be aware of the wider strategic need to promote reconciliation. I would reflect on the post-invasion picture in Iraq, particularly the strategic blunder of de-Ba'athification, as it was then seen, and the huge vacuum and stoking of sectarian tensions it created. Is the Secretary of State aware of the growing concern about the continuing judicial processes in Iraq that may be stoking sectarian tensions, and what efforts is he making to impress on the Government in Iraq that that ought to be avoided at all costs?

Mr Hunt: This was exactly the topic that my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East talked about when he met President Salih and Prime Minister Mahdi on his recent visit to Iraq. I do not want to pretend that we have magically moved to a totally robust and stable democracy in Iraq. None the less, I think it is encouraging that the country is getting used to the process of elections and that the new Government are committed to reconciliation in the way that the previous Government were. However, it is a very fragile new democracy, so if we are going to do what Prime Minister Mahdi wants, we have to give him all the help we can.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): May I join colleagues in adding my thanks to members of our armed forces? As a member of the armed forces parliamentary scheme,
it has been my privilege to visit serving soldiers in various locations, which makes me very humbled and very proud.

May I ask the Secretary of State for an update on the number of people joining Daesh to fight as foreign fighters, and what is he doing to reduce further the number of British citizens joining that force?

**Mr Hunt:** My understanding is that the number of people from the UK trying to join Daesh to fight has fallen significantly, but I will write to my hon. Friend with the most up-to-date information. In terms of the total numbers, about 900 UK citizens have gone to fight with Daesh, about 40% of whom have come back and about 20% of whom have been killed. We are obviously working out as quickly as we can what is going to happen to the remaining 40%.

**Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for the statement he has made. He is right to highlight the importance of our efforts in the cyber-sphere, and to mention that we host the global coalition’s strategic centre communications cell. When we considered this work in the Defence Committee, we heard that our efforts are too slow, too reactive and too cautious, and when we asked who excels in this sphere, we were told it was the Israel defence forces. Will the Secretary of State engage with Israeli representatives and learn the lessons about how we could be more proactive and more effective?

**Mr Hunt:** I will happily take that away. My understanding is that we have excellent co-operation with the IDF; and there are always things we can learn from working with other organisations involved in similar battles. Of course, we do work under the very tight legal constraints rightly imposed by this House in terms of what our agencies are and are not allowed to do and the authorisations necessary. That is something we would not want to change: that is as it should be. However, I will happily take away the challenge of seeing what we can learn from the IDF; which have a formidable reputation.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): As the British Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend is an international statesman. One hundred years ago, his predecessor was drawing the borders of all the countries we are talking about in this discussion this afternoon. In the treaty of Versailles 100 years ago, the Kurdish people were in effect ignored by the western powers. One hundred years on, after their valiant efforts against Daesh, will my right hon. Friend assure the House that we will not abandon the Kurds again and that we will help them to achieve if not independence, at least autonomy in Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Iran?

**Mr Speaker:** Notwithstanding the validity of what the hon. Gentleman has said about the status of the Foreign Secretary as an international statesman, my hunch is that the right hon. Gentleman is altogether a wiser soul and too discerning a dad to try that one on with the kids.

**Mr Hunt:** I am slightly perplexed, Mr Speaker, but someone will enlighten me about your pearls of wisdom. I think what my hon. Friend says is worthy of serious reflection. The truth is that we have seen what important allies the Kurds have been in this battle against Daesh. Were we to let them down now, it would send a terrible signal about our commitment to our allies for any future conflict in which we might be engaged. With respect to reflecting on what my predecessors did 100 years ago, it tells any Foreign Secretary that they do need to approach the job with a degree of humility.

**Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinewfr) (PC): As many contributors to this discussion have mentioned, the Kurds have been doing the dirty work for us on the ground in northern Syria against Daesh, yet, in the words of one defence analyst, they face potential slaughter at the hands of the Turkish military. What are the British Government doing to avoid this gross betrayal, to protect the Kurds from Turkish aggression and to allow the Kurds to finish the job in the last stronghold of Daesh in Deir ez-Zor province in north-east Syria?

**Mr Hunt:** We do understand that Turkey, too, has a right to territorial integrity, but we are very concerned about what might happen with regard to the issue the hon. Gentleman raises if the US withdrawal is too precipitate, and if it was not clear what outcomes would be unacceptable both to the US and to us. That is why there has been a huge amount of discussion between Turkey, the United States, the United Kingdom and our other allies, precisely to avoid the outcome he is talking about.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): It is reassuring to hear what the Secretary of State has said today and to have an indication, for those of us who supported military action against Daesh, of what needed to be done to ensure that these fascists, as they are rightly called, would be defeated and not allowed to fester. Will he reassure me that we will continue a long-term engagement in Iraq and Syria, because defeating Daesh in the long run is also about rebuilding those devastated communities, supporting Christians to return home and ensuring that funds are available, through aid, to redevelop those countries?

**Mr Hunt:** I am happy to reassure my hon. Friend. Friend that our commitment to that part of the world is for the long term. Our military commitment is finite—it is restricted to the mandate given by the House of Commons—but we are committed in every possible way, because we recognise that if the region is unstable, we will pay the price back here, through terrorism, disruption to our economy and any number of ways. He is absolutely right that our commitment must remain.

**Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): The Leader of the Opposition is a former national chairman of the Stop the War Coalition. Under his chairmanship, the coalition issued a statement praising Daesh for its “internationalism” and “solidarity”. Does my right hon. Friend agree that although we might have many words to describe Daesh, there are certainly not two of them?

**Mr Hunt:** I agree wholeheartedly. I think that it is a terrible mistake when people misjudge the atrocities that organisations such as Daesh are capable of just because they happen to share their own anti-western worldview.
Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): As chair or the all-party parliamentary group on explosive weapons, I thank my right hon. Friend for the £5 million of additional funding he has supplied for the United Nations Mine Action Service’s de-mining activities in Iraq. May I ask him to go further and speak to his colleagues in the Ministry of Defence and the Department for International Development to ensure that mine deactivation and removal is a priority? In places such as Fallujah, which was the first city to be freed from Daesh control, people’s daily lives are disproportionately affected by these terrible weapons. Even though Daesh has been routed, it has left behind a terrible legacy.

Mr Hunt: As the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), has just told me, the reality is that if the mines remain long after the war, the war lasts longer. The truth is that people cannot get back to their normal lives and the tragedy continues, so we very much support the work that my hon. Friend describes. I am sure that there is more we can do, so we will look at that.

Mr Speaker: I readily accept, before I say anything further to the hon. Gentleman, that a cacophonous crescendo of car horns and klaxons—a wonderful display of alliteration—the spectre of which he has just invoked, is undesirable. I have no reason to doubt that when he was conducting an extremely serious meeting with his constituent about the gravest of matters, it must have been at the very least disconcerting and at worst, frankly, destructive, so I am not insensitive to what he has said. Off the top of my head, I cannot claim to have an immediate resolution of the matter. The Serjeant at Arms, who is in his Chair and whose presence is a constant source of reassurance to us, will also have heard what the hon. Gentleman has said.

I think that the matter bears reflection, because of course the conduct of a demonstration—I know that the hon. Gentleman, that a cacophonous crescendo of car horns and klaxons—a wonderful display of alliteration—the spectre of which he has just invoked, is undesirable. I have no reason to doubt that when he was conducting an extremely serious meeting with his constituent about the gravest of matters, it must have been at the very least disconcerting and at worst, frankly, destructive, so I am not insensitive to what he has said. Off the top of my head, I cannot claim to have an immediate resolution of the matter. The Serjeant at Arms, who is in his Chair and whose presence is a constant source of reassurance to us, will also have heard what the hon. Gentleman has said.

I think that the matter bears reflection, because of course the conduct of a demonstration—I know that the hon. Gentleman will be on the same page as me on the matter, because he is a very well-read and cerebral fellow—is necessarily an other-regarding act, not a self-regarding act, in the sense that it has implications for other people. It might be referred to, in more commonplace parlance, as a neighbourhood effect; in this case, the hon. Gentleman was in the neighbourhood and the effect was upon him and his constituent. I think that we do need to consider this. I hope that the Serjeant, the parliamentary security director and the police can give some thought to the matter.

The right to demonstrate, including making some noise in the process, is an important right, but so too is the right of another person to go about his or her lawful business, and the right of Members of Parliament to go about their business on behalf of, and frequently in conversation with, constituents is very important, too. Let the matter be further reflected upon, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will receive some feedback in due course. That might not be an ideal reply, but I hope that it will pass muster for now.
The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

6.16 pm

I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I should begin by paying tribute to my noble Friend Lord Bates for piloting the Bill through the other place so successfully. I am sure that the House will recognise the importance of supporting our financial services industry no matter what the outcome of negotiations on leaving the European Union. The UK's position as a world-leading financial centre is critical to our prosperity.

In 2017, the financial sector contributed £131 billion to the UK economy. It employs over 1 million people across the country, two thirds of whom are outside London, including in the thriving financial centres of Edinburgh, Belfast, Manchester and Cardiff. UK exports of financial services were worth over £77 billion in 2017, which highlights the importance of the sector on the global stage.

I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.
memory, in clause 1(12), line 35 or thereabouts—the fourth file although the fifth measure in the list, the earlier two being combined. As to the main point on which he seeks clarification, the Bill will bring into effect those measures, as amended or otherwise, by affirmative statutory instrument at the time they are brought in. It will then be a case of the way in which those measures are dealt with in terms of the delegated powers to which he refers.

Nicky Morgan: I thank the Minister for giving way. In his letter to colleagues last week, the Economic Secretary stated that the Bill will allow for the Government to choose to implement only those EU files or part of those files which they deem beneficial for the United Kingdom. The Minister talks about whole or parts of legislation. Is he able to set out which of the files or parts of legislation the UK does not intend to implement, and how they will make the decision about what is or is not beneficial to the United Kingdom?

Mel Stride: I would make two points. First, where we will end up with the various files that are the subject of the Bill will, to some degree, be determined by where we end up shortly after or after any no-deal exit. I would imagine that at that point the EU would also wish to be negotiating with us on those measures. Secondly, the files themselves, under the schedule as opposed to clause 1, are being negotiated at the moment. We therefore do not have clarity on the exact form they will take.

The second category of files, as I explained, are those that are still in negotiation. These are files that the UK has, in many cases, played a leading role in shaping, and that could bring significant benefits to UK consumers and businesses. The Bill also allows the Government to domesticate these files, in whole or in part, via affirmative statutory instrument. Given that the UK will not be at the negotiating table when the files are finalised, we will be unable to advocate for the interests of the UK’s financial services sector during those negotiations. The Bill therefore provides the Government with the ability to make adjustments to the files that go beyond the deficiency fixing powers for the agreed files. These powers are clearly defined and proportionate.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Pc): I am extremely grateful to the Minister for giving way. As he has outlined, these are powers that would only be used in the event of a no deal. As a Treasury Minister, I would imagine he is probably losing more sleep than most Government Ministers at the prospect of a catastrophic no-deal situation. Will he outline what reporting mechanisms will be introduced by the Treasury for how these powers are used, either by the Treasury or by Treasury-affiliated bodies such as the Bank of England, the Prudential Regulation Authority and the Financial Conduct Authority?

Mel Stride: I am pleased to report that the Bill, as amended in the other place, allows for reporting in respect of the statutory instruments on a six-monthly basis—that commitment is in the Bill—and that there will be four periods in total. The first period of six months will commence from the moment the Bill receives Royal Assent. The report will both look backwards at the powers that have been exercised up until that point and forwards to those powers that may be exercised in the coming period. As to other organisations, such as the Bank of England, there will be a requirement for annual reporting on the basis of the measures undertaken by those regulatory organisations.

Robert Neill: The Financial Secretary is being extremely generous, but it may actually speed things along. Can he help me on one matter relating to the second class of legislation, the level 1 files? He set out a list of files that are included in the second category. Is it intended that that is entirely exclusive? The Bill deals largely with the procedure for dealing with these files. I have in mind, for example, the proposals that are being developed by the Commission on non-performing loans and on business crowdfunding services—again, areas where the UK has had a good deal of input into initial discussions but that are not actually listed in the Bill. Is it intended to deal with those? If so, in what way?

Mel Stride: I can confirm to my hon. Friend that the list is exhaustive in the terms he was discussing. In the case of non-performing loans, these matters were considered but it was decided that the number of these in relation to the number within the EU was relatively low and that existing tools that are available were adequate to deal with those particular matters. Hence, that particular issue does not feature within the scope of the Bill.

Changes cannot be made in such a way that the implemented files depart in a major way from the effect of the original legislation. However, the Government will have some flexibility to make adjustments in order to take account of the UK’s new position outside the European Union. As a result of amendments to the Bill during its passage through the other place, the Treasury will be required to publish a draft statutory instrument at least a month before laying it, alongside a report detailing: any omissions from the original EU legislation; any adjustments from the original EU legislation; and the justification for those adjustments.

The Treasury will be further required to publish six-monthly reports on how the power has been exercised and how it will be exercised in the following six-month period. Following contributions in the other place, the Government have also introduced a requirement for the financial regulators, the Bank of England and the Financial Conduct Authority, to report annually on their use of any powers sub-delegated to them as a consequence of the Bill.

Having gone through the Bill’s various provisions and outlined its importance both to our future financial stability and to making sure that we are in the right place in the unlikely and undesirable event that we face a no deal, I commend the Bill to the House.

6.30 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I am someone who believes in Parliament—I believe in it not just as a way to pass the laws under which we are governed and to hold Ministers to account but, crucially, as a way of reconciling the different and competing interests that a complex and sophisticated country such as ours inevitably encompasses. Like many colleagues, I find our politics at the moment increasingly bitter and angry and lacking in respect and empathy for opposing points of view. For me, the House of Commons and, to
an extent, the House of Lords have historically given
this country the means to have the conversation that it
needs to have with itself to begin to resolve differences
of this kind.

I say that in opening to explain that it is a genuine
source of sadness to me that, so far, Brexit has represented
not the return of greater powers to Parliament, but the
greater accumulation of power to the Executive that
we have ever seen in peacetime. That reality is before us
again today. The Minister has clearly laid out the basis
we have now debated dozens of statutory instruments with
secondary legislation. Ministers, my colleagues and I
have now debated dozens of statutory instruments with
just a handful of colleagues in the corridors of this
place, passing legislation on huge items of EU regulation,
containing many thousands of pages. I will spare our
colleagues the excitement of referring to each of them
in detail, but they provide all sorts of vital consumer
protections and market safeguards.

Financial regulations are like the intricate parts of an
engine: we do not need to understand them all or even
to know about some of them, but we benefit from them
being there and we will soon know when they go wrong.
The regulations that we have dealt with include those
that mandate the provision of clear, succinct information
because the Bill effectively sets up the same process, but
in a Delegated Legislation Committee. That is relevant
and about which decisions will instead go to other
bodies such as the Bank of England and the Prudential
Conduct Authority” and “the European Commission
creates questions about the checks and balances between
them, especially when new powers are being bestowed,
and about which decisions will instead go to other
bodies such as the Bank of England and the Prudential
Regulation Authority. These decisions should not be
taken unilaterally and simply presented for rubber-stamping
in a Delegated Legislation Committee. That is relevant
because the Bill effectively sets up the same process, but
for the next two years of new financial services legislation.

We are extremely grateful to the Minister and the civil
service for taking the time to fully brief us about their
approach, but the Opposition plan to vote against the
Bill today, and I want to explain the three reasons why.
First, as I have touched on, we believe that the Government’s
approach is fundamentally undemocratic. Simply diverting
the process for the scrutiny of future EU legislation to
secondary legislation Committees risks a major democratic
deficit.

As we have seen with the no-deal statutory instruments,
it is entirely within the Government’s gift whether time
is granted on the Floor of the House to debate these
instruments further. We will effectively be bestowing
power on the Treasury to decide our future compliance
with EU financial regulation. Given the concerns that
the financial sector has about being a rule taker, that is
an enormous step to take. When Britain voted to leave
the EU, I believe that it was to empower Parliament to
debate and make those decisions, not to concentrate
them in the hands of a few civil servants and Ministers.
Of course, the big change from a sovereign point of
view is that, for some of these, we would no longer have
had any input at the EU level.

Secondly, the approach of splitting in-flight files and
existing regulations into a patchwork of statutory
instruments lacks coherence. We are debating the Bill
today. Numerous other, related statutory instruments
will proceed in Committee this week, one of which we
are sitting on tomorrow. We have already discussed
some of the legislation referred to in this Bill in Committee,
yet the updates on it and the next stages of these
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[Jonathan Reynolds]
directives and regulations are now included in the Bill as being in flight. We need a single overview to identify what the post-Brexit framework will look like. Approaching it piecemeal risks having items fall through the gaps as well as creating clashes and inconsistencies. Significant powers are being transferred to the Bank of England and our regulators, yet there is no single item of legislation that demonstrates the extent and scope of the powers.

To be frank, given that the legislation is itself only a stop-gap, none of us really knows what the Government have planned for financial regulation after Brexit. This opaque and confusing process is inaccessible not just to legislators, but to those outside Parliament. I have received correspondence from two different asset managers in the past fortnight, for example, seeking insight into what is happening in this place regarding the collective investment regime because they have found the SI process so confusing to follow and are worried about the future.

Thirdly, we must acknowledge the systemic importance of what is included in the Bill. Nobody wishes to see a repeat of the events of the global financial crisis in 2008. That is why an extensive package of regulation emerged in the aftermath of the crisis, designed to protect against a repeat of those mistakes. Many of those pieces of regulation had their origins in the 2008 and 2009 G20 summits. There was a co-ordinated global effort, of which we were part, intended to make our financial markets safer and better able to withstand stress, hopefully protecting the public purse in future.

I genuinely hear no appetite for a bonfire of EU regulation when I speak to people in the UK finance sector but, in truth, we simply do not know what the future holds or where pressure may come from to relax or tighten regulations. However, the Bill risks enabling the Treasury to make wholesale changes to our regulatory regime with little recourse available to Parliament to have a say on that, other than through the secondary legislation process, which, as we have all seen, can severely limit the chances for scrutiny. I believe that the current Treasury would approach that process in good faith, but Ministers and Prime Ministers change and we do not know who ultimately will be entrusted with these powers.

Some of the fundamental pillars of the post-crisis financial regime, such as the capital requirements directive V and the bank recovery and resolution directive II, as well as other items of regulation designed to strengthen the financial market infrastructure, are included in the Bill. The capital requirements directive, for example, sets out the asset buffers that systemically important financial institutions must hold and in what ratios. Given the costs involved to banks, these regulations often involve significant negotiation and lobbying. We saw in the US last year that a concerted lobbying effort secured major concessions from the Basel committee on capital requirements. It is simply a fact that such legislation involves the management of large and competing interests, and it does not seem right to the Opposition that the Treasury could be lobbied on such a matter and subsequently implement a statutory instrument that is subject to limited scrutiny compared with primary legislation.

It is for these reasons that our reservations outweigh our understanding of the need to pass the Bill. We very much want a strong and successful financial sector after Brexit, but we reiterate that the best way of ensuring that we have that is to negotiate a deal that the House is willing to vote for. We acknowledge that in the event of no deal a whole raft of emergency legislation would need to be passed, but at present we cannot sign up to handing over these powers to the Government without any guarantee about how they will be used. It is our intention, therefore, to oppose Second Reading and divide the House.
Clause 1(1)(b) gives the Treasury powers to make adjustments to the specified legislation it considers appropriate. What criteria are being used to scrutinise and judge the appropriateness of a policy? The wording also leaves the door open for unscrutinised discretion on the part of Ministers and organisations that they may delegate these powers to. The standard is not good enough, given the importance and impact of the Bill and what it is trying to achieve.

The Bill gives Ministers wide latitude to make policy changes using delegated legislation. That conflicts with the position laid out in the EU withdrawal Act, which prohibits such changes because they greatly reduce the opportunity for Parliament to scrutinise policy. The Government have acknowledged that passing legislation without a substantive debate in Parliament is undesirable. We cannot allow this to slip past.

There is a legitimate concern that the Bill leaves scope for regulators to diverge from European technical standards, which could ultimately contribute to the undermining of the EU principle of equivalence. Many businesses rely on meeting these requirements to access EU markets. The Financial Markets Law Committee has raised that issue directly with the Treasury, along with wider concerns about the potential market uncertainty caused by the unreliable nature of British technical standards as a result of this legislation. The Treasury has attempted to address some of those concerns in its policy note, which outlined the safeguarding mechanisms for the Bill, but sadly those still fall woefully short of what is expected.

Subjecting SIs to the affirmative resolution procedure is not a substitute for bringing primary legislation before Parliament because there is no scope to amend them. The Treasury has also committed to engaging with key stakeholders, but, as the Opposition spokesperson mentioned, if previous efforts are anything to go by, this is not reassuring. We have all sat in Delegated Legislation Committees where it feels like the only stakeholder engagement is asking the opinion of a select few. We cannot ignore the needs of businesses and the wider public at such a precarious time.

More care should be taken to gather the experiences of the business community and the wider population before making decisions that could impact on them. It has been difficult throughout this process to gather evidence because statutory instrument Committees cannot take evidence, and we will not be taking evidence on the Bill either, meaning that we will lack the ability to scrutinise this in many different respects.

It has been said many times inside and outside the House that leaving the EU is the will of the people. That is definitely not the case in my constituency or the rest of Scotland, which voted 62% to remain, but even if it were, I would find it difficult to accept that people who voted for Brexit want this—there are gey few Brexiteers here today trying to defend this policy. Tory Ministers are being given unfettered power to legislate with no parliamentary scrutiny, which is way outside any mandate the Government feign to have.

The Bill makes a mockery of the leave campaign promises of taking back control, because this Parliament and each of us as MPs will have less control than we had before. It allows for the creation of new laws via statutory instruments, but these will be unscrutinised or augmenting primary legislation passed not by this House but by the institutions of the EU. The Chair of the Treasury Committee made an excellent point in her letter about the measures in the Bill that will allow the Government to choose to implement only those EU files, or parts of those files, that they deem beneficial to the UK and to make adjustments to legislation to fix deficiencies and take account of the UK’s new position outside the EU. That sounds like a policy choice—choosing to implement only those files, or parts of files, deemed beneficial to the UK. It would involve the Government deciding which files are beneficial to the UK and so allow them to do what they said they would not do.

After Brexit, the UK Government will have no seat at the European table, as these in-flight directives proceed, on issues that will impact on businesses across these islands. Weirdly, we are delegating scrutiny of these policies to the EU when we are not going to be members any longer. We have heard in Delegated Legislation Committees about how the UK is a great leader in financial services with great expertise, and we have heard how influential and involved our officials have been in making regulations for financial services—the Economic Secretary referred to this in his letter—but this influence is being chucked away for glib slogans on the side of a bus.

We will be losing influence on matters that will disproportionately affect financial services in this country, adopting legislation from another jurisdiction that we have chosen actively not to be a part of and then leaving it up to the Treasury to decide what we take and what we leave, and perhaps not even the Treasury—perhaps the Financial Conduct Authority or some other organisation whose work we are even less able to scrutinise. It is completely unacceptable, and I see no Brexiteers here willing to defend it—not one bit of it. Where are they now?

The UK Parliament, and our own elected representatives in this place, will not have a say in the detail. We are passing into the hands of Treasury officials the ability to determine the position at some point in the next two years. If we want to continue to operate in the EU market, we will have to comply with those rules. Nothing, absolutely nothing, that we introduce—deal or no deal—will be as good, as seamless and as hassle-free as the passporting deal that financial services have now, while the UK is a full member state of the EU. The Treasury cannot deny that fact.

Scotland has worked hard to get to where we are now. In Edinburgh, in Glasgow and in places throughout Scotland, financial services firms are working hard, investing and doing so much to promote their talents. There is no doubt in my mind, and in the minds of the hundreds of constituents who have emailed me, of their concerns about Brexit. They believe that things would be better all round if the Government acted in the best interests of the country, and revoked article 50.

I strongly agree with the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds). The principled position is to oppose the Bill. The Government are taking plenty of powers unto themselves, which is outrageous in the context of “taking back control” and all the other glib utterances that we heard at the time of the EU referendum. They say, “Just trust us, and it will be fine.” I am sure I can trust them, and perhaps it will be fine, but we cannot base this on that. We should not give up our own role as Members of Parliament, which is to scrutinise all these matters.
Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who made an excellent speech.

Today’s debate has focused on Brexit and financial services. I want to focus on why the Bill is so vital to our budding green finance industry, what the EU is doing to promote green finance and what our own country is doing in that regard, and what the Government can do to end uncertainty for an important and growing part of our economy. I shall refer to the sixth and seventh reports of the Environmental Audit Committee, “Greening Finance: embedding sustainability in financial decision making” and “Green finance: mobilising investment in clean energy and sustainable development”.

In 2015, the United Kingdom signed up to the Paris agreement on climate change and the UN’s global goals for sustainable development, which set out ambitious targets to transform our world. In the three years since then, we have learnt much more about climate science. As was made clear in a report published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in October 2018, if we are to avoid the catastrophic effects of uncontrolled climate change we shall need radical and unprecedented changes in all parts of the economy, which will require trillions of pounds—or dollars—to be invested in clean energy and cleaner transport infrastructure.

I pay tribute to the Government for some of their work in that regard. The Bank of England’s Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures looked into strategy, risk and targets. The Government then set up the Green Finance Taskforce, whose report made a series of recommendations, one of which was that the Government should establish a sovereign green bond to kick-start investment. The Government have yet to respond to that report, but I hope they will do so soon. We have seen the green growth strategy, and, in the City of London, $22 billion of investment has been raised in seven currencies for more than 72 green bonds. I fear that the Bill could potentially disrupt some of the progress that we are making, and interfere with London’s place as a centre for green finance.

We have done well in our own country. We have moved quickly to decarbonise the power structure. However, we have done very little to deal with our agricultural and transport-related emissions, and almost nothing to deal with our agricultural and transport-related emissions, and almost nothing to decarbonise our heating emissions. When people tell me that things will be easier, I always ask, “How are you going to transform 31 million gas boilers over the next 10 years?” According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change—the IPPC’s report, we have just 12 years in which to tackle damaging carbon emissions. We need to think big, and think globally, if we are to rise to that challenge.

My Committee’s inquiry found that the privatisation of the Green Investment Bank and the reduction in European Investment Bank lending following the referendum may have played a part in the 56% reduction in investment in green energy projects in the UK. We could not work out whether that was a blip or a trend, but I look forward to seeing this year’s figures and finding out which it was. Our “Greening Finance” report states that climate change poses material threats to our economy, our investments and, of course, our pensions, which provide the funding for these companies.

There are three climate-related financial risks. There is the physical risk posed by more heatwaves such as the one that we experienced last year, more droughts, which will threaten the water industry, wildfires, which we have seen in the Arctic and in California, extreme rainfall, rising sea levels, and flooding. That risk will affect investment in food, farming, infrastructure, house building and insurance. In a 4° world, my Committee was told, the insurance market would cease to exist. London’s position as a global insurance centre would be destroyed, and the jobs along with it. There is also the risk posed by the transition to the green economy. Companies that do not make a timely low-carbon transition could face costly legal or regulatory action, and some will be left behind by innovative firms with cleaner, greener, more efficient technologies.

Issuers—banks, insurance companies, asset managers and owners, and a range of other financial institutions—must assess and report climate-related financial risks. That is particularly important in relation to pension funds. I welcome the National Employment Savings Trust, but by the time a young person auto-enrolled in the scheme retires, we could be living in a world radically transformed by climate change and society’s response to it. According to the latest Met Office prediction, in a high-emissions scenario our summers will be 5° warmer than they are now. That has implications for the water that we drink and the homes in which we live.

It is vital that our pensions, investments and savings are able to weather those changes, which is why my Committee called on the Government to introduce mandatory reporting of climate-related financial risk. We also wrote to the chairs of the 25 largest pension funds asking them what they were doing to mitigate that risk. We think that improved reporting would help to divert more capital to more sustainable ends, because what gets measured gets done. That would increase investment in the new green infrastructure that we need, and would mean that our savings did well while also doing good. We are pleased that the Government have clarified the fiduciary duty of pension trustees in trust-based schemes, which will come into force on 1 October 2019, and we are waiting to hear from the Financial Conduct Authority what it intends to do.

Let me now turn to why the Bill matters in relation to sustainable finance. I asked the Minister—and I was grateful to him for giving way—about “in-flight” legislation. The EU has proposals for financial services legislation that would promote sustainable finance. It is debating proposals for a framework for low-carbon benchmarks which would allow investors to harmonise their portfolios with the Paris agreement on climate change. The benchmarking is important, because only by seeing what is happening in other companies can investors work out whether they are doing well or badly, and make the strategic changes that may be necessary. It is also discussing the possibility of a taxonomy of environmentally sustainable activities which would allow companies to “green-check” their revenue streams, and new disclosure requirements for asset owners such as pension schemes, as well as asset managers, banks and insurers. My Committee had called for that.

When the Bill was introduced in the other place, I was disappointed to note that the EU proposals for benchmarks and disclosure requirements were not included in the list of “in-flight” legislation in the schedule. The Minister...
said that this was Parliament doing its job and amending legislation, but it is not clear to me whether those proposals were left out accidentally or deliberately. Do we think that we are already in that position outside of the EU? Has it become clear to us that these things were so brilliantly that we need not bother to pursue the proposals? The Minister has not made that clear.

I welcome the amendments made in the other place to include all the EU’s sustainable finance proposals. However—this is important—the Government have no obligation, but only the option to adopt those valuable measures. Will the Minister reassure the House that the Government will adopt them, and that the UK will not fall behind when it comes to EU action on sustainable finance? If we diverge from the EU’s regulations on sustainable finance it would harm large financial institutions with investment in green financial products in Europe. It could harm our budding sustainable investment industry. We are at the moment a world leader in finance; we know the difficulties Brexit will cause to be faced across our economy, but we have the opportunity to be a world leader in sustainable green finance and we must not let that opportunity pass us by.

7 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) set out very clearly and comprehensively the problems with this Bill in his opening remarks. I do not want to repeat them all, but I will summarise the core reasons why the official Opposition cannot support the Bill.

The Conservative Government often mix their metaphors when presenting their Brexit process. This Bill, for example, part of what the Government have described as an onshoring process, is presented as dealing with those so-called in-flight measures that have not yet landed. In my brief remarks, I want to explain why many of us are confused about the identity of the pilot of this plane, quite how far and fast the plane will go, and indeed whether it should be on the runway in the first place. I suppose that it is at least a relief that the Transport Secretary is not in charge, given last weekend’s revelations.

First, who will decide which parts of in-flight EU legislation will be implemented? This is straightforward for those Bills that have already been passed at EU level but not yet implemented—those taxiing on the runway. In that case, the Bill commits itself to implementation in the UK, not least given that UK Ministers and MEPs would have been fully involved, one would hope, in all aspects of that legislation, with Government only able to fix deficiencies in that legislation.

The picture is, however, far less clear for legislation still under discussion at EU level, and thus to a certain extent still up in the air. In that regard, we are informed that this Bill will enable “the Government to choose to implement only those EU files, or parts of those files, which it deems beneficial to the UK”.

They will be able to “adjust the legislation as it is brought into domestic law to fix any deficiencies or, in the case of files still in negotiation, to ensure that it reflects the UK’s position outside of the EU.”

How exactly they might do so, and what that reflection might encompass is left unclear. The right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), Chair of the Treasury Committee, rightly raised this earlier in an intervention on the Minister, and I am disappointed that she did not receive a sufficiently clear response to that question; I will return to that point later. Indeed, there is no indication here that that deviation from EU practice will even be flagged up to this place, let alone go through a different decision-making process as a result. Instead, it is expected that, as usual with this Government, sadly, statutory instruments will be used. Clause 1(1)(b) even states that the Government can make “any adjustments the Treasury consider appropriate”, a power that was initially open-ended but that, quite rightly, was amended in the other place.

The point remains that it will be difficult for Parliament to be aware of any deviations from EU practice. The Conservatives may well respond by stating that industry would be quick to point them out. Frankly, I am grateful for industry’s engagement with this process, to the extent that it has been able to input, and it is essential that, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde, we preserve our strong and successful financial services sector, and our regulations must reflect that. However, I reiterate a point I have made before: there is no organisation in the UK with an explicit mandate for financial stability and the consumer interest in financial services, a role which is filled within the EU by the Finance Watch. It is unsurprising therefore that Finance Watch has put on the record its concerns that the current approach to Brexit could be used as a means to undermine financial regulation, pointing to, for example, the Chequers agreement’s phraseology of the UK pushing for greater liberalisation of financial services, investment and procurement markets post Brexit.

The second reason to reject the Bill concerns its peculiar status among the rest of the so-called onshoring process. The flight path here is bedevilled with interactions with numerous other legislative processes, from those embedded in the 40 statutory instruments that have already been laid before Parliament to the additional 20 yet to go, and with only 34 working days between now and 29 March, as rightly underlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde.

By contrast, with the extraordinarily rushed process being adopted here, the Government’s powers under this Bill can be exercised for up to two years—yes, two whole years after Brexit. That is in a context where the Government have no clear plan for financial services regulation post 29 March. Rather than this confusion of legislation—short-term, long-term and of indefinite duration; primary, secondary affirmative and secondary negative—we surely need to have some consolidated legislation covering this area. This confusion is of course part of a pattern, sadly, over recent years from Conservative Ministers, with Acts in 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015 having to correct or amend existing provisions. Indeed, we have been informed that there may well be correcting amendments to be considered even after the 60 statutory instruments and this Bill are passed.

Of course we had a good example of the deficiencies even within this Bill, as rightly pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), in relation to the legislation governing environmental indicators and reporting, which was initially missed out of the schedule. I pay tribute to her for raising this essential issue of green finance and greening finance and how it was initially missed out of these proposals.
I found the Minister’s response to the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) rather peculiar. I note that the hon. Gentleman is no longer in his place, but I felt he made an important point. He asked whether the UK would keep in step with emerging provisions from the EU, such as in the area of non-performing loans. The Minister suggested in response that alignment in this Bill was rejected due to the content of those proposals, when his Bill, however, was presented as inclusive of all financial services legislation that was in-flight aside from those elements that we had specifically opted out of, such as those relating to banking union, which we do not participate in of course and which is presumably the real reason why non-performing loans legislation is not included here.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield highlighted in her remarks the non-scientific nature of the assessment by this Government of which measures will be deemed by this Government of which measures will be deemed in-flight or otherwise. We have had no indication of the criteria to be used for that from Government. The discussion we have had, albeit in this brief debate, has pointed out that all we have as a Parliament currently as an indication of this Government’s approach to regulating financial services in the future is this Bill and the no-deal SIs—no overall plan, no indication of how the different pieces fit together, and above all no clarity around how we will be able to keep in step with the EU27 in relation to emerging issues like green finance and cryptocurrencies.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): On the issue of no clarity, can the hon. Lady tell the House why her party did not oppose the Bill in the other place or suggest any changes to it there?

Anneliese Dodds: It is my understanding that there was significant challenge from my party in the other place, and in fact changes were made, including for example a clearer indication of the circumstances under which those adjustments could be made by the Government. Initially that was very open-ended, but we supported and pushed for much more clarity on that. We would have liked to have seen change in other areas, and perhaps clarification in additional areas. We have not had that, however, which is why it is necessary to oppose the Bill at this stage.

Finally, this legislation is of course only required because of the Conservative Government’s recklessness in persisting with a commitment to keep no deal on the table, as rightly underlined by the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). We have seen very clearly today from the preliminary estimates of GDP growth for the final quarter of last year how this determination to prioritise ideology over national interest is harming our country. The contribution to GDP from business investment was negative for the fourth quarter in a row; that is a clear sign that uncertainty surrounding the Government’s Brexit strategy is acting as a real drag on the economy. The construction sector actually contracted this quarter, and after two consecutive quarters of negative growth, the UK manufacturing sector sadly is now officially in recession. So 2018 had the worst annual GDP out-turn since the then Chancellor’s disastrous 2012, and economists are forecasting that even worse could well come.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. The Economic Secretary to the Treasury will be aware of our exchanges in Committee regarding EU regulations as they relate to key information documents and how KIDs are adversely affecting the assessment of investment trusts. The trade bodies oppose them, including the Association of Investment Companies, which has suggested that the investors’ response to them should be to “Burn before reading”. Can the Minister report back on his deliberations with the Financial Conduct Authority, which has been rather slow out of the blocks? Ultimately, it is the Government’s responsibility to get this right.

John Glen: I am happy to respond to my hon. Friend’s intervention. I acknowledge his expertise in this area and his excellent article in the Investors Chronicle this week. I would point out that, just last summer, the FCA issued a call for input and sought industry views on the next steps for packaged retail investment and insurance products—PRIIPs. That consultation closed on 28 September and the FCA is reviewing the responses carefully. It will publish a statement in the first quarter of this year. When I next see the chief executive of the FCA, I will challenge him on that publication date.

Let me turn to the substantive thrust of the concerns raised in the debate. The first relates to the desirability of no deal. As I have said, we do not want a no-deal scenario, but we need to be responsible and to plan for all eventualities. Our priority remains getting approval for the deal that we have negotiated with our European partners, which will deliver on the democratic choice of the British people.

Turning to the other preparations, we have now laid 50 statutory instruments before Parliament. The allegation from the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) and for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) was that there had been no coherence to the Government’s work, but as the hon. Lady will know, we will have had 53 statutory instruments. We have more debates tomorrow and on Wednesday, and I think several more next week.
We are addressing the deficiencies in all the major EU files and the relevant domestic legislation. This will ensure that we have a functioning financial services regime at the point where we leave the EU in a no-deal scenario. Our aim throughout this work has been consistently to minimise disruption for firms and their customers and to provide a smooth transition when we leave the EU.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) made a point about the breadth of the power in this legislation. We have worked hard to ensure that this is a clearly defined power and that changes cannot be made such that the implemented files depart in a major way from the original legislation. However, the Government will retain some flexibility to make adjustments to take account of the UK’s new position outside the European Union. The amendments proposed by the Government require the Treasury to publish draft SIs at least one month in advance of laying, as well as a report detailing where there have been omissions and changes and giving the justification for those changes. We believe that the report will allow parliamentarians to scrutinise the changes before the SIs are laid. If the UK were forced to take on EU legislation either in whole or not at all, it is likely that we would be able to domesticate very few of these files in good time, so even the positive aspects of the reforms would be delayed. This is a pragmatic measure to deal with the reality of a very undesirable situation, and our approach has been endorsed by the industry, with which we have engaged in the preparation of the Bill.

Alison Thewliss: The Minister talks in his letter about how things are deemed to be beneficial for the UK, but he and I will have very different opinions on what would be beneficial for the UK, or indeed on whether Scotland should be part of the UK, so how can he say that that is not a policy decision?

John Glen: We are talking about a no-deal scenario, which we cannot fully anticipate or set out in legislation. However, there would be a full discussion and additional legislation in those circumstances.

For the benefit of the House, I want to clarify the industry engagement that has been undertaken on this Bill. The Treasury engaged with industry ahead of the introduction of the Bill, and the financial services industry has been expecting many of the files for some time. For example, the industry will be generally supportive of the changes that will be implemented with the European market infrastructure regulation regulatory fitness and performance programme—EMIR REFIT—file, which introduces changes to regulations for clearing and reporting requirements, to make them more proportionate and to provide further clarifications. We have been engaging to deliver what the industry expects.

With respect to accepting EU laws after exit, the Bill is not about accepting such laws wholesale. We will be able to implement only those pieces of legislation that are beneficial to the UK, because we will be able to choose the files, or specific provisions within those files, that we are going to implement. For those files that we have already agreed at EU level but not yet implemented, we will be able to fix deficiencies similar to what was done in relation to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. For those files on which negotiations will be ongoing at the point of exit, we will be able to make some adjustments to them to take account of the fact that we will not be around the negotiating table when they will be finalised.

Moving on to the model for financial services regulation more generally, the Government of course recognise that this legislation should apply only for an interim period while we consider a sustainable, longer-term approach that balances the need to ensure appropriate parliamentary oversight of financial services legislation after leaving the EU with the need to maintain the flexibility and competitiveness of our regulatory regime. That is why the model in the Bill would apply only for a temporary, non-extendable two-year period post exit, specifically in a no-deal scenario, and to specified EU files only. The Government will take forward our approach for a sustainable long-term model in due course.

Turning to the points made by the hon. Member for Wakefield, the UK has publicly led on the development of sustainable finance, as she set out, and the Government are committed to the sustainable finance agenda and are a leader in green finance. That is why we have included these files in the Bill. We recognise that the files form part of the EU’s response to the Paris climate change agreement and the UN sustainable development goals. The Government support the aims of the files and do not consider them harmful to industry at their current stage of development. As such, we were pleased to add them to the schedule to the Bill, and we thank the noble Lords who recommended their inclusion.

I stress again that this legislation involves a temporary measure, with the delegated power limited by a two-year sunset clause and subject to the affirmative procedure in each and every instance of its use. Following constructive engagement in the other place, the Bill is clearer about the power contained within it and has much stronger reporting requirements than at its introduction.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to this debate. I am sure that we can agree on the importance of continuing to support the UK’s world-leading financial services industry in any future scenario. I look forward to discussing the Bill further in Committee, and I commend it to the House.

The House divided: Ayes 293, Noes 248.

Division No. 324

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Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, rh Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, rh Mr Jonathan
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, rh Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Ian
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swamy, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Symes, Sir Robert
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Thurlow, Kelly
Tolimison, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shai
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whatley, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sam
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr Mike
Wright, rh Jeremy

Tellers for the Ayes: Michelle Donelan and Jo Churchill

NOES
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackford, rh Ian
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
NOTICE OF PROXIES

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A (7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill [Lords]:

**Concilliam**

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

   **Proceedings in Public Bill Committee**

2. Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 28 February.

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

   **Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading**

4. Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

Question accordingly agreed to.

FINANCIAL SERVICES (IMPLEMENTATION OF LEGISLATION) BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A (7)).

That the following provisions shall apply to the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill [Lords]:

**Concilliam**

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

   **Proceedings in Public Bill Committee**

2. Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 28 February.

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

   **Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading**

4. Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

Question accordingly agreed to.

FINANCIAL SERVICES (IMPLEMENTATION OF LEGISLATION) BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A (7)).

That the following provisions shall apply to the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill [Lords]:

**Concilliam**

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

   **Proceedings in Public Bill Committee**

2. Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 28 February.

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

   **Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading**

4. Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.
(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings
(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(Paul Maynard.)

Question agreed to.

FINANCIAL SERVICES (IMPLEMENTATION OF LEGISLATION) BILL [LORDS] (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.
Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),
That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise:
(1) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:
   (a) any expenditure incurred by a Minister of the Crown, a government department or other public authority by virtue of the Act;
   (b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable by virtue of any other Act out of money so provided;
(2) any charge on the Consolidated Fund or the National Loans Fund, or any other charge on the public revenue, arising by virtue of the Act.—(Paul Maynard.)

Question agreed to.

FINANCIAL SERVICES (IMPLEMENTATION OF LEGISLATION) BILL [LORDS] (WAYS AND MEANS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),
That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise:
(1) any fees or charges, or any other charge on the people, arising by virtue of the Act;
(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund or the National Loans Fund.—(Paul Maynard.)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate
DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (COUNTY COURT)

That the draft Mutual Recognition of Protection Measures in Civil Matters (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 12 December 2018, be approved.—(Paul Maynard.)

Question agreed to.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Ordered,
That Alex Burghart be discharged from the Work and Pensions Committee and Anna Soubry be added.—(Mark Spencer, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

Election Law Reform

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Paul Maynard.)

7.35 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): I am pleased to be afforded the Floor of the House for this Adjournment debate on the reform of election law. Many might ask, “What does it matter?” Nay-sayers might say that this is a debate in defence of ourselves. Well, perhaps, but this is serious. Our election law is a mess, leaving candidates and agents exposed as never before to the real risk of criminal prosecution, so this cannot wait—it needs solving now.

Election law is important, as it defines the type of democratic institutions that we have. The playing field must be fair and equal, and seen to be so, and the results of elections need to be respected as just and fair. That must be encapsulated in our election law.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way before he gets into the thrust of his contribution. I asked his permission to intervene beforehand.

In Northern Ireland we have made many, many changes to electoral law, particularly for stricter controls on registration and identification. That is not the subject of this debate, but does the hon. Gentleman agree on the need for voter ID in the mainland? We have done it in Northern Ireland, and it has done away with a lot of discrepancies in voting. That may be a separate issue but, none the less, does he agree it is important?

Craig Mackinlay: I thank the hon. Gentleman. He raises a wider debate about voter registration, and I would not object to its application on the mainland. I see nothing wrong with every single voter having a unique identifying code so that people cannot vote in two places, for instance. I would welcome moves towards that.

Through no design of mine, and for obvious reasons, I have come over the past two years to know, rather too closely, the intricacies of election law. I do not intend my contribution to descend into a personal rant against the Electoral Commission, the Crown Prosecution Service and Kent police, which led me to a three-month trial and subsequent acquittal, but I hope some good can come from my experiences by being a catalyst for the reform of election law, which was recently described by a retired professor of election law, Bob Watt, as a “compost heap”.

We have two key statutes: the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, often referred to as the PPERA; and the Representation of the People Act 1983, often called the RPA. The PPERA was enacted to reflect the reality of modern politics, and it created the Electoral Commission, a statutory body with powers over election processes and guidance setting for candidates, agents, political parties and, importantly, local authority electoral staff.

The Electoral Commission has a budget of £17 million and employs 134 staff. It oversees and controls national party spending, donations and reporting and the regulation of third-party campaigners, among other things. Members may not be aware that it is from the PPERA that ballot...
papers have thereafter had the candidate’s name and the logo of the national political party for whom they are standing. That was a recognition of the reality that the electorate vote for political parties. Few of us in this House would be so bold as to claim that the electorate vote for us solely as individuals—if only that were true; they vote in larger part for the party messages, for the perceptions they have of party leaders and for the national party manifestos. This legislation set spending limits of close to £20 million for registered political parties to spend across the UK in the regulated period of a year prior to a planned and forecast election as envisaged by the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011.

We then have the law that is more relevant to us. It is relevant to candidates and agents across elections, no matter what their type, be they parliamentary, Assembly Member, council, mayoral or police and crime commissioner elections. I refer to the Representation of the People Act 1983, which is the legislation I would like to focus upon this evening. I wish to focus on two small sections—sections 90C and 90ZA. It was on the construction and interpretation of these two sections that the entire case was founded, and it is from these things that we need to learn and change. In broad terms, the 1983 Act governs candidates’ returns, spending limits, timings, agents’ and candidates’ responsibilities, and, importantly, various offences, notably against those not authorised to spend money on a campaign. There is a clear prohibition in section 75 of the Act, with punitive criminal sanctions against those who spend without the authority of the election agent.

Those small sections are detailed and they are often not understood, so I will advance to the House what they mean. Section 90ZA explains the common meaning of “election expenses”. Subsection (4) outlines the concept of “incurred and authorisation”, and this accords to the long-held view that election expenses can be so only if incurred or authorised by a candidate or agent. This interpretation, relied on by all political parties, has roots going back to 1868 legislation in another form. If not authorised, an offence can be committed by the person incurring expenses under section 75 of the Act. This seemingly clear interpretation was to prevent those who might want to interfere with an election from doing so—or else face criminal proceedings. It also provided candidates and agents with the power to control what is spent on the campaign they are legally responsible for.

Section 90C explains what to do if goods, services or facilities are provided free or at a discount, for instance, where a friendly printer provides printed material, perhaps as a party supporter. It is clear and people fully understood what it was there for; the concept was simple. The section dictates that the item, service or facility given free or at an undervalue should form part of the election expense return at a proper market value rate, subject to some simple de minimis rules.

My case passed through a long trail of court interpretations before criminal trial. At an early application to dismiss, which was rejected, we argued that the normal interpretation of section 90C—the discount or free provision—could apply towards a candidate’s election expenses only if such a good, service or facility had been properly authorised in the first place by the candidate or agent under the normal authorising provisions of section 90ZA. It has long been the understanding of colleagues in this House and experienced election law Queen’s counsel, some of whom write the textbook on election law, that the rules always intended that agents were responsible for the finances of election campaigns. Candidates will be focused on meeting electors and winning votes during the campaign period—we will all be familiar with that. The law intended agents to be involved in all the spending decisions in a campaign, either by spending themselves or permitting someone else to spend on their behalf. They, or the candidate, are meant to authorise any spending on the campaign, so that all expenditure goes through them. As a result, the agent is then liable to produce a full, “true” return of all this spending and be responsible for keeping within the legal spending limits.

The Act also takes steps to try to ensure that others are dissuaded from spending on an election campaign without this authorisation from the agent or candidate. Section 73(6) and section 75 provide for offences for people who make payments for the campaign or who spend on campaigning without the agent’s express permission. Anyone spending or making such payments without authorisation—written authorisation should be the norm—risks committing an offence. If others are willing to take the risk of committing an offence by spending or paying expenses without authorisation from the agent, that would be a criminal matter for them. This does not mean there is a free pass for people to flout spending limits by simply refusing to give authorisation for spending which others decide to incur anyway. So it is clear that the baton of the risk of illegal activity passes from the agent or candidate to the individual deciding to incur the unauthorised expense. We all have some strong and great supporters in our constituencies who are keen to help, but I expect that none would flout the wishes of the candidate and agent and decide to place themselves in jeopardy. Then there is a deterrent to third parties incurring expenses without authorisation.

The judge in an early part of my ordeal did not agree with this long-held interpretation and interpreted that the legislation should mean that anything used to the benefit of a candidate or to denigrate their opponent, used either by the candidate or, more worryingly, simply “on their behalf”, should be included in a candidate spending return, regardless of whether it was authorised or not. This was appealed to the Court of Appeal, in front of the Lord Chief Justice. That appeal was successful and the normal ground was seemingly restored.

The Crown Prosecution Service, with the Electoral Commission attaching itself as an interested party, appealed the Appeal Court decision to the Supreme Court. That appeal was heard on 23 May 2018, with judgment given on 25 July last year. In summary, that decision overturned the Appeal Court decision and has to stand as the ultimate authority on the interpretation of sections 90C and 90ZA of the 1983 Act.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I wish to recap. Worryingly, a candidate in an election could be liable under the law for spending on his behalf that he neither authorised, nor was even aware of.

Craig Mackinlay: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, as he has encapsulated the issue in a few brief sentences. I will be expanding on that in the remainder of the debate.
The Supreme Court decision ruled that under section 90C, free goods, services or facilities for the “use” or “benefit” of the candidate, arranged either by them or on their behalf, must be included in an election return. In addition, and this goes to the point made by my hon. Friend, authorisation or even, it would seem, full knowledge of the candidate or agent is not required, and only active refusal might—I stress might—be the only possible defence. It is difficult to see how that could be done if the candidate or agent is unaware of the matter concerned or the costs involved.

The Electoral Commission does not come off unscathed by that Supreme Court judgment. Paragraph 28 of it states that

“the Electoral Commission’s helpful guidance documents issued over several years, whilst they certainly both address the question of apportionment of expenditure between party and candidate, and deal with the concept of free or discounted services, nowhere appear to alert readers to the possible link between them, nor to the application of the notional expenditure rules to what must sometimes be a difficult exercise of separating local from national expenditure.”

Let us overlay that statement about the Electoral Commission with some of its own written output on the launch of a consultation on a new draft code of practice on 10 September 2018:

“We hope these Codes will make it easier for you to submit your own or your party’s returns, simplifying the process and removing any blurred lines that there might have been”.

It goes on:

“In responding to this consultation you’ll help us to further demystify the process and remove any confusion that you or your party may have over the process of campaign reporting.”

So, we have an acknowledgement by the Electoral Commission of problems in election law and it was admonished, to a degree, by the Supreme Court.

The only reference in the draft code published in September last year to the Supreme Court judgment is a single paragraph on page 4 of a 23-page document, which is as yet without statutory force. That single paragraph says:

“This notional spending falls to be declared as election expenses in the candidate’s return even if the items provided have not been authorised by the candidate, the candidate’s agent or someone authorised by either or both of them, R v Mackinlay and others (Respondents), UKSC 42, 25 July 2018.”

That is it: this fundamental change in interpretation encapsulated in a few lines in a draft code of practice, with no guidance as to what it might mean in practice. If the hope was, to use the Electoral Commission’s words, to demystify and remove blurred lines, the Electoral Commission has comprehensively failed.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I think my hon. Friend has answered this question, but to pick up the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen), did the Electoral Commission suggest in the draft code of conduct how a candidate was supposed to know, or to be able to account for, that information in any practical way? Or did it leave that open?

Craig Mackinlay: My right hon. Friend highlights exactly what he might have expected, but I am afraid he will be disappointed, because that is it. There is not one additional word of guidance as to how this change of interpretation might be administered on the proper battleground of elections.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an important and helpful speech. Was the issue of whether the money was national spend or local spend within a political party relevant to the finding he is describing? For example, some Conservative national spend for an individual constituency might not have been authorised by the agent. Was that the reason the decision was made in the way that it was?

Craig Mackinlay: The hon. Gentleman highlights the issue at stake, which is at the core of the Supreme Court judgment, but we are still left with this ambiguity as what others might do that the candidate might not know about. Matters of which the candidate has little to no knowledge, and activity that they certainly had not authorised, would have to be part of an election return.

Ian C. Lucas: I have great sympathy for the ordeal, as he described it, that the hon. Gentleman has gone through. We all have experience of elections and agents. The central point that he has indicated is really important: individual authorisation should be obtained from the individuals concerned. That requirement should be adhered to and, if that has not happened, that is deeply regrettable.

Craig Mackinlay: The hon. Gentleman makes reference to the full understanding of election law dating back to 1868 and in its various guises since. It is only now that the Supreme Court has overturned what we had all accepted as the normal happenings and procedures of election law for all these years. It has confounded many election specialists.

Let me pick up where I left off. As yet, the draft code has no statutory force. In just 51 days, we will be appointing candidates for local elections and in 80 days the local elections will be taking place throughout the country, possibly in just about every constituency. The Electoral Commission currently proposes to put thousands of local election candidates into battle with no clue as to what they should do to stay properly within the newly interpreted law.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that these issues, with which the Electoral Commission is grappling very late in the day, have been known to us for many years? Regrettably, the Electoral Commission has dragged its feet in addressing these issues. It should do so in a way that provides clarity and certainty for people who could otherwise be liable to prosecution.

Craig Mackinlay: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. There is one person in this House who has been liable to prosecution: I have had the full force of that.

As I shall ask a number of times in my speech, is the Electoral Commission fit for purpose? Was the commission’s preferred interpretation of the relevant sections of the 1983 Act, which it used in support of my prosecution and, it seems, for no other obvious purpose, included in the 2015 guidance for candidates and agents? No, it does not appear anywhere. Did it find its way into the revised guidance for the 2017 general election, under
which everybody in this House fought for election? No, it does not appear anywhere. Armed with the result of the Supreme Court judgment, to which the Electoral Commission was attached as an interested party, did the commission finally incorporate it into its most recent guidance for the local elections in England in May 2019? Did it incorporate within that guidance the definitive Supreme Court interpretation of sections 90C and 90ZA of the 1983 Act? I think you know the answer, Madam Deputy Speaker, and it is no. Why did the Electoral Commission intervene, at public expense, if it had no intention of advising candidates and agents, on pain of criminal prosecution, as to the proper interpretation of law following the judgment in its favour? Is the Electoral Commission incapable of speaking with itself? I ask once more: is it fit for purpose at all?

A huge grey area has now opened up. What if someone decides, without recourse to the candidate or agent for authorisation, to print and deliver thousands of leaflets saying “Vote for X”? This could cost the individual thousands of pounds, which they decide to pay themselves. Once it is printed and delivered, they inform the candidate and agent about the unintended help that they have provided and paid for. Unknown to them is the fact that the candidate has no Headroom left in their election budget for this kind of spending, which would breach the legal spending limit. The leaflets are clearly for the benefit of the candidate and they have obviously been used. They are notional, as they are free, because the third party has paid for them. The Supreme Court’s new interpretation of section 90C requires that that cost must be recorded, and in the circumstances that would breach the spending limit for the candidate and agent, with all that that might entail.

Candidates and agents need to know the risks they face. Clear warnings should be given in Electoral Commission guidance. Remember that it is candidates and agents who face criminal sanctions if spending limits are breached. Under the Supreme Court’s judgment, they lose control of spending should anyone else decide to offer their support for free, whether it is wanted or not. How can anyone hope to budget for an election campaign under such a system? We all need clarity from the Electoral Commission. It pushed for this interpretation of the law and won at the Supreme Court, so how do we deal with it in practice? At the next election, might people provide free goods and services on behalf of, say, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), or my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), to the extent that they breach their spending limits? Will we then find them massively out of pocket? Could they report the candidate as having used a cost that the third party has paid for them? I ask again: is it fit for purpose?

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The Electoral Commission offered substantial evidence during my criminal trial. Its view was that corrax boards should be written off and recorded in full at the first election that they are used. I can only say, “Really?” Then say so in published guidance. Let us examine what its current perceived position really means. Let us say that successful candidate X wins in a safe seat that is likely to be held for many years. That is common for many in this House. If the boards were to be expensed through the election return at the first outing, at the second outing, there would be nothing to declare because they cannot be counted twice. The new Opposition candidate at the second election would be at an immediate disadvantage on needing to buy expensive corrax boards just to keep up, while the outgoing MP would have to declare the cost to declare, allowing a spending advantage, as budget could be used for additional leaflets or other election promotions. I ask again: is the Electoral Commission fit for purpose? Does it actually understand what it is there to regulate?

Let me give a few examples of the perversity of the law and the situation we now find ourselves in following the Supreme Court judgment. This would certainly apply should we face—heaven forbid—a premature general election. What would be the status of a supporter—or, probably more accurately, a spoiler—deciding to hire an aircraft with a trailing banner of support which is not wanted or assented to by the candidate or agent? The benefit test and the on behalf test under the Supreme Court judgment. This would certainly throw up cost accounting issues. Let us say successful candidate X wins in a safe seat that is likely to be held for many years. That is common for many in this House. If the boards were to be expensed through the election return at the first outing, at the second outing, there would be nothing to declare because they cannot be counted twice. The new Opposition candidate at the second election would be at an immediate disadvantage on needing to buy expensive corrax boards just to keep up, while the outgoing MP would have to declare the cost to declare, allowing a spending advantage, as budget could be used for additional leaflets or other election promotions. I ask again: is the Electoral Commission fit for purpose? Does it actually understand what it is there to regulate?

Let me give a few examples of the perversity of the law and the situation we now find ourselves in following the Supreme Court judgment. This would certainly apply should we face—heaven forbid—a premature general election. What would be the status of a supporter—or, probably more accurately, a spoiler—deciding to hire an aircraft with a trailing banner of support which is not wanted or assented to by the candidate or agent? The benefit test and the on behalf test under the Supreme Court ruling would have been met, the candidate would probably have seen it and, as such, they would need to account for it as an election cost, potentially exceeding their election budget and placing themselves under threat of prosecution under the criminal code. That would mean a loss of seat, fraud charges, a criminal record, costs and loss of any professional qualifications—potential ruination.
[Craig Mackinlay]

How would senior members of a party possibly tour the country at an election, as is the usual and expected standard practice? This would be deemed, under the benefit test under the Supreme Court, to be in support of the candidate in the particular constituency visited. The Nicola Sturgeon helicopter alone would break the budget of the candidate visited, as would the security and travel costs for the PM or the Leader of the Opposition.

I have saved the most perverse example, which is relevant to this age of digital campaigning, until last. What if a foreign national or hostile foreign Government were to spend on Facebook advertising in support of—or denigration of—a candidate but it is entirely unwanted by that candidate? The benefit and use tests under the Supreme Court ruling would have been met. If the candidate were able to obtain the cost of the advertising from Facebook and find who placed it—in itself a tall order—how many impressions would be relevant? Were the impressions seen by non-voting businesses or by minors, they would not be an election cost, but impressions viewed by those of voting age would. However, the law and Election Commission guidance state that an honest assessment needs to be made. Under the newly interpreted understanding of section 90C of the 1983 Act, an honest assessment would need to be made. Might this pitch the election expenditure over the limit, with all that follows? The double entry of election expenses requires, at all times, the identification of donors. So, madly and perversely, the candidate could find themselves in a double illegality because a second illegal activity would be deemed to have taken place by the recognition and deemed acceptance of an illegal foreign donation.

It is very easy to speak in an Adjournment debate just to have a moan, but tonight I wish to conclude with some solutions—I have a number of them. Might higher local candidate spending limits and lower national party spending limits be the answer, so that any interpretative haste. It is available to Ministers under a simple statutory instrument, which I recommend be passed with all haste.

Schedule 4A to the 1983 Act lists what are election expenses under part 1 and what are not election expenses under part 2—for instance, if a candidate drives themselves around in their own car. The Secretary of State has wide powers under section 15 of the Act to make orders to add or subtract from parts 1 and 2. A simple addition, in these words, to part 1 would clarify the law and spending limits. Legislative change needs to be forthcoming—it is urgent; it is needed almost within days. I have proposed a most simple and elegant solution. It is available to Ministers under a simple statutory instrument, which I recommend be passed with all haste.

“Notwithstanding that a matter might fall to be included within Part 1”—that is the “what is”—“of this schedule because of section 90C of this Act”—the deeming provision that the Supreme Court has now come to—“it would only be deemed an election expense if section 90ZA(4) also applies.”

It is section 90ZA(4) that requires authorisation by an agent. In easy terms, this would restore, within threeand a half lines, the position that election expenses can only be so if properly authorised by a candidate, agent or somebody properly authorised by them. With this in place, we can start to unload what has been described as the compost heap of election law in due course and replace it in the longer term with legislation that is fit for purpose. But candidates and agents deserve protection right now.

Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): I am fortunate to have an excellent agent, Simon Ashall, who is fully trained, but—my hon. Friend has brought this issue out in his excellent and important speech—even he is in a muddle about some aspects of our current electoral law. There were 3,304 candidates at the last general election, and only a few hundred, at most, will have had a professional agent. A really good and experienced agent does not feel that he can be on top of things. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need robust and effective electoral law and regulation, but it also needs to be simplified, fair-handed and clear. I thank him for bringing this debate to the House.

Craig Mackinlay: I thank my hon. Friend for those robust and powerful words. As he describes, when experienced election agents treat these laws with fear, this is not a position by which any political party will be able to recruit election agents in the future. The barriers should be clear. One should know where the RPA or the PPERA kicks in. But, as my hon. Friend says, how can anybody know what cannot be known? Those are the realms that we are now in.

Candidates and agents deserve protection. There are elections in 80 days’ time and nominations for candidates close in just 51 days. I ask the Minister to act urgently, with that simple proposed statutory instrument of threeand a half lines, to bring clarity to the law and protection for all candidates and agents.

8.11 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) not only for giving an excellent speech, but for making such an important contribution to this critical field. People watching this from the Public Gallery, or perhaps reading the debate later, may be surprised to learn that these issues are of such seriousness that if candidates or their agents get them wrong, there is a decent possibility that the matter will be resolved with an individual standing up in court, potentially at risk of losing his liberty, his reputation and, indeed, his livelihood. If that is the consequence, it is critical that the legal landscape is clear, and I am afraid that I respectfully agree that it is not clear.

Let me give the House just one small example of how we find ourselves in a situation where people’s campaigning activity might owe more to their appetite for risk than to the correct campaigning message. In 2017 in Cheltenham, one of the issues was whether I should be putting out a leaflet that mentioned Cheltenham repeatedly throughout. Under one view, if it was simply a national message that would apply to Cheltenham, it could be national expenditure. But under another view, it could be allocated as local expenditure. People watching this should understand that if someone gets that judgment wrong, they could end up being prosecuted for breaking their limit.
I thought that there was a risk involved in allocating that as a national spend so I declined to do so, but others took an entirely different view, mentioned Cheltenham a lot and simply allocated the spending as a national spend. It turns out, however, that the Electoral Commission has decided after the event—through these provisional codes of conduct—that circumstances where the constituency is mentioned should be classed as a local expense. Well, if that is right, the implications are absolutely enormous.

My hon. Friend has already delivered a devastating critique of the Electoral Commission, but one of my criticisms is that it is so slow to act. It knew about this local expense. Well, if that is right, the implications are what actually happens in campaigns today.

**Ian C. Lucas:** The hon. Gentleman is making a very important point. I am a member of the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and I am particularly interested in this debate because of the inquiry that we have been carrying out into fake news. One issue that is crucial in all this, but that we have not really discussed today, is the advent of social media campaigning. If we are talking about not being up to speed, I have been on a huge learning journey on the Committee since I was re-elected in 2017. Frankly, I am sure that most of the Members of the House will not be aware of the scale of change that has happened in this area in recent years. The issue regarding local and national spend that the hon. Gentleman mentioned is just one of those changes. We need urgently to reform the law to take account of what actually happens in campaigns today.

**Alex Chalk:** The hon. Gentleman makes a good and fair point, but I would say that the law will inevitably struggle to keep up with every last twist and turn. That is one of the reasons that we need to have an Electoral Commission that is agile and nimble, and can provide assistance to candidates. My first criticism of the Electoral Commission is that it has singularly failed to show that agility and nimbleness. That is not simply an academic criticism; it is echoed in how elections are run, and it means that we do not have a level playing field.

**Mr Harper:** I think that the situation is actually slightly worse than my hon. Friend says. When listening to the speech of our hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay), it struck me that the Electoral Commission had been quite nimble and agile in some ways, in the sense that it decided to back a legal action that is agile and nimble, and can provide assistance to candidates. My first criticism of the Electoral Commission is that it has singularly failed to show that agility and nimbleness. That is not simply an academic criticism; it is echoed in how elections are run, and it means that we do not have a level playing field.

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**Alex Chalk:** The Electoral Commission needs to do two things. First, it needs to be nimble and agile in responding to developments in campaigning practice. Secondly, it needs to show judgment when matters come before its desk. That judgment means using common sense, but it also means being scrupulously impartial and scrupulously independent. That is not just a statement of the obvious. It is something that is set out in the code of conduct for electoral commissioners, which says:

“Commissioners, and the Commission as a body, are accountable to Parliament. Within the Commission, Commissioners are accountable to the Chair. Commissioners are expected to act at all times to further the Commission’s aims and objectives, and uphold its impartiality.”

Impartiality is key. Section 2 on conflicts of interest goes on to say:

The failure to declare an interest and then act appropriately can affect the validity of a decision. The test in all matters is—would a fair-minded and informed observer conclude that there is a real possibility of bias? The issue is not just whether there is bias, but instead could there be a reasonable suspicion of bias? Decisions must be made in an impartial way without any opinions being formed beforehand”.

And yet we have an extraordinary situation whereby the director of regulation of the Electoral Commission—the person who comments on the fines imposed on political parties, and who, perhaps more than anyone else, should be impartial and be perceived to be impartial—wrote on Facebook when David Cameron became Prime Minister:

“Just can’t understand what people were thinking—do they not remember the Tories before?”

She went on to say that she “doesn’t want to live under a Tory government.”

She also wrote that she could “not believe” that she lives under a Tory PM again! What is wrong with people? Grrrr! Words have failed me.”

This is the person who is making decisions on whether to proceed with prosecutions or investigations against my hon. Friend. How on earth does that satisfy the test? I remind the House that the test asks “would a fair-minded and informed observer conclude that there is a real possibility of bias? The issue is not just whether there is bias, but instead could there be a reasonable suspicion of bias?”

Well, if that test is not crossed in this case, what on earth is the point of the Electoral Commission?

8.19 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): It is a pleasure to be here with you tonight, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) for raising this issue. I am glad that we have been able to have a lengthy debate in which to fully understand these matters. He has raised a number of important points, and I am glad of the opportunity to respond. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) for adding his remarks, and all those who have done so through interventions.

First, I do recognise the very difficult time that my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet has recently gone through. I hope that he takes solace not only from his acquittal but from the further remarks that the judge went on to make about the good faith in which he has operated. It must be said, however, that while he was acquitted, one person in the case was found guilty of breaching electoral spending rules. The rules that govern the spending of political parties and
candidates at elections are important. They provide for a level playing field, as has been discussed, both for parties and candidates. The extent of their importance and the seriousness of any breach can be seen in the judge’s remarks during sentencing on the other part of the case. I will not say anything further tonight on the details of that case, but I do want to address the points on electoral law raised by my hon. Friend. Friend. The first of those concerns the Supreme Court judgment on notional expenditure, and the second touches on the divide between candidate and party expenditure. A few other points have been raised, but I will focus on those raised by my hon. Friend.

I should say at the outset that the laws that govern our elections are an integral part of the UK’s democratic framework and therefore something that we should be proud of, respect, protect, and aim to promote. They ensure that there is a level playing field for all candidates, parties and campaigners participating in UK elections, provide a level of protection in regulating the registration of campaigners and parties, ensure that election-related expenses are accounted for, and provide checks and balances. In addition, the Electoral Commission, as the regulator, plays an important role in the electoral framework to ensure that candidates, parties and campaigners are complying with the law.

Let me turn first to my hon. Friend’s point about his disagreement with the Supreme Court’s ruling that there should be no additional requirement for a candidate or an agent to authorise the provisions of free or discounted goods or services. He speaks of amending the primary legislation that governs this point and proposes that it could be amended by way of a statutory instrument so that authorisation becomes required in both types of case. The Government are considering this judgment very carefully and will continue to do so, as will I, in the light of the arguments that have been put tonight. There are serious implications for the law on notional expenditure for electoral candidates. We will continue to talk to the political parties to understand the implications for future campaigns and to consider potential solutions. Indeed, I will be discussing this only tomorrow with a cross-party delegation from the other House.

However, one point I would make tonight is on whether this could or should be done through primary or through secondary legislation. That deserves some consideration. It may not be appropriate, entirely, to seek to amend the primary legislation, as proposed, through the use of the order-making power that is found, as my hon. Friend set out, in paragraph 15 of schedule 4A to the RPA 1983. That schedule sets out the general categories of election expenses. His proposed changes would be a fundamental change to the meaning and effect of notional expenditure provisions in that legislation. It is therefore a fair consideration that any such amendment should be done by primary legislation rather than by an order-making power. I offer that to the House in terms of considering the complexity of the change that we might be looking at.

Mr Harper: I approach this matter with care, as I have been in my hon. Friend’s position in the past and know how complex this legislation is. May I just probe her on the answer she is giving to my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay)? I thought that his solution was not actually making a fundamental change but putting the legislation back to what we all thought it was, and what I think Members had thought they were doing when they legislated in the first place.

Chloe Smith: I thank my right hon. Friend. As he says, he has stood at the Dispatch Box in this role, and he, too, will have grappled with the intricacies of the RPA, the PPERA, and more besides. I understand his point, which I would answer by way of an example. Only tonight, I have just come from leading a statutory instrument debate on a further election expenses order. I am a very lucky Minister. I have had the opportunity to be part of three of four election-related debates in only one day. That measure was perhaps a more straightforward example of candidates’ electoral spending limits. We therefore have, at this very moment, some very practical examples before the House of what I would suggest is the right use of that order-making power. That was a different order of thing. I would suggest to my right hon. Friend, then even the way that he characterises this proposed change. We do need to consider whether such a thing should be done by ordermaking or in primary legislation. Whatever the genesis of the problem—whether it came from the Supreme Court or from a different source—it is right that we give it that consideration.

Mr Harper: Can I just check the Government’s position on this? I know what the view of my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet is—that the position was clear before last year and the Supreme Court’s decision in July changed the understanding of the position. Is it the Government’s understanding that before the Supreme Court’s decision, the law was clear, as my hon. Friend set it out, and then the Supreme Court changed everyone’s interpretation of it? In other words, do the Government think that there is something that we need to fix, or do they think that the Supreme Court just set out what everyone thought the law was and therefore we do not need to do anything to fix it?

Chloe Smith: I think it is fair to say that the Government certainly recognise that the position has been brought into a lack of clarity. The net position right now is that candidates and agents may well be seeking a clearer understanding, and so the question is how to help to provide that. I will come on to ways of doing so.

I want to turn briefly to the arguments put by my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet about how party and candidate spending rules interact. He is arguing, quite understandably, that the law in this area requires reform as well—again, due to a lack of clarity. The Supreme Court itself acknowledges that separating local from national expenditure can sometimes be a difficult exercise. Certainly, the Government’s view, absolutely, is that ensuring that the electoral framework is well understood and operates effectively is important for all of us. One piece of work that is going on is that since 2017 the
Electoral Commission has produced a series of updated non-statutory guidance documents on electoral spending for political parties, candidates and third-party campaigners for parliamentary general elections, local government elections, and other elections. That includes specific guidance on managing spending returns and others.

In addition, the Electoral Commission has been working on new statutory codes of practice for registered political parties and candidates. Those are intended to add clarity and give examples of how the law applies to different kinds of electoral spending. I will make a few points on the codes, which I hope will be helpful, and then on what the Government will do.

The code for candidates clarifies the qualifying expenses for candidates that must be declared in a candidate’s spending return and candidate expenses that are exempted. It provides guidance on the cases or circumstances in which expenses are regarded as incurred for the purposes of a candidate’s election. The code also seeks to provide clarity on notional expenditure, which has been discussed at length tonight.

The code for parties similarly clarifies the qualifying expenses that must be declared in a party’s spending return and includes general principles on all campaign expenditure incurred and on expenses that are excluded. As well as guidance and codes, legislative change is always an option to reform electoral law, and we should look at that carefully.

Mr Harper: I am grateful to the Minister for being so generous in taking interventions. Can she set out for the House how the position outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean asked a clear question: what was the intent? Was the intent of Parliament where we once were and what we all understood, or was it what the Supreme Court has finally come up with? If the Electoral Commission is so keen on what the Supreme Court came up with, why has it not put that in its latest 2019 guidance for local candidates? That is the reason I am trying to put the pitch back to what we have all understood for many years—from 1868 onwards—by a simple three-and-a-half-line statutory instrument. I recommend that this be given the most urgent consideration.

Chloe Smith: My hon. Friend reiterates a number of important points. He is right that this requires urgent consideration, and I have confirmed that the Government are looking at the position and want to help ensure that there is clarity. In this House, we are legislators; we are responsible for looking at the law and whether it is clear. As to the regulator’s responsibility to provide usable guidance promptly, I observe again that the Electoral Commission is separately accountable to the House. There have been questions tonight from my hon. Friend and others that the House will wish to satisfy itself of for its oversight of the Electoral Commission, which, as you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, is through the Speaker’s Committee. I encourage Members to direct some of their questions to that source. That is the right thing to do.

What I can talk about is the Government’s next steps, so let me add something in relation to the codes of practice that I have mentioned. First, the commission concluded its public consultation on them in December 2018, and Ministers will review those draft codes before they are put to Parliament. Again, I emphasise that because that is the right and proper opportunity for the Government to contribute their part, but also for this Parliament to do so. The commission aims to have them approved by Parliament in time for elections in 2021. The Government will continue to work with the Electoral Commission on the statutory codes of practice, because we recognise the importance of having clear and accessible codes to provide further clarity on electoral spending.

Alex Chalk: There can be no doubt but that the Minister is attending to these matters with her customary diligence. Does she agree with me, however, that we can have endless codes of conduct, but that will not address the potential mischief? The situation is that somebody who is being mischievous could in effect sabotage a candidate’s campaign by flying an aeroplane towing a banner at great expense, and that may render the individual liable to conviction, punishment and disgrace. No code of conduct is going to solve that, is it?

Chloe Smith: Yes, in short, I do recognise the example given, and I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for expounding it. I am also grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet, who added other compelling examples, whether about leaflets or in relation to other hostile actors seeking to do such harm. I understand those concerns, and I am glad they have been laid out clearly in examples tonight.
Mr Harper: The Minister is being generous in giving way. I want to pick up a point she made about the code of conduct. She talked about clarity, but from listening carefully to my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet, I think that while part of the problem is about clarity, post the Supreme Court’s decision, the issue is not really clarity. The law is clear, because of the Supreme Court’s judgment, but the problem is that the law, as the Supreme Court set out, is not a good outcome because it allows others to cause mischief. This is not about making the law clear; it is about changing the law back to what we all thought it was in the first place, and only we in this Parliament can do that.

Chloe Smith: Yes, and this brings me neatly to the concluding part of my remarks. This is precisely the piece that we in the House and the Government would seek to consider, which is whether we should change the law to provide such clarity. The argument has been put very well tonight that there is a lack of clarity. That has been exemplified and expanded on, and the question remains about the consideration of that judgment and its implications for the law on notional expenditure for electoral candidates.

It is right that we continue to talk to the political parties to understand the implications for future campaigns and to consider potential solutions. Indeed, the Government proactively put this forward as a topic of discussion at the parliamentary parties panel, which we use to consult on these issues, last December. As I mentioned earlier, I will be meeting representatives from across the parties as soon as tomorrow to discuss their views.

Mr Lord: I thank the Minister, on behalf of colleagues, for those assurances. Given the importance of this matter, could she give us some sort of timeline? There are different ways to get this new understanding sorted out and on to the statute book, but whichever way her Department chooses, may we at least have a timeline so that this important matter is sorted out once and for all?

Chloe Smith: I would like to be able to do so, but I am not in a position to do so. My hon. Friends in the Whips Office will have heard that request, and they may in turn be able to advise me about what may be manageable in the forthcoming parliamentary business. However, I intend to continue considering the matter carefully, as I hope that I have outlined, because we need a better understanding of a few related complexities. For example, were we to make the change, how would we avoid the possibility of further abuses being committed between categories? Proper consideration needs to be given to such a change and to which power could be used to do that, as I said earlier. I give the House a commitment that I will continue to consider those important aspects with Cabinet Office officials.

Jim Shannon: On that point, I think that the thrust of what hon. Members have put forward tonight is the need for clarification. They also referred to the upcoming council elections in May. Many of us are seeking that clarification before May, so can the Minister give some indication of what will happen?

Chloe Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention and, indeed, for his earlier expression of support for improving the integrity of all elections through the use of voter ID at polling stations. I have set out tonight a number of the tools being used to try to give that clarity: the guidance from the Electoral Commission, the work on the codes and the question of legislative reform. As he will have just heard, I am unable to commit to a clear date for legislative reform tonight, because our considerations need to continue, but I hope that some elements of the existing guidance may still be helpful to all candidates and agents, not just those of us in this Chamber, in the upcoming local elections.

Let me come to a conclusion. It is also important that we have cross-party consensus on any legislative options, because these matters, which apply to our entire democratic framework, ought to be above mere party politics. We would require that consensus before we could proceed with a legislative option. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet again for raising this important matter. As he and I have set out, these rules exist for a good reason: they create a level playing field by ensuring that all associated candidate and party costs are accounted for within electoral spending limits, and they prevent the misuse of electoral spending. The Government will continue to work with the regulator to ensure that there is clear guidance on electoral spending, including through the codes of practice to which I referred. We will continue to consider the implications of the Supreme Court judgment, with a view to protecting those important principles that underpin our democratic framework, which include fairness to candidates and agents and of course the concept of a level playing field, which has been well articulated tonight.

Question put and agreed to.

8.43 pm
House adjourned.
Recall of MPs Act 2015:
Member for Peterborough

Letter from Operations Manager, Central Criminal Court:

“I am writing on behalf of the Central Criminal Court in relation to the re-trial of Fiona Onasanya MP on a charge of Perverting the Course of Public Justice. I am writing to you as required by s.4(2) of the Recall of MPs Act 2015 to inform you that Ms Onasanya was convicted by the Jury of the offence on 19 December 2018 and that, on 29 January 2019, Mr Justice Stuart-Smith sentenced her to 3 months imprisonment.”

Letter from Registrar of Criminal Appeals:

“In accordance with s.4(4) of the Recall of MPs Act 2015, I write to inform you Fiona Onasanya has submitted an appeal against conviction, which I have referred to the full court and which is listed for hearing on 5th March. I also confirm that we have received no Attorney General referral and that no application may now be made as the time limit has expired and cannot be extended.”
Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Solar Power

1. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What steps his Department has taken to ensure that solar power can compete on a level playing field with other energy generation technologies.

Claire Perry: I agree entirely with the hon. Lady about this being an important part of our energy market, which is why I am so proud that 99% of our solar installations have happened since a Conservative-led Government have been in power. I frequently meet the Solar Trade Association, which is always a pleasure. I encourage her to look beyond a regime of subsidy for delivering renewable energy, as the evidence of the numbers suggests that there are 2.3 GW of solar projects in the pipeline that already have or are awaiting planning permission and that could be delivered without subsidy. We are moving rapidly to a subsidy-free world for solar generation. [Interruption.] The hon. Lady shakes her head, but it is true. It is important that we do not equate subsidy with output, and with actually delivering the power we want.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): Does the Minister agree that making solar power compulsory for all new builds would be beneficial for the homeowner, would remove any need for subsidy and would cost the taxpayer nothing?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend raises an excellent point. He will know that building regulations now set minimum energy standards, couched in performance terms rather than being prescriptivist about the types of technology that should be used. Builders are increasingly adding renewable energy systems, but I am always interested to see what more we can do to bring forward such a good way of lowering bills and CO₂ emissions.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Both solar and wind have been very successful in driving down industry costs, but does my hon. Friend recognise that that poses a challenge to technologies such as wave and tidal that are competing against solar and wind? Such technologies are chasing a number that is always falling faster than they can keep up with.

Claire Perry: I do. I was pleased to meet the Marine Energy Council a few days ago. The meeting was supported by a cross-party group of MPs, and we discussed exactly this issue and how, in a cost-effective way, we might look to continue supporting technologies that are further from market.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): On Friday children across the country will go on strike, saying they have lost confidence in the Government’s ability to tackle climate change. Does the Minister think these children are wrong, or can she explain to them why the UK is spending £10.5 billion to subsidise fossil fuels—more than any other country in Europe—at the same time as scrapping the solar export tariff and forcing some people to give their surplus solar energy back to the grid for free?

Claire Perry: There are a number of inconsistencies in that question, but I think it is incredible what young people across the world are doing. They did the same
thing at COP, where we had some compelling statements. Young people expect us to wake up to the reality of the future, which is why I am so proud to stand here and tell them that they live in a country that has led the world in decarbonisation over the last 20 years and is the first major industrial economy to ask for real advice, rather than a few fake words, on how we will get to net zero. [Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman chuntering on about net fossil fuels, but there are no direct subsidies for fossil fuels. I think he is suggesting that we should not have an oil and gas industry in the UK. I would like to see how that plays out with his colleagues north of the border.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s commitment that no small-scale producer should export electricity to the grid for nothing. Will she confirm that as well as applying to solar, that would extend to small-scale hydro?

Claire Perry: Yes, that is absolutely correct. I know that my hon. Friend takes an interest in this, so I wish to emphasise that we recognise the value of community energy, which has benefited in many cases from this scheme. If people have the chance to respond to the consultation emphasising the value of that, it would be much appreciated.

Insecure Work

2. Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support people in insecure work. [909142]

8. Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support people in insecure work. [909149]

9. Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to support people in insecure work. [909150]

23. Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support people in insecure work. [909164]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Britain has a very strong record in this area, with the highest level of employment in our history, combined with some of the strongest rights for workers in Europe. Last month, I announced new measures to counter discrimination at work against women returning from maternity leave, and we are one of the first countries in Europe so to do.

Grahame Morris: I thank the Secretary of State for that reply, but may I remind him that unemployment in my constituency is up by almost 1,000 on the same period last year, to 2,860? May I also tell him that a fire at Country Style Foods in Peterlee in my constituency has left a number of people looking for work, including one temporary worker employed through an agency? She had worked for the same company for seven years on a zero-hours contract, but a short break in her employment has stopped her accessing contributions-based benefits. In most zero-hours contracts, this “flexibility” is illusory. When would he consider that zero-hours contracts are inappropriate?

Greg Clark: Two thirds of workers on zero-hours contracts say that they do not want any more hours and that they are content. On the break in service, the hon. Gentleman will know that that relates to one of the recommendations of the Taylor review that we have committed to implementing.

Lilian Greenwood: It has been almost two months since the Minister announced that workers on zero-hours contracts would get the right to request a stable contract. There are 65,000 people in the east midlands whose main job is on a zero-hours contract; our region has the highest percentage of people on these contracts, according to the Office for National Statistics. That means tens of thousands of people vulnerable to unfair treatment at work, uncertain about whether they can afford to get through the next week, let alone plan for the future. In this HeartUnions Week, the TUC is rightly calling for a ban on exploitative zero-hours contracts. When will the Government act to tackle insecurity in the workplace, rather than just tell workers to ask nicely for a permanent contract?

Greg Clark: The Taylor report, and indeed the Select Committee, considered the recommendation that has come from some sources to ban zero-hours contracts. The Taylor report concluded that banning zero-hours contracts“would negatively impact many more people than it helped.” The joint report by the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and the Work and Pensions Committee found that people on zero-hours contracts preferred to have that flexibility, for the most part.—[Interruption.] That was the evidence given to the Committee. The hon. Lady will know that we have committed to bringing in the right to request a stable-hours contract.

Alex Norris: I refer colleagues to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Last week, the GMB and Hermes struck a landmark deal that proved that secure work is compatible with new and emerging industries. Today, I am writing to DPD, which has a depot in my constituency, to ask it to meet the unions and follow suit. Will the Secretary of State say today that it is important that we establish good laws in this country, but companies can get on with it now? They can get around the table with their unions and secure the jobs for their people in their workplace.

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. I met Tim Roache, the head of the GMB, last week and congratulated him and Hermes on having come to their agreement. It shows that good employers can work with their employees to agree what is the best for them mutually, and it is a very good example of that.

Karen Lee: According to the TUC, 3.8 million people are working in insecure jobs with no guarantee of hours, which represents a 36% increase since 2010. One of my constituents in Lincoln, Dan, is struggling to break out of the cycle of precarious work. He told me: “You cannot support a family”— and he is doing his best—“if every morning you’re turning up for a job that might not exist.”
Does the Minister agree that the unacceptable increase in insecure work fundamentally undermines the UK’s high employment levels?

Greg Clark: I am glad the hon. Lady mentions our high employment levels—she is right to do so—because for people to have the best opportunities for prosperity we have to ensure that there are jobs available. She will know that we have more jobs and more vacancies in this country than we ever have had. The number of workers on zero-hours contracts is just 2.4% of all employees, and that is falling, as it happens. As I say, two thirds of them prefer that flexibility. The right approach, in line with the recommendations of the Taylor review, is to give workers the opportunity to request a stable, fixed contract, but to allow flexibility for those who want it.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): My right hon. Friend is right to recognise that zero-hours contracts give flexibility to particular groups of people, many of whom have caring responsibilities and peripatetic work patterns. Without those contracts, they would not be able to enter the world of work and benefit themselves. Does he recall that it was the last Labour Government that had these contracts as exclusive and that we got rid of that abuse?

Greg Clark: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We made that change, and it was of great benefit. We should be proud of the increase in employment that has taken place. According to the Resolution Foundation, the biggest gainers principally have been women, ethnic minorities, single parents and disabled people. That is something we should be proud of.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that with the creation of 3 million brand-new jobs since 2010, more people in our country are in secure employment than ever before in our nation’s history?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In fact, the number is 3.25 million more jobs since 2010, and 80% of those have been full-time. The number of zero-hours contracts has actually fallen.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Rugby has the second highest rate of people in work in the west midlands, and one reason for that is the flexibility in the local labour market, especially in the growing logistics sector. Does the Secretary of State agree that for many people, the ability to choose the hours they work is important to them?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Taylor report called for two-sided flexibility, so that employers and employees can make a choice as to what the best arrangements are for them both.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): The hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) says that the east midlands has the highest proportion of people on zero-hours contracts, but she failed to add that we also have the highest economic growth outside of London and the south-east. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the best guarantees of improving workers’ rights, conditions and wages are a strong demand for labour, a growing economy and the control of unskilled migration, which is something we will be able to do after Brexit?

Greg Clark: I agree with my hon. Friend that having jobs and vacancies available is the best source of security for people in this country. We have a proud record of having secured that over the past eight years.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Last week, it was reported that the Government plan to bring forward legislation to commit to guaranteeing workers’ rights outside the EU. Will the Secretary of State confirm that no Government can bind their successors? As easily as legislation can be passed, a future Tory Government could take those rights away, just as this Government have done by introducing tribunal fees, passing the draconian Trade Union Act 2016 and failing to crack down on bogus self-employment. Why would Members on the Opposition Benches trust anything that the Government say about ensuring workers’ rights in law?

Greg Clark: The record of this Government has been to extend workers’ rights way beyond what the European Union has offered. In the UK, we have 52 weeks of maternity leave, for example, compared with a requirement of 14 weeks in the EU. This House has chosen to give rights of paternity leave and pay to fathers and partners that are not yet available in the EU. The measures that the hon. Lady knows we are about to introduce for people returning from maternity leave makes us a leader in Europe on the issue. She should be confident in the ability of this House to promote and protect workers’ rights.

Under-25s: Working Conditions and Pay

3. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What steps is he taking to help ensure fair (a) working conditions and (b) pay for people aged under 25.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): Through the good work plan, the Government are strengthening employment rights for all workers. We are introducing measures that will support innovative businesses, while ensuring that workers of all ages have access to fair and decent work. In April, we will introduce inflation-beating increases to the national minimum wage rates, benefiting 350,000 young workers directly.

Martyn Day: Despite the PM promising on her first day in the job to tackle burning injustices, this Government have consistently refused to introduce a real living wage for all, with the under-25s particularly hard hit. If Government will not act, will they devolve these powers to Holyrood?

Kelly Tolhurst: I point out that some of the highest unemployment rates are among that age group so our priority is to make sure that young people are able to gain secure work and experience. In actual fact, nine out of 10 workers between the ages of 18 and 24 are paid above the national minimum wage rate, and we are continuing to work towards increasing that year on year.
4. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What recent assessment his Department has made of the prevalence of human and labour rights abuses in the global supply chains of UK supermarkets. [909144]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): The retail sector is the UK’s largest private sector employer and recognises that it has a responsibility for this issue, and it is pioneering responsible sourcing practices. The Government welcome campaigns such as the British Retail Consortium’s “Better Retail Better World” and Oxfam’s “Behind the Barcodes”. The Government remain determined to eliminate exploitation, and the landmark Modern Slavery Act 2015 increases specialist support for victims and places requirements on businesses to be transparent about their supply chains.

**Kerry McCarthy:** I secured a debate last year on this issue, highlighting the shocking extent of modern slavery in our supermarket supply chain. Will the Minister tell me what action has been taken since then?

**Kelly Tolhurst:** I thank the hon. Lady for raising this question and for giving us an opportunity to talk about this matter. The retail sector regards human rights and supporting sustainable markets as fundamental principles within its psyche. The British Retail Consortium has played a pivotal role, and it was a founder member of the “Stronger Together” scheme. Under the Modern Slavery Act, there is a duty on employers to submit modern slavery statements, and they should be doing so by the end of March.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): May I invite my hon. Friend to meet Sir Charlie Mayfield, who is the chairman of the John Lewis Partnership, which of course includes Waitrose? She will know that it has an audit trail to ensure that all its goods are produced ethically. When can she meet him?

**Kelly Tolhurst:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question and say that we meet Sir Charlie Mayfield regularly. This gives us a great opportunity to highlight the fact that there are thousands of businesses really stepping up to the mark on this issue. ASOS and Co-op are leading the way on transparency, and are identifying risks and taking action. M&S, Unilever and Tesco are also signing up to the employers’ pay principles.

**Jo Swinson** (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): We all want to be able to buy food in the supermarkets without trampling on the human rights of the people who produced it. Yet less than half of all agricultural companies are complying with their requirements under the Modern Slavery Act 2015, so what changes will the Government make to ensure that companies properly report what they are doing to tackle problems with human rights in their supply chains?

**Kelly Tolhurst:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question. The Home Office has written to more than 17,000 agricultural businesses reminding them of their obligations to submit their modern slavery statements. We are committed to the Guiding Principles for Business and Human Rights, a UN initiative, and we are proud to be the first country to have an action plan in place, but, as with all these things, we will continue to keep them under monitoring.

**John Howell** (Henley) (Con): In my role as the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to Nigeria, I am aware that Guinness Nigeria is being sold by Tesco. Is the Minister aware that Diageo and other companies in Nigeria have pledged to eradicate modern slavery from their supply chains?

**Kelly Tolhurst:** I thank my hon. Friend for his suggestion. He is quite right. That is just another example of where, working with Government, is taking action to stamp out these practices where they identify them and telling us how they are taking action to eradicate them.

**Leaving the EU: Consumer Rights**

5. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that consumers are informed of any changes to their rights after the UK leaves the EU. [909146]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): We are committed to protecting consumers and providing clear information so that they understand their rights. That is why we have launched a public information campaign to reach out to consumers, citizens and businesses. As part of that, we have provided tailored information to consumers about their rights after EU exit. We are working closely with partners such as Citizens Advice on this issue.

**Liz Twist:** Will the Minister tell us what assessment has been made of the impact of a no-deal Brexit on the UK’s product safety regime, and what legal protection consumers will have when buying future products and services from the EU?

**Kelly Tolhurst:** The hon. Lady raises an important point. Every piece of no-deal legislation that we have brought through the House has had an impact assessment, and we have already submitted five pieces of legislation. We have been very clear that consumer rights will be protected when we leave the European Union, and I am committed to doing that.

**Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): In the Minister’s estimation, what has the Office for Product Safety and Standards achieved in its first year of existence?

**Kelly Tolhurst:** My hon. Friend is right to highlight that the new Office for Product Safety and Standards has got its strategy plan together. We are working through that, working with data-led intelligence to ensure that we tackle product safety inequalities when they appear.

**Gill Furniss** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): As the Government continue to threaten the public with a catastrophic no-deal Brexit, which they admit themselves would be detrimental to consumers, a report by Which? shows that a staggering 82% of people said that the Government had communicated either too little information or no information at all about the
impact of such a Brexit. Will the Minister tell the House whether that is a result of sheer incompetence, or is it simply that the Government no longer care about consumers?

Kelly Tolhurst: This Government are committed to retaining the high levels of consumer protection that we have. We have been very clear about that; we set out our intentions in the consumers Green Paper. We have launched advertising campaigns and published guidance on the Government’s website regarding certain elements of consumer rights. We are working closely with the Consumer Protection Partnership, which brings together the enforcement and the information bodies that work with consumers. We are committed to delivering for consumers, and that will not change—in or out of the EU.

Tendring: Skilled Jobs

6. Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to help businesses create more highly skilled jobs in Tendring. [909147]

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): The South East local enterprise partnership, which covers the district of Tendring, has received £590 million through the local growth fund to drive regional development. Business support for small and medium-sized enterprises is available through the LEP’s Business Essex, Southend and Thurrock growth hub. The LEP is funding projects to strengthen coastal communities, including Tendring, as well as supporting the highly skilled offshore renewables sector.

Giles Watling: High-skilled jobs are clearly useless without anyone to fill them, and the employee supply chain necessitates a clear role for further education. I recently signed a cross-party letter to the Chancellor calling for further education funding to be increased to above inflation in the next financial year. Does the Minister agree with me and 164 other colleagues that that is a good idea?

Chris Skidmore: The Government have protected the base rate of funding for 16 to 19-year-olds until 2020 and are working closely with the post-18 funding review led by Sir Philip Augar to ensure a coherent vision for further and higher education. As part of its local industrial strategy for the district of Tendring, I welcome the fact that the South East LEP is investing in further education, including £10 million for the Colchester Institute’s Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Innovation Centre, its Learning and Technology Centre in Braintree, and a centre of excellence in health and care in Colchester.

Energy Market: Diversity Supply

7. Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): What steps he has taken to ensure diversity of supply in the energy market. [909148]

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): My right hon. Friend for that answer. However, can she reassure the House, and many of our constituents, that the move from the existing feed-in tariff to the smart export guarantee will not jeopardise the viability of solar energy anaerobic digester producers and that they will continue to be paid for exporting energy to the grid?

Claire Perry: My right hon. Friend is quite right. As I said earlier, we are very keen to ensure, through the smart export guarantee, that we move to the lower-subsidy or subsidy-free future that we know we can get to, but that we continue to see the sorts of viable projects that he references. I would urge him to make sure that the views of his constituents are reflected in the consultation that closes on 5 March.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Has the Minister had recent conversations with the power distribution networks? They are very powerful, they transmit all the electricity, and they are owned by very strange people, in my view. Warren Buffett owns all the power distribution in the north through Berkshire Hathaway. The Chinese own it all in London and the south-east through the Cheung Kong and Li Ka Shing enterprises. Are they efficient? Are they effective? Do they work in the national interest, or in somebody else’s national interest?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman, I am sure, shares my view that we should have the most efficient and well-invested energy system going forward that keeps costs down for consumers. He will also know that since privatisation—[Interruption.] Well, if he wants an answer perhaps he could stop shouting at me and listen. We have seen a large reduction in power outages and an increase in energy security. We have to make sure that the system is fit for the future because, as he knows, much of what happens in the future will not be creation of energy on the old coalfield sites and distribution down the transmission lines—there will be far more decentralised energy, and we continue to look forward to that development. [Interruption.]
more we can do.

innovative proposals in this area. I was pleased, as I see that that project has now been brought forward in a form of the Swansea tidal lagoon. It is very pleasing to continue to look actively at this sector. Indeed, we have invested over £50 million in innovation in the sector over the past few years. However, it was right to reject the most expensive power station ever proposed in the form of the Swansea tidal lagoon. It is very pleasing to see that that project has now been brought forward in a form that does not require any Government subsidy. That is clearly a vote of confidence in this sector and this technology going forward. Our door is open for innovative proposals in this area. I was pleased, as I said, to meet the Marine Energy Council to see what more we can do.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister outline any recent findings regarding the harnessing of tidal power and any project the Department is pursuing or overseeing?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman will know that we continue to look actively at this sector. Indeed, we have invested over £50 million in innovation in the sector over the past few years. However, it was right to reject the most expensive power station ever proposed in the form of the Swansea tidal lagoon. It is very pleasing to see that that project has now been brought forward in a form that does not require any Government subsidy. That is clearly a vote of confidence in this sector and this technology going forward. Our door is open for innovative proposals in this area. I was pleased, as I said, to meet the Marine Energy Council to see what more we can do.

Research and Development Trends

10. Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): What comparative assessment he has made of trends in the level of spending on research and development in (a) the UK and (b) other EU member states.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): The Department regularly assesses comparative levels of R&D expenditure in the UK and in EU member states. The Office for National Statistics has estimated that overall gross R&D expenditure in the UK was £33.1 billion in 2016—1.7% of GDP, compared with the EU average of 1.9% of GDP. We must do more, so in our industrial strategy we have committed to spending 2.4% of GDP on R&D across the UK economy by 2027.

Vicky Ford: Many British-based scientists are concerned that their participation in cross-border science networks might be jeopardised by Brexit. Can the Minister confirm that it is this Government’s intention that the UK should continue to participate in Horizon Europe’s next framework programme, FP9, and that the best way for us to help to make sure that that happens is for this House to support the withdrawal agreement?

Chris Skidmore: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend on this issue. The Government’s priority is a smooth and orderly exit from the EU as set out in principle in the EU withdrawal agreement. Voting for the agreement would provide continuity and reassurance for researchers in continuing to participate in the Horizon programmes. It is no secret that we want to explore association with Horizon Europe. The political declaration makes clear our joint intention to establish terms and conditions regarding UK participation in EU programmes as part of our future relationship.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): As I said to the Minister yesterday, I have two universities in my constituency, and they are very concerned about research and development; they do a lot of work for companies like Jaguar Land Rover, and mainly in the industrial sector. What guarantee can the Minister give that the level of funding will be maintained after 2020? The Chancellor has not committed to that so far.

Chris Skidmore: I am proud, as the Universities Minister, that we have in this country three of the world’s top 10 universities when it comes to research. We want to ensure that we continue to have that international reputation. We have made Treasury guarantees on the underwrite extension, ensuring that we continue to be part of all the projects that are part of Horizon 2020. We want to ensure that the association with Horizon Europe has universities at the front and centre of it.

Leaving the EU: Support for Businesses based in Scotland

11. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on fiscal support for businesses based in Scotland to prepare for the UK leaving the EU without a deal.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The Chancellor and I work closely together to support businesses right across the United Kingdom, but as I said before, the best option for Scotland in facing Brexit is to provide certainty to business by supporting a deal that has been proposed with the European Union.

Gavin Newlands: I am not entirely convinced by that answer. With the risk of red meat facing tariffs of around 40%, the president of the National Farmers Union of Scotland, Andrew McCormick, described a no-deal Brexit as “catastrophic” for Scotland’s farmers and crofters. In the event that the Prime Minister is unable to get her deal through the Commons and opts for no deal instead of extending article 50, and given what the Secretary of State has said about no deal, will he resign?

Greg Clark: The solution is in the hon. Gentleman’s own hands. The NFU has been clear about this in Scotland and every part of the United Kingdom—it said that we should back the deal that has been negotiated. He has the opportunity to do that.

21. Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): How will the Government’s industrial strategy support the Scottish economy?

Greg Clark: I am delighted to say that we work closely with the Scottish Government and universities and businesses across Scotland. One example is the sector deals that we have struck, including the life sciences sector deal, in which Scotland is strong, which means investment going into Scottish institutions and creating good jobs now and in the future.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): A recent survey by Ernst & Young found that 92% of Scottish firms do not feel fully ready
for Brexit. They are being left adrift by this Government. Given the calamitous collapse of the phantom deal for the ferry company with no ships—the Seaborne Freight fiasco—does the Secretary of State stick by his comment that the contract was “prudent and responsible”?

Greg Clark: The Secretary of State for Transport gave a statement on that yesterday and was clear that no Government money had been put into that. When it comes to building confidence for businesses in Scotland, which I hope the hon. Gentleman and I want to do, he will know that the way to allay businesses’ concerns is to ensure that we conclude an agreement. There is one that has the support of businesses in Scotland and across the country, and I hope his party will back it.

Drew Hendry: That answer is simply not good enough. Even the former head of the civil service, Bob Kerslake, said that the fiasco will “just confirm the view of many that this country is in a mess”. If the UK Government cannot put in their own services, will the Secretary of State support the SNP’s demand for the Chancellor to use the spring statement to provide firms with the fiscal support they need to put in place their own measures to get them through this Tory Brexit mess?

Greg Clark: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman would raise fiscal matters, when some of the fiscal decisions taken in Scotland recently have further diminished investors’ confidence. For Scotland to be the highest-tax part of the United Kingdom is a terrible signal to not only workers but businesses.

Yorkshire: Economic Development

12. John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): What plans he has to support economic development in Yorkshire.

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): I know that the hon. Gentleman is a proud Yorkshireman, and he will know that we frequently discuss the economic success story that is Yorkshire and the Humber. It may be a little bit politically incorrect, but I am sure he is proud of the fact that in the first three years of the Conservative Government from 2010, Yorkshire created more jobs than the whole of France.

John Grogan: But given that economic growth in Yorkshire and the Humber has on average been about 1% since 2010, compared with 3% in London, does the Minister see merit in the proposals and the economic case for One Yorkshire devolution that have been presented to Ministers? It is backed by 18 local authority leaders, many of them distinguished Conservatives.

Claire Perry: I know my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government is reviewing the proposals. I see in his place the Mayor of the Sheffield city region, the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), who is doing a fantastic job. I say to the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) that in the places where large-scale mayoralties are working well, such as the west midlands with Andy Street or on Teesside with Mayor Houchen, a cross-party proposal has been brought forward, bottom up, for the Government then to make a decision on.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. No, no. Last time I visited Ochil and South Perthshire, the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, it was a most stimulating experience, but my recollection is that the constituency was a considerable distance from Yorkshire. I call Chris Davies.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): And Wales is even further, Mr Speaker. [Laughter.]

Mr Speaker: Well done.

Manufacturing

13. Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What plans he has to support manufacturing in the UK.

19. Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to support manufacturing after the UK leaves the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): Our modern industrial strategy for our whole country will ensure that the UK remains one of the most competitive locations in the world for manufacturing investment. We are investing over £600 million in the high-value manufacturing Catapult, and up to £167 million in our “Made Smarter” industrial digitalisation programme. I hope and believe that this will help UK manufacturers develop, adopt and exploit new technologies to make us really successful in the future.

Chris Davies: The British soft drinks industry plays a very important part in the manufacturing sector in our country and should really be applauded for the way in which it has adapted to meet the recent sugar tax. With the Government’s announcement that a bottle return scheme will be introduced in the next few years, will my hon. Friend assure the industry and this House that this scheme will be uniform right across the country?

Richard Harrington: Much as I would like to do so, I cannot give my hon. Friend that assurance, because waste and recycling policy is a devolved matter. However, it is our preference that the scheme is UK-wide, and we will really be pushing that with the devolved authorities.

Preet Kaur Gill: The latest monthly figures from the Office for National Statistics reveal that manufacturing output has collapsed into recession territory, with a sixth consecutive month of falling output. As part of that, manufacturing fell 4.9% in the final quarter of last year. Will the Government listen to Labour, trade unions and businesses, and take the threat of a no-deal Brexit off the table to restore manufacturing sector confidence and protect my constituents’ jobs?

Richard Harrington: I agree with the hon. Lady and with the Prime Minister that a hard Brexit without a deal would be a disaster for the economy of this country, and Toyota, Jaguar Land Rover and many people have said how important the just-in-time process is. I hope that the hon. Lady will listen, and that she will vote for the Prime Minister’s deal, which will give the motor and manufacturing industries the transition period they need.
Motor Manufacturing

14. John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support the motor manufacturing sector in the UK.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The UK automotive sector is a vital part of our economy, generating £78 billion of turnover and directly employing 160,000 people in manufacturing alone. We are working with the sector through our industrial strategy and, in particular, the automotive sector deal, to make sure that our industry leads in the technologies of the future.

John Spellar: The Secretary of State knows that diesel efficiency helps to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, he knows that new diesel engines are also much cleaner and he knows the importance of diesel production for our motor industry as it makes an orderly transition to new propulsion systems, so why is he letting his fellow Cabinet members the Secretaries of State for Transport and for Health and Social Care grandstand in demonising diesel, and why is he not standing up for our car industry and our car workers?

Greg Clark: I say to the right hon. Gentleman, who I know takes an interest in this, that I have always been clear, and indeed the “road to zero” strategy is very clear, that having a new diesel engine is a perfectly reasonable choice as we move towards zero-emission vehicles in the future. That is very clear: I have said it, my colleagues have said it and I am happy to repeat it to the House.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Our car industry is a global success story facing existential challenges—climate change, technology change, market change and Brexit. As 80% of our imported parts come from the European Union and 80% of cars made are exported, including half to the European Union, motor manufacturers say a no deal could mean £4.5 billion in turnover and directly employing 160,000 people in manufacturing alone. We are working with the sector through our industrial strategy and, in particular, the automotive sector deal, to make sure that our industry leads in the technologies of the future.

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Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Our car industry is a global success story facing existential challenges—climate change, technology change, market change and Brexit. As 80% of our imported parts come from the European Union and 80% of cars made are exported, including half to the European Union, motor manufacturers say a no deal could mean £4.5 billion in turnover and directly employing 160,000 people in manufacturing alone. We are working with the sector through our industrial strategy and, in particular, the automotive sector deal, to make sure that our industry leads in the technologies of the future.

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making available to ensure that there are trained and skilled job seekers to work in those post offices if they open in my patch?

Kelly Tolhurst: It is true: it has been too long since I have had the opportunity to visit my hon. Friend’s part of the country. I have met some of his colleagues to talk about post office opportunities in the south-west. As I have already reiterated, we are committed to delivering those rural post offices.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): As the Minister will be aware, in the Postal Services Act 2011 the House has already given its in-principle agreement to mutualise the post office network. Will she indulge a former Post Office Minister and agree to meet me to discuss how the powers in sections 4 and 5 of the Act could be used to take forward this exciting policy innovation?

Kelly Tolhurst: The right hon. Gentleman is quite correct: the Post Office is at the forefront of looking at new ways in which it can modernise and increase the services delivered through our post offices. I will be more than happy to listen to any suggestions that he has—so, yes, of course, at some point I will meet him.

Small Businesses

16. Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to support small businesses.

Kelly Tolhurst: I am glad the hon. Gentleman has raised this issue. We engage with the small business community, the wider business community and all business representation organisations on a weekly basis. It is quite right that we consult a plethora of businesses.

Peter Heaton-Jones: Many of the excellent small businesses in North Devon are in the hospitality sector. Will the Minister assure me that the Government will continue to support those excellent small businesses, which give such good service to our visitors and tourists?

Kelly Tolhurst: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. North Devon is a wonderful part of the country. The tourism sector is particularly important for our economy, providing 1.6 million jobs across all regions and contributing £67.7 billion in gross value added. The Government are committed to supporting the sector and to continuing to work with small businesses through our industrial strategy and the sector deal that is under way.

Kevin Hollinrake: Sadly, HBOS managers were found guilty of defrauding their own small business customers, yet the Financial Reporting Council has steadfastly refused to seriously consider whistleblower evidence that KPMG and the bank colluded to cover up bank losses partly attributable to that fraud. What will my hon. Friend do to ensure that this matter is seriously investigated?

Kelly Tolhurst: My hon. Friend raises a really important question. There have been several criticisms of the FRC, which is why the Secretary of State commissioned Sir John Kingman to lead a review of the regulator. We are taking forward Sir John’s recommendations to create a stronger regulator with stronger powers. I assure my hon. Friend that I will continue to meet him on the particular issue he raises, so that we can find a resolution.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that we should support workers who keep small businesses like cafes and pubs going? In his so-called “Good Work Plan”, the Business Secretary boasted that the Government will ensure that all tips go to workers in full. Where exactly is the Bill that was first promised three years ago?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady is quite right. In October last year, we announced that we will bring forward legislation regarding tipping in the next Session. We are committed to doing that. It is this Government who have brought it forward.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State for International Trade seems to be hell-bent on destroying our businesses, judging by his support for zero import tariffs. Can the Business Minister confirm that she understands the damage that unilaterally imposing zero import tariffs would do to businesses and jobs in this country? Will she confirm whether she or the Business Secretary will remain as members of the Government if that policy is adopted?

Kelly Tolhurst: I am glad the hon. Gentleman has raised this issue. We engage with the small business community, the wider business community and all business representation organisations on a weekly basis. It is quite right that we consult a plethora of businesses.

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Parental Leave: Children with Severe Illnesses

22. Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): What plans his Department has to extend the amount of parental leave for people whose children have severe illnesses.

Kelly Tolhurst: The Government are committed to supporting working families. We are conducting a short and focused review of the provisions for parents of premature, sick and multiple babies, focusing primarily on barriers to the labour market. I have met colleagues, Bliss and The Smallest Things.

Rosie Cooper: In response to the Minister’s reply, may I ask when that review will commence and when we can expect its conclusions?
Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Lady for allowing me to talk about this issue. A short internal review has been carried out by my officials and I expect to receive information on that shortly. I have already committed to keeping cross-party colleagues updated and I happily extend that commitment to her.

Topical Questions

T1. Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Since our last departmental questions, we have been continuing to implement the industrial strategy. We are doing more, for example, to protect businesses and consumers from online threats, with the Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund backing research to make hardware more secure. As we leave the EU, we are determined to continue to be a pioneer in setting the highest standards, including proposals—currently being consulted on—to expand protections for pregnant women and new parents returning to work after having children.

Mrs Latham: Could the Secretary of State tell us what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the creative industries sector deal?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. It was one of the first sector deals. We were very determined to act on the report of Sir Peter Bazalgette, which celebrated the potential for new jobs to be created. It is going extremely well. Investments are being made in virtual reality, creating new opportunities for small businesses to benefit from the technology that larger ones have.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): Since the start of the year, the Financial Times, The Observer, The Times, POLITICO and The Spectator, as well as many specialist publications, have described the looming energy crisis facing the UK following the collapse of plans to develop three nuclear power stations at Wylfa, Moorside and Oldbury, but back in November 2018, the Secretary of State announced that the energy trilemma—the challenge of providing energy that is green, cheap and secure—was coming to an end. Is he still of this view?

Greg Clark: Yes.

Rebecca Long Bailey: That was straight and very to the point. The Secretary of State may have pointed to the falling cost of renewable energy, but he cannot downplay his Government’s policies, unfortunately, which are plunging that industry from crisis to crisis. New deployment of solar has fallen 90% since 2016. New onshore wind deployment has fallen 80%, so that certainly does not sound like the end of the energy trilemma. With people getting nervous about how we are going to keep the lights on, will he describe in detail where exactly he expects the UK to source low-carbon electricity from by the end of the 2020s?

Greg Clark: We have a proud record of being one of the world’s leaders in renewable energy. The proportion of renewable energy on the grid at the moment has hit 33% for the first time in our history. We are the world’s leader in offshore wind. The challenges that the hon. Lady identifies come from the fact that energy sources are falling in price. They are more abundant than ever before and we have established ourselves as the place in the world with the technology to be able to deploy them on the grid. She should welcome that.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): That is an excellent point from my hon. Friend, as we would expect. Luckily, we are on the case and have the Automotive Council skills working group, with which we are doing our best to deal with the problem that he mentions as a partnership between Government and industry.

T2. James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): Jaguar Land Rover in Southend struggles to recruit trained mechanics. As we move towards electric vehicles and more technical vehicles, what more can the Government do to make sure that we fill this skills gap?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): I am very pleased to assure the hon. Lady that we are not only doing enough, but leading the developed world. Our renewables generation has increased fourfold since 2010. We have decarbonised our economy—as our four nations—more than any other country in the G20, and we were the first industrialised country to seriously look at that shocking Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report and ask our own independent Committee on Climate Change for its advice on how we can get to a net zero-carbon economy going forward.

T3. Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): My constituents in Midlothian tell me how concerned they are about the catastrophic impacts that climate change will have, and indeed, is already having. What is the Secretary of State’s response to the long-term forecast by the Met Office showing that global warming could reach 1.5°, the limit aimed for in the Paris agreement, in just five years? Does he honestly believe that the Government are doing enough within their power to stop this?

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): I am very pleased to assure the hon. Lady that we are not only doing enough, but leading the developed world. Our renewables generation has increased fourfold since 2010. We have decarbonised our economy—as our four nations—more than any other country in the G20, and we were the first industrialised country to seriously look at that shocking Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report and ask our own independent Committee on Climate Change for its advice on how we can get to a net zero-carbon economy going forward.

T5. Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): It is concerning that the Department’s research has estimated that 54,000 women a year may lose their jobs due to pregnancy or maternity, and that one in nine women has said that they were fired or made redundant when they returned to work after having a child. What steps can my hon. Friend take to address this issue?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Let me be clear: pregnancy and maternity discrimination is unacceptable and illegal. That is why, last month, the Government announced a consultation on pregnancy and maternity discrimination. The consultation seeks to extend redundancy protection for pregnant women and it seeks views on
what the Department is doing to tackle pregnancy and maternity discrimination. I point out that this will go beyond what the EU currently allows.

T4. [909169] Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): Some 77% of UK organisations operate with limited cyber-security and resilience. The current strategy is failing to protect business from critical cyber-threats. How will the Department swiftly increase business cyber-resilience?

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): The hon. Lady is correct to say that cyber-resilience must be a key part of our industrial strategy. I was in Northern Ireland last Friday to discuss with organisations how they could be involved in our AI programme and with setting up masters programmes in cyber-security.

T7. [909173] Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I was glad to hear of the Minister’s offer to visit the south-west and meet our hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster). Will she continue all the way down to Penzance and meet post offices in my area that are threatened with closure or have already closed?

Kelly Tolhurst: I would love to come to Penzance if time permits—it is an area of the country I would love to visit—and I will continue to work with my hon. Friend to deliver post office services in his region. He is a passionate supporter of the Post Office and I welcome his support for me in my role as the Minister in that area.

T6. [909172] Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It was concerning to hear the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), join the International Trade Secretary just now in failing to rule out zero tariffs in the event of a no deal. Does the Secretary of State not agree that such a move would leave us open to a flood of cheap imports, drive down wages and cost jobs?

Greg Clark: Of course we need to consult—and we are consulting—with businesses and sector organisations to ensure that the right decision is made, but no decision has yet been taken.

T9. [909175] Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): In North Devon, we are passionate about doing our bit to tackle climate change. Will the Minister update me on where we are with reducing carbon emissions?

Claire Perry: With much pleasure. We published figures last week showing that we continue to reduce our emissions, which are down 3½% year on year. I say again that we are decarbonising faster than any other country in the G20. We are doing our bit domestically as well as internationally with our £6 billion of climate spending, and we have formally put our name forward to host the crucial climate change talks in 2020, although we must remember that other countries are still interested.

T8. [909174] Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Healthcare Environmental, based in Shotts, collapsed before Christmas, leaving 150 of my constituents and 450 across the UK redundant. We have managed to sort out redundancy payments for some of those eligible, but they have all lost out on their December pay. Can the Government do anything in a timeous fashion to help the workers get the wages they are due?

Kelly Tolhurst: I recognise the distress felt by constituents in cases of insolvency and where companies cease to trade. The redundancy payment service, operated by the Insolvency Service, has already made statutory redundancy payments to 157 eligible employees. Payments in respect of unpaid wages cannot be made while the company is still not in formal insolvency procedures, but we remain ready to act.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): My office has been meeting representatives of the Coal Authority to talk about geothermal opportunities in Clackmannanshire in my constituency. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss these opportunities?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner for what could be a very valuable source of heat from flooded mine workings. It seems apposite to recognise the effort that went into digging them out, and it would be good to use them in our low-carbon future. As he knows, I continue to look at his ideas with great interest.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Central to economic development in Yorkshire will be the design of the new UK shared prosperity fund. What work is the Secretary of State doing across Government to ensure that the fund works to the maximum benefit of the Yorkshire economy?

Greg Clark: We are having conversations across the UK, including with local leaders, of whom the hon. Gentleman is a distinguished example, and I look forward to continuing those discussions so that we can set out the prospectus.

Anna Soubry (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): My right hon. Friend was right to tell the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee that business was crying out for clarity on Brexit, but we cannot have that clarity until we have a meaningful vote. Will my right hon. Friend therefore confirm that the Government will bring that meaningful vote back to the House as a matter of urgency? It would be wholly irresponsible for it to be held within a matter of days before we are due to leave the European Union.

Greg Clark: My right hon. Friend is right to say that we need to bring certainty and enable businesses to plan for the future, but she is also fortunate, in that the Prime Minister is about to make a statement on the matter.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): The mineworkers’ pension scheme has boosted Government coffers by billions while ex-miners and their widows receive an average pension of £80 a week. Will the Secretary of State meet miners’ representatives and the trustees of the scheme to hammer out a fairer pension deal?

Claire Perry: As the very proud daughter-in-law of a miner’s widow who benefits from the scheme, I take its stewardship very seriously. I believe that it will be
debated in the House in a couple of days, and I should be delighted to discuss it further. I should point out that the extraordinary arrangements that were developed between the Government and the trustees have delivered much higher returns to the beneficiaries than similar schemes, but I continue to be happy to meet Members to discuss the issue.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am extraordinarily grateful to the hon. Lady, but I think it can wait.

Rachel Reeves rose—

Mr Speaker: No, I think it can wait. I look forward to it with interest and enthusiasm, but—

Rachel Reeves: It relates to the questions.

Mr Speaker: It may do, but the Prime Minister is waiting to address the House, and I think that people want to hear her. We will hear the hon. Lady in due course.
Leaving the EU

12.36 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the Government’s ongoing work to secure a Brexit deal that honours our commitments to the people of Northern Ireland, commands the support of Parliament, and can be negotiated with the EU.

On 29 January, the House gave me a clear mandate and sent an unequivocal message to the European Union. Last week, I took that message to Brussels. I met President Juncker, President Tusk and the President of the European Parliament, Antonio Tajani. I told them clearly what Parliament wanted in order to unite behind a withdrawal agreement—legally binding changes to the backstop—and I explained to them the three ways in which that could be achieved.

First, the backstop could be replaced with alternative arrangements to avoid a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. Yesterday my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union met Michel Barnier to discuss the ideas put forward by the Alternative Arrangements Working Group, which consists of a number of my right hon. and hon. Friends. I am grateful to them for their work, and we are continuing to explore their ideas. Secondly, there could be a legally binding time limit to the existing backstop, or thirdly, there could be a legally binding unilateral exit clause to that backstop. Given that both sides agree that we do not ever want to use the backstop and that if we did so it would be temporary, we believe it is reasonable to ask for legally binding changes to that effect.

As expected, President Juncker maintained the EU’s position that it will not reopen the withdrawal agreement. I set out the UK’s position—strengthened by the mandate that the House had given me—that the House needs to see legally binding changes to the backstop, and that that can be achieved by changes to the withdrawal agreement. We agreed that our teams should hold further talks to find a way forward, and President Juncker and I will meet again before the end of February to take stock of those discussions.

So our work continues. The Secretary of State and the Chairman of the Committee of the House today, and last week the Attorney General was in Dublin to meet his Irish counterpart. Following my own visits to Brussels, Northern Ireland and Ireland last week, I welcomed the Prime Minister of Malta to Downing Street yesterday, and I will be speaking to other EU27 leaders today and throughout the week. The Leader of the Opposition shares the House’s concerns about the backstop; I welcome his willingness to sit down and talk to me, and I look forward to continuing our discussions. Indeed, Ministers will be meeting members of his team tomorrow.

I think that there are a number of areas in which the whole House should be able to come together. In particular, I believe that we have a shared determination across the House not to allow the UK’s leaving the EU to mean any lowering of standards in relation to workers’ rights, environmental protections, or health and safety. I have met trade union representatives and Members on both sides of the House, and my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary is leading work to ensure that we

fully address all concerns about these vital issues. We have already made legally binding commitments to no regression in these areas if we were to enter the backstop, and we are prepared to consider legislating to give these commitments force in UK law. And in the interests of building support across the House, we are also prepared to commit to asking Parliament whether it wishes to follow suit whenever the EU changes its standards in these areas. And of course we do not need to automatically follow EU standards in order to lead the way, as we have done in the past under both Conservative and Labour Governments. The UK has a proud tradition of leading the way in workers’ rights whilst maintaining a flexible labour market that has helped deliver an employment rate almost 6 percentage points above the EU average.

Successive Governments of all parties have put in place standards that exceed the minimums set by the EU. A Labour Government gave British workers annual leave and paid maternity leave entitlements well above that required by the European Union. A Conservative-led Government went further than the EU by giving all employees the right to request flexible working; and I was proud to be the Minister for Women and Equalities to introduce shared parental leave so that both parents are able to take on caring responsibilities for their child—something no EU regulation provides for.

When it comes to workers’ rights this Parliament has set a higher standard before, and I believe will do so in the future. Indeed we already have plans to repeal the so-called Swedish derogation, which allows employers to pay their agency workers less, and we are committed to enforcing holiday pay for the most vulnerable workers—not just protecting workers’ rights, but extending them.

As I set out in my statement two weeks ago, the House also agrees that Parliament must have a much stronger and clearer role in the next phase of the negotiations. Because the political declaration cannot be legally binding and in some areas provides for a spectrum of outcomes, some Members are understandably concerned that they cannot be sure precisely what future relationship it would lead to. By following through on our commitments and giving Parliament that bigger say in the mandate for the next phase, we are determined to address those concerns. The Secretary of State has written to all members of the Exiting the EU Committee seeking their view on engaging Parliament in this next phase of negotiations, and we are also reaching out beyond this House to engage more deeply with businesses, civil society and trade unions.

Everyone in this House knows that the vote for Brexit was about not just changing our relationship with the EU, but changing how things work at home, especially for those in communities who feel they have been left behind. [Interruption.] Addressing this and widening opportunities is the mission of this Government that I set out on my first day as Prime Minister, and I will continue to work with Members across the House to do everything we can to help build a country that works for everyone.

But one area where the Leader of the Opposition and I do not agree is on his suggestion that the UK should remain a member of the EU customs union. I would gently point out that the House of Commons has already voted against that, and in any case—[Interruption.]
Mr Speaker: Order. There is a lot of noise and heckling, but the record shows that everyone gets a chance to question the Prime Minister. I think it is right that she should have a proper and respectful hearing, and the same courtesy must be extended to the Leader of the Opposition in due course.

The Prime Minister: First, I would gently point out that the House of Commons has already voted against that, and in any case membership of the customs union would be a less desirable outcome than that which is provided for in the political declaration. That would deliver no tariffs, fees, charges or quantitative restrictions across all sectors, and no checks on rules of origin. But crucially it would also provide for the development of an independent trade policy for the UK that would allow us to strike our own trade deals around the world, something the Labour party once supported.

On Thursday, as I promised in the House last month, we will bring forward an amendable motion. This will seek to reaffirm the support of the House for the amended motion from 29 January—namely to support the Government in seeking changes to the backstop and to recognise that negotiations are ongoing. Having secured an agreement with the European Union for further talks, we now need some time to complete that process. When we achieve the progress we need, we will bring forward another meaningful vote, but if the Government have not secured a majority in this House in favour of a withdrawal agreement and a political declaration, the Government will make a statement on Tuesday 26 February and table an amendable motion relating to the statement, and a Minister will move that motion on Wednesday 27 February, thereby enabling the House to vote on it, and on any amendments to it, on that day. As well as making clear what is needed to change in the withdrawal agreement, the House has also reconfirmed its view that it does not want to leave the EU without a deal. The Government agree, but opposing no deal is not enough to stop it. We must agree a deal that this House can support, and that is what I am working to achieve.

I have spoken before about the damage that would be done to public faith in our democracy if this House were to ignore the result of the 2016 referendum. In Northern Ireland last week, I heard again the importance of securing a withdrawal agreement that works for all the people of this United Kingdom. In Belfast I met not just politicians but leaders of civil society and businesses from across the community. Following this House’s rejection of the withdrawal agreement, many people in Northern Ireland are worried about whether the current uncertainty will mean for them. In this House we often focus on the practical challenges posed by the border in Northern Ireland, but for many people in Northern Ireland, what looms larger is the fear that the seamless border between Ireland and Northern Ireland that helped to make the progress that has followed the Belfast agreement possible might be disrupted. We must not let that happen, and we shall not let that happen.

The talks are at a crucial stage, and we now all need to hold our nerve to get the changes that this House requires and to deliver Brexit on time. By getting the changes we need to the backstop, by protecting and enhancing workers’ rights and environmental protections and by enhancing the role of Parliament in the next phase of negotiations, I believe we can reach a deal that this House can support. We can deliver for the people and the communities that voted for change two and half years ago and whose voices for too long have not been heard. We can honour the result of the referendum, and we can set this country on course for the bright future that every part of this United Kingdom deserves. That is this Government’s mission, and we shall not stint in our efforts to fulfil it. I commend this statement to the House.

12.47 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I usually thank the Prime Minister for giving me an advance copy of her statements, but this one was handed to me just as I was leaving my office to come down here, so I can only assume that she entrusted it to the Transport Secretary to deliver it to me.

Our country is facing the biggest crisis in a generation, yet the Prime Minister continues to recklessly run down the clock. We were promised that there would be a deal last October; it did not happen. We were promised a meaningful vote on a deal in December; it did not happen. We were told to prepare for a further meaningful vote this week, after the Prime Minister had again promised to secure significant and legally binding changes to the backstop; that has not happened. Now the Prime Minister comes before the House with more excuses and more delays.

In her statement, the Prime Minister has failed to answer even the most basic questions. What progress has she made on identifying and working up the alternative arrangements? Have they been presented to the European Union? If not, when will they be presented? Will she set them out before this House and ask for its approval of them? In truth, it appears that the Prime Minister has just one real tactic: to run down the clock, hoping that Members of this House can be blackmailed into supporting a deeply flawed deal. This is an irresponsible act. She is playing for time, and playing with people’s jobs, our economic security and the future of our industries.

Yesterday, growth figures showed the lowest growth since 2012 and our manufacturing sector mired in recession. The decision by Nissan last week to pull its investment from its Sunderland plant may be only the thin end of a very long wedge. Uncertainty and falling confidence in this Government’s ability to deliver are putting jobs at risk. The Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will be hearing the same warnings as I am: that several major manufacturers—household names employing tens of thousands of people—are poised to follow in Nissan’s footsteps.

Earlier today, we heard from the Leader of the House that the next meaningful vote may not happen until after the EU summit on 21 March—just days before Brexit is due to happen. If that is not the case, will the Prime Minister tell the House today when the meaningful vote will be? We also learned from the Leader of the House that any changes to the backstop will not be written into the legally binding withdrawal agreement. Will the Prime Minister confirm that?
Is the Prime Minister really prepared to risk people’s livelihoods, jobs and investment in a desperate attempt to push her deeply flawed deal through Parliament? She has just told this House to hold its nerve. Tell that to Nissan workers in Sunderland and the thousands more worried about their job security and the future of their communities. No Minister who is serious about protecting jobs in this country would allow a Prime Minister deliberately to run down the clock and play chicken with people’s livelihoods. To stand by and do nothing would be a complete dereliction of duty.

As I received the Prime Minister’s letter yesterday in response to Labour’s Brexit plan, it became clearer to me that the Prime Minister is merely engaged in the pretence of working across Parliament to find solutions. She has not indicated that she will move one iota away from her rejected deal or any of her red lines. On the backstop, the Prime Minister has pointed out that Labour also has concerns. But let us make no mistake about it—that has never been a major issue with the Prime Minister’s deal. In order to stop the UK falling into the backstop, we need a permanent customs union and a strong single market deal. That is the key to maintaining an open border on the island of Ireland and to protecting jobs, industry and living standards in this country. That is why it is backed by businesses that employ and trade unions that represent millions of workers in this country.

To correct the Prime Minister’s claim in her statement, we want to negotiate a new UK-EU customs union, as I set out in my letter. The Prime Minister says there is no need to negotiate a customs union as her deal provides for the benefit of being in one, but I am afraid that that is simply not the case. The deal that the Prime Minister negotiated means that there will be barriers to trade in goods and there will be no frictionless trade, putting manufacturers across the country at a huge disadvantage. That is made quite clear in the political declaration when it says that

“the Parties will form separate markets and distinct legal orders” and concedes that that “can lead to a spectrum of different outcomes for administrative processes as well as checks and controls”.

Nothing is secured.

The Prime Minister is also trying to win support for her deal by promising to protect workers’ rights after Brexit. Well, just look at the record of the Conservatives. They attacked trade union rights through the Trade Union Act 2016. He asked me about the progress on the alternative arrangements and whether they were going to be put before the European Commission. I remind him of what I said in my statement:

“Yesterday my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union met Michel Barnier to discuss the ideas put forward by the Alternative Arrangements Working Group, which consists of a number of my right hon. and hon. Friends.”

I think that answers his question.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about Labour’s proposals. I referenced the issue with the customs union in my statement, but of course he also talks about being a member of the single market. Being a member of the single market means accepting free movement and one of the things that people voted for when they voted to leave the European Union was to bring an end to free movement. That is what this Government will deliver.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the dates for votes that are going to take place in this House. I set those out in my statement as well. He referenced businesses quite a lot but, of course, businesses backed the deal—[Interruption.] They did. He talked about uncertainty but, of course, the best way to end uncertainty is to vote for a deal. He talked about running down the clock, but I wanted to have this sorted before Christmas. I brought a deal back—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Matheson, I have nurtured for a long time an ambition to see you become a statesman. I think you are threatening that prospect with these noisy gesticulations. Be calm—Buddha-like.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The deal was negotiated before Christmas, so it is not I who is trying to run down the clock—[Interruption.] It is no good Labour Members who voted against the deal pointing their fingers across the House. Every time somebody votes against a deal, the risk of no deal increases.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about acting in the national interest. Yes, we should be acting in the national interest and the national interest is in getting a deal agreed through this Parliament. That is why we are working with the European Union in everything that we are doing.
The right hon. Gentleman made several references to the issues of businesses, the issue of jobs and protecting jobs. We are going back to deal with the issue of the backstop, but the deal that we have negotiated with the EU—the political declaration that sets out the future—is a deal that protects jobs. The one thing that we know would threaten jobs in this country would be a Labour Government.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): My right hon. Friend will recall that, when we served together in the Cabinet, the coalition Government were very enthusiastic about the prospect of negotiating EU trade deals with important trading partners around the world, including the prospect of a trade deal with Japan. The Japan deal was concluded on 1 February, and I think it covers a bigger proportion of the global economy than any trade deal negotiated so far. Does the Prime Minister aim to seek a customs arrangement that enables us to continue to enjoy, or to begin to get, the benefits of this important deal after 29 March, or is she insisting that we have to leave it and have our own trade policy, and begin our own negotiations with a country that has a much bigger economy than our own and is likely to demand concessions from the United Kingdom that it was not able to demand from the European Union?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right that the economic partnership agreement with Japan came into force on 1 February. Of course, prior to that, we had been trading with Japan on World Trade Organisation arrangements. It has been the policy of the Government, in relation to the trade deals that have been agreed between the European Union and countries around the world, that we see continuity in those agreements at the point at which we leave the European Union—we have also been working to see continuity were we to leave with no deal—but we also want to ensure that we can enhance our trade arrangements with countries around the world, and so build our own trade deals with those countries. The best and most sensible approach is to maintain trading relations as they are as we leave the European Union, and then build and enhance those trading relations with our own independent trade agreements.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Sometimes I think the Prime Minister must live in a parallel universe. We have just heard that she wanted this concluded in December. Talk about rewriting history—it was the Prime Minister who denied us the right to have a meaningful vote. She sits there laughing. Sometimes you should be honest with yourself, never mind being honest with the people of the United Kingdom.

Here we are, once again: a statement from a Prime Minister lost in a Brexit fantasy. We are 45 days from Scotland being dragged out of the European Union against our will, 45 days from economic catastrophe. She talks about Japan. Goods leaving Japan in the next few days will arrive after we leave the European Union, and we do not know what the tariff regime will be for those imported cars and training shoes, or whatever else. The ongoing mess of this Government never ceases to amaze.

Does the Prime Minister understand that EU leaders have refused to budge on any changes to the withdrawal agreement? Donald Tusk said on 6 February that the EU is not making any other offer. What does the Prime Minister not understand in that statement? Why does she not understand that the EU will not reopen the withdrawal agreement that she signed up to? Does she realise the danger of running down the clock? Forty-five days to go, and here we are with a Government who cannot even deliver a ferry contract.

Prime Minister, your response to my letter requesting sight of what economic analysis you have done on your own deal poses more questions than answers. The question is simple: have you done an economic assessment of your deal’s impact on the UK economy? I want a simple yes or no.

Prime Minister, you are asking this House to vote on your deal and you cannot even be honest about the economic impact. You expect MPs to vote for this, but your binary choice is simply laughable. A growing number are calling for an extension to article 50. Extend article 50 today.

The Prime Minister’s deal is a fraud. Ending freedom of movement and leaving the biggest trading bloc in the world, this will be catastrophic for Scotland. The UK is already suffering the cost of Brexit. Will she put an end to this economic madness?

Prime Minister, as students get set for university applications and as business owners look to prepare for the new financial year, your Government are causing a new wave of uncertainty. We on these Benches refuse to accept Scotland being dragged out of the European Union against our will. Ultimately, Scotland will have a choice: be an independent European nation or remain part of an inward-looking UK. Scotland’s voice must be respected.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman has been making the same points in response to my statements, regardless of their content, for some time now. He talks about the economic analysis, and we published an economic analysis of the Government’s proposals.

Ian Blackford: That’s not true.

Mr Speaker: Order. There is plenty of scope for disagreement about what is true and what is not true but, in fairness, I repeat the point that the person who has the floor must be heard.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I say to the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) that, in his intervention from a sedentary position, I think he may have inadvertently misled the House on this matter.

Ian Blackford: Liar.

Mr Speaker: Order. Forgive me, but I did not hear what was said. [HON. MEMBERS: “He said, ‘Liar.’”] I hope the word “liar” was not used. [Interruption.] Order. I am perfectly capable of handling this matter with alacrity, and I shall do so. [Interruption.] Order. If that word was used, it must be withdrawn at once without equivocation or qualification. [Interruption.] Order. If a Member on the Front Bench used that
word—I am sorry, but I am not debating it, I am not arguing and I am not negotiating—it must be withdrawn at once.

I admit that I did not see which Member used the word, but I am advised on good authority that it was used by the leader of the Scottish National party. If so—I want the debate to continue, and it will—I simply ask the right hon. Gentleman to withdraw that word. He cannot accuse another Member in this House of dishonesty. Withdraw.

Ian Blackford: In courtesy to yourself, I withdraw. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: There are plenty of precedents for that. I remember doing it once myself, and I remember a member of the shadow Cabinet, the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), once doing it out of deference to the Chair rather than out of deference to the person whom he had been attacking. That is enough.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. To continue my explanation to the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber, the Government have put forward an economic analysis of their proposed deal. We did that in the economic analysis published before the withdrawal agreement was put before the House. In it we recognised that areas of the political declaration had not yet been confirmed and that variations in relation to the degree of friction across the border would come from that. We could have taken a very low variation, which would have been very close to the Government’s deal, and we could have taken a high variation, but we took a midpoint, which is entirely fair for the Government to do. The economic analysis shows that, if we are to honour the referendum, the deal that delivers best for the British economy is the deal that the Government have put forward.

The right hon. Gentleman also talks about putting an end to the current situation. As I have indicated, we can indeed move forward when we have agreed a deal across the House. If he is so concerned about avoiding no deal, I assume that, when a deal is brought back from the European Union, he and SNP Members will vote for it in order to support the future of the United Kingdom.

Once again, the right hon. Gentleman talks about the economic impact on Scotland of leaving the European Union and he talks, virtually in the same breath, about his view that Scotland should be independent from the United Kingdom. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] That may raise cheers on the SNP Benches, but it would not raise cheers from those people in Scotland whose economic future depends on being a member of the UK.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Of course there is enormous interest, which, as per usual, I want to accommodate. May I appeal to colleagues at this time, with the country watching us, to have a robust but respectful debate? It is perfectly possible for colleagues to make their points with considerable force but to do so with courtesy. I know we will be led in this matter by a former party leader and a notably courteous right hon. Gentleman, Mr Iain Duncan Smith.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): May I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement, in which she referred to the successful amendment tabled by my hon. Friend for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady)? She will recall that its successful passage was heavily based on a thing that has become known as the “Malthouse compromise”. Of course, a number of alternative arrangements have been proposed over the past months. The possibility of alternative arrangements to replace the backstop is recognised by both the UK and the EU in the political declaration that was agreed in November. There are some issues and some questions in respect of the proposals that have been tabled. I raised the issue of alternative arrangements with the European Commission, European Council and European Parliament when I was there last week. As I said, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was able to discuss these issues with Michel Barnier yesterday.

As I set out in my previous statement to the House, what people across this House want to ensure is that the backstop, as it currently exists, cannot become a permanent arrangement in which the UK could find itself. There are various ways of dealing with that: as I set out in my previous statement, one is to replace that backstop completely with alternative arrangements; and another is to ensure that the backstop can never be permanent. Those are the issues that have been discussed, but I have laid Parliament’s views clearly before the EU.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Now that the Prime Minister has reached out to the general secretary of Unite the Union, and to the Leader of the Opposition and his entourage, she is no doubt better informed as to how Trotsky might have dealt with the Brexit crisis. But will she elaborate a little more on her discussions with the general secretary of the TUC and its 6 million affiliated members, and the official Brexit spokesman of the Labour party, who have made it very clear that the best way to protect workers’ rights is to give workers a say on the final deal, and the option of remaining in the EU and keeping the workers’ rights they already have?

The Prime Minister: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that the issue I have discussed with trade union leaders, the secretary general of the TUC and Members from across this House is the concern to ensure that there is no reduction in workers’ rights in the UK, a commitment that this Government have given and will continue to meet.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I agree with the Prime Minister, and have done for many months, that the best way to avoid a no-deal outcome to Brexit is to have a deal put in place. That is why I have been released, at the request of the Prime Minister, to work as part of the alternative arrangements working group. But is it not now clear that to get that agreement through the House those alternative arrangements are
going to have to command the confidence of a majority of Members on this side, our confidence and supply partners, and some Labour MPs? The tenor of the Leader of the Opposition’s response today shows that, unfortunately, working on a cross-party basis is unlikely to deliver a vote for the agreement and certainly not continued votes for the necessary legislation. That is the reality of the parliamentary arithmetic, isn’t it?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for the work she has been doing on the issue of alternative arrangements. Obviously, I want to see a deal that can get through the House, supported by all Members from my party and by our confidence and supply partners, but it is in the interests of this Parliament and of taking legislation forward to see a strong vote from across the whole House on this issue. As she has said, the tone of the response by the Leader of the Opposition did not give much encouragement on that issue, but we will continue to talk with the Labour party Front-Bench team. As I said, the Brexit Secretary and other members of the ministerial team will be meeting the Leader of the Opposition’s team to take forward those discussions and to explore the issues that the Labour party wishes to raise.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Although strength in pursuit of a principle is to be admired, inflexibility and denial in the face of the facts is not, especially when the future of the country is at stake. The facts are that alternative arrangements for the Northern Ireland border were examined extensively last summer and found wanting; that the EU has made it clear that it will not reopen the withdrawal agreement; that the rolling over of the trade deals that the Father of the House referred to is not going well; and that businesses are spending millions of pounds and pulling their hair out because they fear the prospect of a no-deal Brexit on 29 March. I do not believe that the Prime Minister would do that to our country. I do not think that Ministers would allow her to do it, so why does she continue to pretend that she might?

The Prime Minister: I have consistently said—and I made the point in my statement this afternoon—that what I want and what the Government want is a deal with the European Union. But there is only one way to ensure that we avoid no deal. I know I say this a lot, and I know right hon. and hon. Members shout out at it and so forth, but if they do not want no deal, they have to agree a deal.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): My right hon. Friend is facing intransigence both from the undemocratic EU and from MPs who voted for the European Union Referendum Act 2015, the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017, the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 and the repeal of the European Communities Act 1972 but who are now trying to reverse this with their own votes. She has not signed the withdrawal agreement, which itself contains undemocratic and unconstitutional features, including the backstop and article 4, which removes control over our lawmaking. If this undemocratic intransigence continues, will she therefore walk away from the negotiations?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, what we are doing now is working with the EU to achieve what this Parliament has said it wants to see achieved, notably legally binding changes to the backstop that deal with the issues that have been raised by this Parliament. I continue to work on those points, but my hon. Friend made a very important point at the beginning of his question, which is that Members from across this House overwhelmingly voted for a referendum. It was clear at the time that this House would respect the result of the referendum. The Government of the time made it clear that we would respect the result of the referendum. This House overwhelmingly voted to trigger article 50. Article 50 had a two-year timeline to it, which ends on 29 March, and this House voted for the withdrawal agreement Act. At every stage so far this House has been willing to put into place the result of the referendum. What the House now needs to do is agree a deal, so that we can leave on 29 March and progress on to the next stage of negotiations and progress on to a brighter future.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The country’s counter-terror chief has said that no deal would be a “very serious flaw” in our security arrangements. The police chief in charge of preparing for Brexit has said that no deal would leave us less safe. The Prime Minister and I have always previously agreed on the importance of not undermining our national security or public safety, but she knows that her continued delays have increased the risks of no deal on 29 March, so if she has failed by the middle of March to persuade this House to back a deal, is she still ruling out extending article 50—yes or no?

The Prime Minister: The extension of article 50 does not solve the problem. The only way to solve the problem of having no deal is to agree a deal. The right hon. Lady says that my delays have caused the position we are in. We are in this position because I negotiated a deal with the European Union and brought it back to the House of Commons, and the House of Commons, including Members on her side of the House, rejected that deal. We are now working to address the issue raised by the positive vote that the House of Commons gave on 29 January. That vote ensured it was clear what changes the House of Commons felt were necessary to agree a deal.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): We are all acutely aware that time is racing away, which is why more and more Members are saying we must extend article 50. We also need time for all the necessary legislation. Will the Prime Minister confirm that in the numerous statutory instruments being laid that are not debated, there is not one planned for next week, when some MPs may be away, committing us to zero tariffs in the event of no deal? Zero tariffs would decimate our agriculture and food industries and start a race to the bottom. Such a significant decision would have far-reaching consequences and would demand full parliamentary scrutiny.

The Prime Minister: There will be a number of statutory instruments that the House will be addressing. The House will be working hard on Brexit arrangements next week. On the issue of tariffs in the event of no deal, discussions are still being undertaken with businesses and other sectors.
Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): Further to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), can the Prime Minister now give millions of people and businesses across the country a simple answer to this straight question: if she is faced with a choice of leaving the European Union without a deal on 29 March or seeking an extension of article 50, what will she do? We deserve to know the answer to that question.

The Prime Minister: What I am doing is working to ensure that we can bring a deal back to the House. It will then be for the right hon. Gentleman and other Members of the House to determine whether they want to support a deal with the European Union.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): The Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the Liberal party both implicitly criticised the UK Government’s record on workers’ rights in comparison to Europe. They both ignored the fundamental right of safety in the workplace, on which we have had the best record in Europe every year since we joined, so there is little to fear in this area. Given that, will the Prime Minister guarantee to the House that any future changes in this area will be subject to the control of the House?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point about the good record this country has on workers’ rights. I can confirm that I believe we should not just be automatically following what happens in Europe in this area; we should be making those decisions, and it is important that we in this country and this House make those decisions. With our record of going further and having better workers’ rights than a number of areas of the European Union, that makes sense.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The Prime Minister referenced the fact that there are concerns in Northern Ireland about maintaining the seamless border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, but she should also reference, as she knows, the grave concern among many in Northern Ireland about creating new barriers between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom, given that we trade more with the rest of the United Kingdom than the Irish Republic, the rest of the EU and the rest of the world put together. Neither barrier is necessary or needed under any scenario. The Prime Minister and the House know what is needed to pass the withdrawal agreement, so will she confirm that the stance taken by Leo Varadkar—we met him in Belfast on Friday in a very cordial meeting—and others could lead to the very outcome that they say they wish to avoid?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the concerns that have been expressed about the trading relationship between Northern Ireland and Great Britain and the issue of potential regulatory barriers. It is an issue that he and I have discussed on a number of occasions. We talk here about what it takes in this House to ensure that we agree a deal, but that deal has to be agreed with the European Union, and that means that all members of the EU27 have to agree that deal. I was able to have cordial and constructive talks with the Taoiseach on Friday. The right hon. Gentleman referenced his own talks. I hope, trust and believe that all sitting around the table want to ensure we deliver a deal that delivers on the commitments for the people of Northern Ireland and that can pass this House and be agreed by the EU.

Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on what she is doing to extricate this country from the humiliation of the backstop, in accordance with the overwhelming wishes of the House, but will she confirm that there is no point having a time limit on the backstop unless that is written into the treaty itself and unless the end date falls substantially before the next general election?

The Prime Minister: As my right hon. Friend already knows, I want to see the future relationship in place by the beginning of 2021, which is well in advance of the next general election. The other point he made is absolutely the point I have been making to the European Union. One of the concerns of this House was that any assurances given on the temporary nature of the backstop in early January were not of the same legal form as the international treaty that forms the withdrawal agreement. That is why we are asking for the assurances to have a legally binding status. The obvious way to do that is within the withdrawal agreement.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I say to the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) that the humiliation this country faces is losing jobs and investment. That is the issue we should be focusing on.

The Business Secretary told our Select Committee last week that Friday 15 February is the deadline for getting a deal for businesses that export to the far east, as shipments take six weeks to arrive. Does the Prime Minister agree with the Business Secretary? Will she guarantee that those free trade agreements that we enjoy today will still exist when those goods arrive on 29 March?

The Prime Minister: We are well aware of the timetables that businesses are working to. That is why we have been pressing and working hard to get the deal agreed by the House and the European Union. It is also the case that we are working on those trade agreements. A number of continuity agreements have been signed with trading nations around the world to ensure that we can continue to trade on the current arrangements.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I welcome the categorical assurance that my right hon. Friend has given the House in respect of the House’s ability to debate a neutral motion on Wednesday 27 February, but time is very short. Can she explain to the House how we will comply with the provisions of section 20 of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 if there is a deal? How will we implement the withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill and still leave on 29 March? Is it not the case that looked at realistically, there will have to be an application to extend the article 50 process, even if my right hon. Friend is successful in getting some kind of agreement through the House?

The Prime Minister: As my right hon. and learned Friend said, the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 makes clear that the provisions of the 2010 Act apply to the withdrawal agreement and require it to be laid
before Parliament for 21 sitting days. In most circumstances, that period may be important for the House to have an opportunity to study a piece of legislation, but in this instance, MPs will already have debated and approved the agreement as part of the meaningful vote. While we will follow normal procedure if we can, where there is insufficient time remaining following a successful meaningful vote, we will make provision in the withdrawal agreement Bill, with Parliament’s consent, to ensure that we are able to ratify on time to guarantee our exit in an orderly way.

**Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC):** Let us remember what this looks like to anxious people outside this place. It looks like what it is: a Prime Minister buying time in a disingenuous, transparent attempt to run down the clock and force MPs from all four nations of the UK to back her, with a no-deal done deal looming large. Has she at any point in her accelerated timeline considered how and when she will gain legislative consent from the devolved Parliaments on the withdrawal agreement Bill, which will no doubt encroach on their competencies?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Lady talks about buying time. I am taking the very clear message given by this House of Commons to the European Union to negotiate changes to the deal, such that this House of Commons will have confidence and be able to agree the deal.

**Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con):** I welcome the Prime Minister’s statement. Does she agree that requiring legally binding changes to the backstop is not only reasonable but essential if we are to pass the deal through this House? While Brexit was the UK’s choice, if Brussels remains stubbornly intransigent, a departure on World Trade Organisation terms would be the EU’s choice.

**The Prime Minister:** The point that my right hon. Friend makes about the legally binding nature of the changes is important. This House has been clear about those issues, and, as I mentioned in an earlier response, I have raised with the European Union this question of the different legal force of the commitments that have been made so far and the concern that the withdrawal agreement in the international treaty would currently take precedence over the legal assurances that were given in the separate letter about the temporary nature of the backstop. It is the equivalence of that legally binding nature, to make sure that the withdrawal agreement cannot then trump anything extra, that is important.

**Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op):** The whole House will have heard the Prime Minister’s response to the important question from the right hon. and learned Friend (Mr Grieve) about the withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill. It will also have heard the Prime Minister’s response that she does not intend to honour the 21-day period needed to lay it. We have not seen the draft of the Bill, yet it deals with very, very thorny issues about the divorce bill when we leave, EU citizens’ rights, the supremacy of European law during the transition period and the consent to remain under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice during that period. How on earth does the Prime Minister expect Members from all parts of this House to consent to that legislation without seeing a draft of it at this moment in time? Will she not acknowledge that there is no chance that she will pass that legislation in 45 days’ time? On that basis, will she commit to extending article 50 so that we do not crash out with no deal, threatening jobs right up and down this country?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She has raised an important point about the timetable, which was mentioned by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve). As I said, the 21 days in the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 are normally there because there has not been an opportunity for the House to see the nature of the agreement that it is considering. In this case, of course, the House would have had an opportunity to approve the agreement. We are looking for changes in the agreement, but the vast majority of the agreement will not be changed in the discussions that we are having with the European Union, and the House has already been able to look at that as part of the meaningful vote. I am sure that, when a meaningful vote has been agreed on in this House, every Member will want to ensure that they are able to operate on a timetable that enables us to leave at the end of the two-year period, which was agreed by this House when we triggered article 50.

**Justine Greening (Putney) (Con):** The Prime Minister is driving this House towards two options that the British people do not want. We have already voted in this House against having a no-deal departure, and we have also already massively voted against her own prime ministerial deal with Brussels. She has simply turned this exercise now into one of cobbled together enough support to win a vote in this House when, actually, we deserve so much more than that. It is not just about getting the ERG on board, or getting enough Labour MPs to switch sides, but about getting the British people on board for the future that lies ahead. That takes more than just votes here, more than just the results of grubby backroom deals. Is it not time to recognise that the only responsible action ahead of us is to go back to the people and get their seal of approval?

**The Prime Minister:** I have responded to questions of that ilk from my right hon. Friend on a number of occasions, and I have not changed my opinion. It is important that this House recognises that, having given the choice to the British people as to whether to leave or to stay in the European Union and having received the choice of the British people, we should respect that choice and deliver on it, and that is what we are doing.

**Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP):** I note that, during her statement, the Prime Minister said that she had secured an agreement with the EU for further talks. I am sure that she used the word “talks” advisedly, because when the Brexit Committee was in Brussels last week, we were told very clearly that the negotiations were over and that they ended in November when the Prime Minister shook hands on the deal to which she had agreed. Is not the reality quite simply this: that deal will not be changed by the EU? She
cannot get that deal through this House, so what she needs to do is put the deal to the people of the four nations of the United Kingdom.

**The Prime Minister:** I have just answered exactly that question in relation to a vote, and my view has not changed in the 30 seconds or so since I answered my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening).

**Mr Owen Paterson** (North Shropshire) (Con): The Malthouse compromise, if adopted, would deliver the requirement of the amendment put down by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) and passed, which was to replace the backstop. The Prime Minister’s comments just now to my right hon. Friend the Members for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) and for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) were really encouraging. Will she commit to instructing civil servants both in Brussels and in Westminster to work these proposals up into legal text?

**The Prime Minister:** I believe that my right hon. Friend, along with some of my other right hon. Friends, previously indicated to me that he understood that work done by others outside this House had indeed contributed to a potential legal text. I know that meetings are continuing with officials to look at the issues that have been raised around the alternative arrangements. I have indicated what has happened in relation to that in Brussels, and we will continue to work on those alternative arrangements.

**Mr Chris Leslie** (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Essentially, the Prime Minister is asking us to please give her more time to convert base metals into gold, but is it not a complete fantasy to expect the Irish Government to put a time limit on the Good Friday agreement? We should not expect them to do that. Unless colleagues across the House take some responsibility on Thursday, and snap out of this delusion right now, we will be at the mercy of this Prime Minister’s run-the-clock-down strategy.

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Gentleman talks about the issue of the time limit—he described it as a time limit on the Good Friday agreement. No, it would not be a time limit on the Good Friday agreement. This Government remain absolutely committed to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and to the commitments and obligations that we have within that agreement. We all remain committed to ensuring that there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. I have always said, as has the Taoiseach, that the best way of delivering that is in the future relationship, and that is what we are working to do.

**Sir Nicholas Soames** (Mid Sussex) (Con): May I reassure the Prime Minister that I am holding my nerve like anything? Will she therefore confirm that it remains at the heart of the Government’s policy, in the national interest, to secure a deal, which, at the end of the day, will achieve the closest possible political, economic and security relationship with our friends and allies in the European Union?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my right hon. Friend for holding his nerve. May I reassure him that, obviously, what we are doing in negotiating this deal is ensuring that we deliver on the referendum? We will be leaving the European Union, but its countries are our closest neighbours and it remains in the interests of this country, and the European Union, for there to be a close relationship between the UK and the EU in future. We have set out proposals for that future close relationship and, obviously, the second stage of negotiations will be putting that relationship into legal text.

**Kate Hoey** (Vauxhall) (Lab): The Prime Minister was quite right to rule out again staying in a customs union, which was not on the manifesto of either of the two main parties. [Interruption.] The customs union. Does she think that we might perhaps change the wording in talking about no deal? If we cannot get an agreement, then surely we can go over to the WTO and use article 24. It is not crashing out. People voted to leave; they did not vote for a deal as such. They voted to leave, and we need to leave on 29 March.

**The Prime Minister:** Obviously, the hon. Lady and a number of Members in this House have raised the issue of World Trade Organisation arrangements. Of course, there are many parts of the world that we currently trade with—not just with the European Union—on what are EU terms of trade rather than WTO terms. I continue to believe that the best route for this country is to leave with a deal, which is why we are working so hard to get the changes that this Parliament requested.

**Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I welcome the tone that the Prime Minister struck last week in her meeting with businesses in Northern Ireland, where she indicated that she would be seeking changes to the backstop, rather than its wholesale replacement. Is it worth underlining again today the reason why the backstop is there and the important purpose that it serves—namely, locking in something good amidst all the other uncertainty that is going on?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend makes an important point. We all want to see the continuation of the progress that has been made in Northern Ireland, and the economic situation for people in Northern Ireland being enhanced and improved in the coming years. The seamless border is an important part of the progress that has been achieved. I was pleased to be able to go to Belfast and reaffirm our commitment to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, which is unshakeable. There had been some concerns in Northern Ireland, but I was able to allay them. This Government remain absolutely committed to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and the progress that has been achieved in Northern Ireland following that agreement.

**Liz Kendall** (Leicester West) (Lab): The Prime Minister rightly said that the political declaration is not legally binding, but can she guarantee that she will still be in her job when our future relationship with the EU is finally agreed? If not, why would any of us take any of her assurances, given that she will not be the Prime Minister who does the final deal?
The Prime Minister: I am committed to ensuring that we are able to deliver on the political declaration and negotiate a future relationship that delivers for the people of this country.

Liz Kendall indicated dissent.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady may shake her head. There are elements of the political declaration that are still for debate, and I recognise that there will be rigorous debate on some of those elements. In short, we want to ensure that when we come to the end of the implementation period, we have that close economic and security relationship with the European Union.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I hope that there is not a special place somewhere in particular for those of us who take a rather literal interpretation of the word “replace”.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend has always held a special place in my estimation and, indeed, in that of Members across the House, and I would not suggest that he would be going to any other special place.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Many of my constituents who live with serious health conditions are very concerned about the disruption to the supply of medicines upon which they rely. Should doctors be writing prescriptions to permit patients to stockpile medical supplies, or can the Prime Minister guarantee today—a mere 45 days from Brexit—that there will be no disruption to medical supplies post Brexit?

The Prime Minister: We are working with suppliers that provide medicines to the UK to ensure that there will be a continuity of supply and that patients will continue to receive the medicines they need in all scenarios, including in the case of no deal, so that patients will not need to, and should not seek to, secure and store additional medicines at home. We have already agreed that medicines and medical products, including medicines that can be bought in shops, will be prioritised to ensure that the flow of all these products will continue unrestricted after 29 March 2019. My right hon. Friend the Health Secretary wrote to health and care providers in December about the preparations for no deal, and we have been discussing with the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland civil service the arrangements that will pertain in those locations.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): The Prime Minister tells us that she has a mandate to go back and renegotiate the backstop by virtue of the amendment that was passed on 29 January. But by a bigger margin and on a cross-party basis, this place gave her another mandate, which was to take no deal off the table. We have voted to reject her deal and we have voted to reject no deal, but not only is the Prime Minister kicking the can down the road yet again, she also again refuses to take no deal off the table. This is in the face of the analysis and advice of the civil servants who have informed the Cabinet, which has debated this issue, of the profoundly bad consequences—in the words of the Business Secretary, the “ruinous” situation—that we would face in the event of no deal. When will the Prime Minister publish that advice and analysis so that my constituents can understand why no deal is no option for this country?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is obviously right about the votes that took place in this House. However, the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady), which was voted for on a cross-party basis, also referenced the fact that this House wanted to leave the European Union with a deal, and that is what we are working for. I repeat to my right hon. Friend that we cannot just say that we do not want to have no deal; we can ensure that there is not a no-deal situation only by agreeing a deal.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): A common external tariff would mean reduced friction in the trade of goods, which would be hugely beneficial for our manufacturing sector. A new customs union would achieve this and would not, as I understand it, prevent us from striking our own trade deals in services. Why, then, is the Prime Minister ruling out this alternative arrangement for the backstop, and why is she so confident that the benefits of setting new tariffs outweigh the negative impacts of increased friction and costs throughout supply chains?

The Prime Minister: The description of the situation given by the hon. Lady is not one that I recognise. If she cares to look at the political declaration—

Laura Smith: I have.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady says that she has looked at the political declaration, and we make it clear in that declaration that the future relationship will have no tariffs, quotas or restrictions of that sort. She asked why not a customs union. The customs union requires us not to be able to strike our own trade deals. The benefit of the deal that has been agreed and that the Government first put forward is that we would achieve the benefit of no tariffs, no quotas and no restrictions at the same time as being able to negotiate our own trade deals.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister referred several times to the need for legal certainty. The response today from the Attorney General to a question that I asked on this very matter suggested that he was always willing to assist the House in being able to find that legal certainty. May I ask that any changes negotiated are brought back to the House, and that the Attorney General gives us the benefit of that advice? The legal certainty is what will make many colleagues feel that they can or cannot support something.

The Prime Minister: I recognise hon. Members’ concerns regarding the legally binding nature of any changes that are achieved. Of course, the Attorney General will make information available to the House to enable the House to take its decision.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): While the Prime Minister is happy to kick the can down the road for yet another two weeks, over 3 million EU
nations are living in appalling uncertainty. As it stands, the Home Office’s EU settlement scheme could leave hundreds of thousands of EU nationals undocumented and at risk from the hostile environment, so will the Prime Minister accept that only a declaratory system, under which those resident in the UK before 29 March are automatically granted leave to remain, would protect all citizens’ rights, as she claims she wants to do?

The Prime Minister: We have put forward a sensible and reasonable scheme. We have said that we will guarantee rights for EU citizens here in the UK, even in the event of no deal, so this would not only pertain in the event of a deal. As the hon. Lady will know, no fee will be required on the full roll-out of the settlement scheme, and we will reimburse any fees that have been paid in the pilots. However, we retain the right to ensure that it is possible for this country to determine that individuals who perhaps have a particular criminal record are not in this country, and that is a right that we will look at across the board. The sort of situation that the hon. Lady suggests is therefore not right. We have a good scheme that is easy to use and for which there will be no charge.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I am more optimistic than other members of the Brexit Select Committee; I believe that the EU can and will agree to make legally binding changes that will enable the Attorney General to give revised advice on our not being tied indefinitely into a customs union against our will. But if my right hon. Friend comes back to the House with those changes, at that stage it is surely the responsibility of us all as MPs to support the Bill, get the business done and accept responsibility for that. Does my right hon. Friend agree that any attempt by MPs to pre-position ourselves as blaming the EU for no deal would be a severe dereliction of duty?

The Prime Minister: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that at the point at which a meaningful vote is brought back to this House, it will be the responsibility of every Member of this House to determine their vote according to the nature of that deal and, of course, according to the views that they feel about no deal. It is the case that the only way to avoid no deal other than—I am sorry, Mr Speaker; I may inadvertently have misled the House myself earlier when I said that the only way to avoid no deal was to agree a deal. Of course, it is possible to avoid no deal by staying in the European Union, but we are not going to do that.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): With the Prime Minister recklessly running down the clock to a crash-out Brexit, can I say to the responsible members of her Government that if they fail to act soon to prevent such a calamity, history will judge them very, very harshly? But can I also say to my own Front Benchers that now the Government have rejected our offer, if they fail to honour the unanimously agreed policy at our conference in favour of a public vote, they too will be judged very harshly by history?

The Prime Minister: The second part of that question was not addressed to me, so I will not be responding to it. The right hon. Gentleman stands up and says that we are recklessly running down the clock in order to crash out with no deal. That is not the case. If that was the case, I would not be spending time talking to EU leaders, going to Brussels, going to Dublin, and trying to work out a way that we can find to deliver on a deal that respects the concerns raised by this House and that will get through this Parliament.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The organisation Leave Means Leave is telling my constituents that we can walk away from the EU with no agreement but also be a global champion for free trade. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is totally illogical, and that if we want to be a global champion for free trade, our first act should be to agree an agreement with our largest trading partner?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has made an important point, which is that if it is the case that we believe that we want to make trade agreements with countries around the world on terms other than WTO terms, then it also makes sense to make a trading agreement—and we have a very good one proposed by the Government—with the European Union, and that is what we will work to achieve.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister might remember that I congratulated her on trying to speak to a wider group of people and to speak to the Opposition and do all those things that she started doing. From where I am standing, I do not think she has completed that job. I thought there were some good signs this week that there was a discourse and an exchange of views, and we could have seen that in this House there is actually probably a majority for a sensible course forward. On the other hand, can I remind her that outside here, since the referendum, there has been a fantastic change in the national mood? As I go around and speak to people—reasonable people, not the extremists—I find an urgent desire to get this sorted with a second referendum and a people’s vote.

The Prime Minister: Certainly, when I go on the doorsteps, I do get from people an urgent desire to get this sorted—not to get a second referendum and a people’s vote but actually to deliver on the first vote and, to do so, to leave the European Union on 29 March.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): The Prime Minister is absolutely right to hold her nerve. The EU could write the textbook on 11th-hour deals. Most colleagues in this place prefer a good deal to no deal, but can she reassure the House that should we leave on 29 March on no-deal WTO terms, we are sufficiently prepared?

The Prime Minister: We are indeed. We have ramped up our preparations. We are continuing our preparations for no deal. We are engaging not just with Government Departments but with the devolved Administrations
and with the Northern Ireland civil service. We are engaging with local authorities up and down the country, and obviously working with businesses and those who would need to make alterations to their operations in the event of no deal. We continue to ramp up those preparations.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): We hear a lot about the reasons, or the assumed reasons, why people voted to leave the EU, but one thing I am sure about: the people of this country are demanding effective leadership on this issue and they feel absolutely that they are not getting it from anywhere—anywhere—on the political landscape. If the Prime Minister’s attempts to keep her party together by getting the ERG on board fail, will she accept, at that point, the need to build a consensus properly across the House, and that the easiest way, potentially, of reaching that consensus will be to get her deal over the line, as it stands now, by accepting the case for putting it to the people for ratification?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady and I have a different view in relation to a second referendum, as I have expressed earlier. I think it is important that we deliver on the referendum that took place in 2016, but it is also important that as we do that, we do it in a way that obviously needs to command support from this House. I want to see support from across this House. I think that a strong show of support for a deal across the whole House will be important as we move forward into dealing with the legislation, and for other reasons too. I naturally want my colleagues and our confidence and supply partners to support the deal, but, as I say, I look to having a deal that I can bring back that will command strong support across the House.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): My right hon. Friend has repeatedly said that no deal is better than a bad deal. The last deal she put to the House failed, and I welcome her attempts to go back to the EU to strike a better one. But does she agree that to get that better deal, we have to keep no deal on the table as a negotiating tool? Take it off, and no deal—no fair deal—will be struck.

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend that we do need to ensure in the negotiations that people recognise the options that are available. As I have said to a number of Members, we are not going to stay in the European Union, so the only other way of not having no deal is to agree a deal. We cannot simply say that we do not want no deal and then not deliver a deal that ensures that we do not have no deal.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): This week, the European Commission published a document spelling out the implications of the withdrawal agreement. It made it quite clear that Northern Ireland would have to “maintain...regulatory alignment with the EU”, that the EU’s customs code would “continue to apply” to Northern Ireland, and that that would mean “systematic” checks on all “goods travelling from the rest of the UK to Northern Ireland” at all ports and airports. That would rip apart the United Kingdom. To use the Prime Minister’s own words, will she ensure that that must not happen and will not happen?

The Prime Minister: I am as clear as the hon. Gentleman is that we want to ensure that we will keep the United Kingdom together. It was precisely in order to avoid that sort of customs border between GB and Northern Ireland that led to us negotiating the UK customs-wide territory in the withdrawal agreement—in the backstop as it currently appears in the withdrawal agreement. On the issue in relation to regulatory changes, of course we have indicated commitments that the UK Government would be able to make in relation to that situation as we would be respecting what we committed to in the December joint report. I am absolutely clear that everything this Government will be doing we will be doing to ensure that we keep the United Kingdom together. That means keeping Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom—England, Scotland and Wales, as well.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s statement, particularly her very clear exposition of why she does not want to remain in the customs union: because it would materially fetter our ability to do international trade deals in our own right. She is absolutely correct in that. Can I ask her to confirm that that position is wholly consistent with the 2017 Conservative manifesto, and will therefore enjoy strong support from all parts of these Benches, whether we have been sent to hell or not?

The Prime Minister: I believe it is consistent with our manifesto. It is also consistent with the original set of principles that I set out in the Lancaster House speech, which many Members refer to.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister has talked about wanting to achieve an orderly Brexit, but the Public Accounts Committee has carried out a lot of work which shows that even with a deal, Brexit will be far from orderly. In the light of that and the points raised by the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) about the constitutional challenge of getting the deal through, will she commit today to not ruling out extension of article 50, to ensure that whatever happens, this country is prepared?

The Prime Minister: We will ensure that this country is prepared. The hon. Lady refers to an orderly Brexit. The deal that we negotiated—setting aside the issue of the backstop and the changes to that required by the House—provides for an implementation period, which provides an orderly progression to the future relationship. That is what we are working for, and that is what I hope the House will find its way to agreeing.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): Can the Prime Minister be absolutely clear that when we leave the European Union, our environmental standards in this country will rise, not fall?

The Prime Minister: We are committed to ensuring that our environmental standards do not fall. I believe that it is in the interests of this country—indeed, it is the
desire of this House and this country—to enhance our environmental standards in the future. The Government have shown their commitment through the 25-year environmental strategy and the environment Bill that my right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary will bring forward. In a number of ways, we are showing our commitment to enhanced environmental standards.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): A close member of my family suffers from ulcerative colitis and is a serving police officer. They have been told that they may not be able to access the medicine they need to keep them well on a day-to-day basis. What does the Prime Minister say to my family member and to the many thousands of people across the UK who have chronic illnesses, some of which are exacerbated by anxiety and uncertainty, as she recklessly goes towards no deal by threatening Members? She needs to think again. What impact assessment has she done for people like my family member who are suffering from chronic illnesses?

The Prime Minister: That point was raised earlier by the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), to whom I responded by making clear the work we have been doing with suppliers of medicines to ensure that there will be continuity of supply and that patients will continue to receive the medicines they need in all scenarios, including a no-deal scenario. When we are able to bring a deal back that deals with the issues raised by this House, the hon. Lady and every Member will have the responsibility of determining whether they want to leave the European Union with or without a deal.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): One opportunity to boost our coastal communities post Brexit is the establishment of free ports, which port operators will not consider while we are a member of the customs union. I welcome my right hon. Friend’s reaffirmation that we will be leaving the customs union, but can she give an assurance that she will not concede further on that in any customs arrangements that she negotiates, so that we can establish free ports?

The Prime Minister: I know that my hon. Friend has had a great interest in free ports for some time and has been promoting the concept, as has the Mayor of Tees Valley, Ben Houchen. This is an interesting area. There are issues that need to be addressed in relation to free ports, but it is an interesting area that we would want to look at.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): In the Prime Minister’s statement on 21 January, she told the House that she would “look for further ways to engage… regional representatives in England.”—[Official Report, 21 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 27.]

In response to my written parliamentary question last week, she said that that would not happen until “the next phase”—in other words, after we have left the EU. How does she expect to build support across the House when she shows this level of contempt for the regions of this country that will be worst affected?

The Prime Minister: That is not the case. I gently remind the hon. Lady that Members of this House represent all parts of the United Kingdom. We are talking with trade unions and businesses about the impact of decisions that are being made on parts of the United Kingdom. As I indicated in my statement, I committed when I became Prime Minister to a country that works for everyone, and that is what we continue to work for.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Is there not a precedent in the EU for member states that have been unable to ratify a treaty because of a democratic decision taken in their own country to go back to the EU and secure important changes? One country did so, having failed to agree the Lisbon treaty through a referendum; it secured legally binding changes by way of a protocol, to which the EU agreed—that country was Ireland.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is right that there is precedent for a country saying that it is not able to accept the terms of a particular agreement and going back to the European Union to negotiate different terms.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah yes, the president of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly—President Moon.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Prime Minister has made great statements about honouring the referendum, but the thing I am asked most often by colleagues across Europe and people in my constituency is which selective process the Prime Minister used in honouring which votes. We had an election in 2015, and she did not like the result, so she went back to the people in 2017. We had a vote on her deal, and it was rejected, but now we have to look at it again with small alterations. We voted against no deal, and yet she is not implementing that. How can voters in my constituency and people across Europe who watch what happens in this House have any trust that whatever deal is put on the table will be binding and will not be altered should the UK leave the European Union?

The Prime Minister: At the 2017 general election, 80% of the people who voted voted for parties that were committed to honouring the result of the referendum and taking the United Kingdom out of the European Union. That is exactly what the Government are working to do. The hon. Lady refers to no deal. We cannot simply take no deal off the table. As I said, if we are not going to stay in the European Union, the only way to ensure that there is not a no-deal is to have a deal.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Surely the backstop has become an unnecessary nightmare for all of us because we do not know what the future trading relationship will be between the UK and the EU27. If Brussels digs in its heels on not giving the small concession that the Prime Minister is asking for, will she seek to go into an implementation period post 29 March for 20 months, in which time we can negotiate the future trading relationship?

The Prime Minister: We will indeed have an opportunity during the implementation period to negotiate the details of that future trading relationship. I expect that to be done by December 2020, such that we are then able to put that future relationship into place.
Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I was glad that the Prime Minister mentioned her support for the Liberal Democrat policy of shared parental leave, but does she remember her Conservative colleagues who fought tooth and nail against it? Does she remember the Beecroft report—an extensive Conservative assault on workers’ rights that was stopped by the Lib Dems? Outside the EU, there is nothing to stop a future Conservative Prime Minister tearing up her legal commitments. There is no Brexit that can guarantee workers’ rights, and that is why we need a people’s vote.

The Prime Minister: We are giving those commitments in relation to workers’ rights. I was the person who ensured that the Conservative party’s policy was for flexible working for all and shared parental leave.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement today, and I pay tribute to her determination to get a good withdrawal deal and her commitment to ensure that we leave the EU on 29 March. Does she appreciate the strength of feeling in my constituency against the backstop proposal, and will she confirm that she has listened to those concerns and will continue to pursue a real and constructive change in these arrangements?

The Prime Minister: I can give my right hon. Friend that assurance. I have heard the message clearly that Parliament gave in relation to the backstop, and we are working for those legally binding changes that this Parliament wishes to see.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill is legislation of the highest political, legal and constitutional significance. It is absolutely vital that this House has sufficient time to debate and scrutinise it. It would be a constitutional outrage if that were not the case. Does the Prime Minister not then agree that it is crystal clear that we outraged if that were not the case. Does the Prime Minister not then agree that it is crystal clear that we are giving those commitments?

The Prime Minister: What this House voted for was an amendment that confirmed avoiding a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, confirmed that this House wished to leave with a deal and confirmed the issue that needed to be addressed for this House to agree a deal, and that was the issue of the backstop.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): I visited Brussels last week as a member of the Exiting the European Union Committee, and we met Martin Selmayr. Whether or not I believe him is another matter, but he explained to us that he could see no reason why the Commission would ever want to use the backstop. From the Government supporting the Brady amendment two weeks ago, I have to assume that the Government do not want the backstop. Parliament does not want the backstop, and the Northern Ireland public and the public across the rest of the UK do not want the backstop. May I ask my right hon. Friend: why is it still there?

The Prime Minister: Nobody wants to use the backstop. The reason the backstop is there is that it is the guarantee that there will be no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland in the circumstances in which the future relationship has not come into place at the end of the implementation period. There is an alternative available within the withdrawal agreement, which is a further extension of the implementation period. There are pros and cons in both of those positions. Of course we want to see change to the backstop, but there are issues around the fact that in the implementation period there would almost certainly be a request for money, which does not occur in relation to the backstop. It is there as a guarantee. It is like an insurance policy: you take it out, but you never want to have to use it.

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Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): A recent national opinion poll in Northern Ireland showed that 60% of those polled were clearly against the backstop—a majority of opinion. Is the EU policy on the backstop like that great Eagles song, “Hotel California”: you can check out anytime you like, but you cannot leave? Will the Prime Minister give an assurance to Unionists in Northern Ireland that there can be no progress unless the backstop is removed or is time-limited?
The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has made the point clearly. In fact, it is this House that has said it requires changes to be made to the backstop—legally binding changes—and that is what we are working for.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I have constituents working at GE Aviation, BAE Systems, Spirax Sarco, Jaguar Land Rover and Honda, and those businesses urgently need certainty. What assurances can the Prime Minister provide that the talks are credible and constructive, not cosmetic, and that they can reasonably be expected to yield progress?

The Prime Minister: The talks I had last week I think indicated, from the point of those in the European Commission, that they do indeed want to ensure we can leave with a deal. They have extended those talks; previously, indeed, there had been some unwillingness to extend the talks. But now that Parliament has shown what it specifically wants to see changing in the withdrawal agreement, we are able to have those talks and to explore the various ways in which we can ensure we deliver a deal that this Parliament can support.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The Prime Minister assured the House on 14 January that the right to be British, Irish or both in Northern Ireland was clear and referenced in the withdrawal agreement, yet in Belfast on 5 February stated that “I know that in some cases recently, people have encountered difficulties in securing their”—Irish—“rights as Irish citizens”.

Does the Prime Minister therefore recognise and agree that Emma DeSouza and many others in Northern Ireland are Irish citizens and therefore EU citizens, all the while the Home Office claims they are British?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has raised an issue on which, first, it is absolutely clear that the position of people in Northern Ireland to be Irish, British or indeed both is made very clear in the withdrawal agreement—it is maintained in that withdrawal agreement. There has been an issue raised in relation to a small number of cases about the interaction of that with the immigration rules that we apply here in the United Kingdom, and that is what the Home Secretary is working on.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s statement. Does she agree with me that extending article 50 just to have more months of procrastination and to allow some people to carry on dishing out the soundbites, rather than voting for solutions, will be of no use to us, no use to the EU and no use to our economy either?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Extending article 50 does not solve the issue; it just extends the length of time of consideration. The point would still have to come when Members of this House would have to make a decision and exercise—respect—their responsibilities. He references the economy. Actually, businesses have said to me that they do not want to see article 50 extended, because they feel that would extend the period of discussion and uncertainty, and they want a deal delivered and a deal agreed.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): It is understandable that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition is wary, but he knows that Labour promised in the general election to respect the outcome and to work for a deal, so I hope he will take every opportunity that is offered to him to talk, with the shadow Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Secretary, to the Government and to officials in order to hold the Government to account and the Prime Minister to account on the promises she has made in her statement today, particularly on workers’ rights.

Does the Prime Minister share my concerns about the downturn in economic growth? Since the referendum, 2,000 new jobs have been created at Doncaster iPort in my constituency. It seems to me that it is indecision, not Brexit per se, that is now holding back business. It is absolutely essential that we face compromise in a straightforward way and seek a deal. There are some in this House who say, “Take no deal off the table”, but for them no deal is ever going to be a winner. I ask the Prime Minister to reiterate that, across Parliament, we have to do what business and our communities want, and reach a compromise and get a deal done sooner rather than later.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady makes a very important point, which is that it is in the interests of business and in the interests of communities to get a deal agreed so that we can move forward. I believe there are businesses that are holding back investment in this country, waiting for us to get the deal over the line, and that that investment will be made when we get that deal. It is for every Member of this House to be prepared to accept, as the right hon. Lady has said, that we are all making compromises. The agreement with the European Union involves some compromise—that is because it is two sides coming together to agree a deal—but it is in the best interests of this country to have that deal and to get it sorted.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I entirely support what the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) has just said.

This morning, I met the representative of a large manufacturer in my constituency who is incredibly concerned about what would happen in the case of no deal. Will my right hon. Friend lay out clearly the consequences of no deal for our vital services sector? It has a trade surplus both with the EU and across the world, and it is responsible for the jobs of so many millions of our fellow citizens.

The Prime Minister: There is absolutely no doubt that no deal would, of course, have an impact on our economy; I think that in the longer term we would be able to recover from that impact. Obviously, there have been a number of academic and other studies that have made assessments of the impact of no deal. As my hon. Friend has said, the services sector is obviously very important for us. That is why I believe that the proposals and the deal in the political declaration, which gives us flexibility in developing our services, including financial services, are so important for the future.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Brexit has evoked many emotions—anger and sadness. Last week, the Prime Minister was in Ireland. Do the Government care about breaking Irish hearts?
The Prime Minister: When I was in Ireland and met the Taoiseach, we were discussing not only the issue of the backstop and getting a deal with the European Union that can get through Parliament, but also the future relationship between the UK and Ireland. Obviously, given the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland—a land border with Ireland: a continuing member of the EU27, but also a close neighbour—we want to ensure that for the future we can enhance and build on the very good relations that the UK and Irish Governments have had in recent years. So I hope that the hon. Lady will be with us.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Political leaders across Europe have been unanimous in stating that the Prime Minister’s deal, which was overwhelmingly rejected by this House, was the only deal possible because of the Prime Minister’s own red lines. We are now in the terrifying situation that in 45 days we could crash out with no deal. The right hon. Lady has heard Members on both sides calling for an extension to article 50 this afternoon. Will she now tell the House how many votes she is happy to lose before she considers extending article 50?

The Prime Minister: I have set out the procedure that the Government are going to follow in relation to this issue and we continue to work to be able to bring back a deal for a meaningful vote.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Food and Drink Federation has said today that the industry would have no problem meeting the final EU deadline of 29 March if we were leaving with no deal. Yet the Government have still not even reached a deal that we can agree on here, much less to take to Europe. Given all that, how do I justify to my constituents why this Parliament shut at 3.27 pm last Wednesday because the Government had literally nothing to say?

The Prime Minister: Many things happen in Parliament, and not just in this Chamber. The hon. Gentleman might wish to point out to his constituents why the Parliament shut at 3.27 pm last Wednesday because the Government had literally nothing for MPs to discuss?

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): If the Prime Minister is serious about meeting the 29 March deadline, will she allow the House to get on and do what it is here to do instead of filling our time with general debates and statutory instruments? If we are coming back next week instead of recess, will we deal with the Agriculture Bill, the Fisheries Bill, the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill, the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill or the Healthcare (International Arrangements) Bill? Will we ever see the withdrawal agreement Bill?

If we are to leave on 29 March, these matters will all have to be dealt with here and in the other place. Why does the Prime Minister not just accept what is obvious to the rest of the world and start now the process for an orderly extension of the article 50 period?

The Prime Minister: The immigration Bill, I believe, is in Committee today, so work is being done on the immigration Bill. [Interruption.] The right hon. Gentleman says it is in Committee: it is the normal procedure of the House of Commons that, having had a Second Reading, a Bill goes into Committee.

I also say to the right hon. Gentleman that next week there will indeed be many statutory instruments that relate to Brexit and that are important preparations for this House to make. He talks about bringing forward a withdrawal agreement Bill: we cannot have a withdrawal agreement Bill until we have a withdrawal agreement. If he wants the Bill, I assume that he is going to support the withdrawal agreement.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): We were told that we would see the final report on anti-dumping duties on aluminium foil by Christmas; entirely predictably, we have not seen anything at all. The issue is very niche, but for a company in my constituency it is extremely important. It is one example of where businesses have been left in a state of hopeless uncertainty because of the Government’s failure to prepare for Brexit. Is it not time that, rather than letting businesses continue in this state, the Prime Minister announced that she will extend article 50?

The Prime Minister: As I have just indicated, there are businesses saying to me that article 50 extension does not solve the problem for them. What they want to see is a deal agreed by this Parliament and then a deal that has been negotiated with the EU and agreed by this Parliament being put into place.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): May I bring the Prime Minister back to workers’ rights? She will be aware that the European Parliament and European Commission are currently negotiating for better and stronger workers’ rights for workers in the gig economy and for working parents. Those are far better and stronger than those found in the current UK Government’s good work plan. If Europe agrees to those new regulations, will the UK Government implement them for working people in the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: What I have said in the statement and what we have indicated is that if there are future changes to workers’ rights in the European Union, we have committed to giving Parliament the opportunity to say whether the United Kingdom would support those rights.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is patently obvious that the Prime Minister’s tawdry strategy is now to string this out until the last second in an attempt to blackmail and bully MPs into supporting this deal. I reassure her that I will take her advice: I will hold my nerve and refuse to bend the knee to this job-destroying Brexit. May I urge my party’s Front Benchers to do likewise—refuse to vote for it and instead honour our conference commitment to holding a public vote on this deal?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman talks about the impact of not having come to a deal at this stage and then in his question wants to go into a situation where we do not have a deal, we do not have agreement across this House and there is an extension of the time and the uncertainty that he has already referred to. I do not think that a people’s vote—a second referendum—is
the right way forward for the reasons I indicated earlier. I believe that what people want us to do is deliver on the referendum and get on with it.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): What progress, if any, has the EU signalled to the Prime Minister may be possible on the backstop to date?

The Prime Minister: That is precisely what we are talking to the European Union about: how we can resolve the issue of the backstop in a way that will command the support of this Parliament. We have agreed that we will enter those talks, and that is exactly what we will be discussing.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The European Union and all the people speaking for it in the different institutions have made it absolutely clear that the withdrawal agreement negotiated by this Prime Minister, agreed by this Prime Minister and signed off by this Prime Minister is not going to be amended. But this House has rejected the withdrawal agreement. Is not the only way out of this now—and this gives the Prime Minister what she wants—for this House to adopt the negotiated withdrawal agreement with a sunset clause? Then it can be put to the people in a referendum: whether they accept it or whether they wish to remain in the EU with the better deal that we have now.

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answers I gave earlier in relation to the issue of a second referendum.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Given that the Prime Minister has said repeatedly that she will not go back and give the country the choice on whether this is actually what they want, given that she has said repeatedly that she does not want to extend article 50 and given that she refuses to take no deal off the table, what advice would she give to those tens of thousands of UK students currently studying in the EU? What about those British holidaymakers who have already made their arrangements? They may have chronic health conditions and find that they are not able to get cover.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady indicates her concern about the prospect of leaving with no deal. There is an answer to ensuring that we do not have no deal and that is to agree a deal.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The duty of any Government is to keep their citizens safe and surely there can be no compromise on that, so is the Prime Minister really saying that, despite all the warnings from the police and the security services about the effect on our national security of crashing out with a no deal, she is willing to allow us to crash out on 29 March, rather than extend article 50?

The Prime Minister: What I am saying is that the first aim of the Government must be what we are doing, which is negotiating changes to the deal with the European Union that can be brought back to this House and can command the support of this House.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): No fewer than eight Government Ministers have described no deal in terms such as “catastrophic”, “a betrayal”, “disastrous” and “the worse possible outcome”. Why is the Prime Minister still playing Russian roulette with the option of no deal? At what stage of this lethal game does she expect those Ministers to resign from her Government? Perhaps that should be on Thursday, when Parliament has the opportunity to find a way of ruling out no deal once and for all. [Interruption.]

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman says that Parliament would find a way of ruling out no deal once and for all. There are only two ways in which we can ensure that we do not have a no-deal situation. One is to stay in the European Union. The right hon. Gentleman might want to do that. [Interruption.] He says, “Yes, absolutely” from a sedentary position. That is not the result of the referendum. The Government will deliver on the result of the referendum and we will leave the European Union. The only other way of ensuring that we do not have no deal is to agree a deal. That seems to be pretty obvious to me.

Mr Speaker: I think the proper response to the sneeze from the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) at the end of the last question is, “Bless you.”

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): We are now 45 days away from the projected departure date, and we still have no clarity and no closure on a deal that the Prime Minister negotiated when there were 135 days to go. May I ask for her opinion on this statement from the innocent days when there were only 110 days to go, on the eve of the last pulled vote in December?

“If Parliament does not agree a Brexit deal soon then we must recognise that the original mandate to leave, taken over two years ago, will begin to date and will, eventually, no longer represent a reflection of current intent.”

Those are not my words, but the words of the right hon. and gallant Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood). If members of her own Government get it, why won’t she? Can she not see why the general public see that her only strategy is to run down the clock?

The Prime Minister: The Government’s position is very clear. We believe it is better for this country to leave with a deal. That is the position that the House of Commons has taken, but the House of Commons has also said that it does not agree the deal that was negotiated. It wants to see changes to the backstop and that is what we are working for.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): The Prime Minister has taken many questions encouraging her to end uncertainty by taking no deal off the table, but many others encouraging her to create more uncertainty by extending article 50 and calling for a second referendum. The Liberal Democrats managed to advocate both in the same question. Does she share my confusion over the uncertainty among those who oppose Brexit over whether uncertainty is acceptable or not?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has very neatly pointed out the contradiction in many of the contributions that have been made in the House today.
Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): The Prime Minister has spoken about how she wants a country that works for everyone and in her speech she talked about the damage that would be done to the public’s faith in our democracy. What is her message to the 48.1% who voted remain, who did not get a mention in her statement?

The Prime Minister: The deal that the UK Government have been pursuing is one that respects the result of the referendum but does so in a way that protects jobs, protects our security and protects the Union of the United Kingdom. I believe that that is the deal that is right for everyone across the United Kingdom.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Last week, my constituent Karin Vaughan had to travel to a registration centre in Edinburgh from the village of Letham in Fife. Mrs Vaughan moved to the UK 74 years ago when she was three months old. Her village is very, very angry. She is upset. What is the Prime Minister’s message to Mrs Vaughan? I hope it is, “I’m sorry.”

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises a specific case. I do not know all the details of the case that he has raised. If he is reflecting the fact that we are saying that those who are European Union citizens, in order to ensure they have the verification of their position here, should apply under the EU settlement scheme, then I believe the Government are taking the right approach. We are making that an easy scheme for people. As he knows, I have said that from the national roll-out of that scheme there will be no fee.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The proposals from my right hon. Friend for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) have the best prospect of securing a majority across the House, far better than the Prime Minister’s deal, which was voted against by two thirds of hon. Members. Is it not therefore incumbent on her to facilitate negotiations in co-operation with the Labour Front-Bench team and the European Union to see how much progress can be made on those proposals, and then bring them back to this House as they represent the best way forward?

The Prime Minister: As I indicated in my statement, we are continuing our discussions with the official Opposition, but it is also the case that this House made clear what it is that it wants to see in order to be prepared to agree a deal. That was made clear in the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady), which was approved by this House.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I am sure that, like you, Mr Speaker, the Prime Minister is ferociously well read and will have read the 14th century masterpiece, “The Divine Comedy”, which is home to Dante’s inferno, the nine circles of hell. The eighth circle was reserved for fraudsters. Is that not where we will find those from the referendum campaign who broke electoral law, and deployed all kinds of political sorcery and false promise to win the referendum? At this rate, I am afraid to say, it is probably where the Prime Minister’s own withdrawal agreement is going.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is absolutely clear that the EU will not reopen negotiations to discuss the draft withdrawal agreement on the backstop, or on any other of the issues. It is profoundly disappointing that the Prime Minister is pretending otherwise. It is also clear, as the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) and others have said, that we are running out of time, that the economy is stalling and that businesses are really floundering. So in the interests of the country, Prime Minister, will you agree to extend article 50?

The Prime Minister: We are in talks with the European Union, so the premise of the hon. Lady’s question is, I believe, not correct. They are talking to us about what changes could be possible in relation to the backstop. That is the first point. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) pointed out, to complain about the impact of uncertainty on the economy and then to ask to increase the period of uncertainty is a contradiction.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Mention has been made of the different parts of the UK. I have the honour to represent the far north of Scotland—I suspect the House has gathered that by now. When I put it to the Prime Minister a few days ago that European structural funds had brought great historic good to my part of the world—they have greatly benefited my constituents, paying for new airports, roads, economic development, tourism and so on—she referred me to the shared prosperity fund. We are very scant on the detail of the shared prosperity fund. May I respectfully ask her to ask her officials to meet me and other interested Members to discuss what the fund might be and how it might apply to needy areas such as mine?

The Prime Minister: We will be consulting on the nature of the shared prosperity fund and the criteria under which it will operate, so I will ask the relevant Minister to meet the hon. Gentleman in the way he has requested.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Police chiefs told us yesterday that no deal will mean no access to DNA, no access to security alerts on terrorism and no access to the European arrest warrant. The Prime Minister’s own deal will not give security on those issues over the next two years pending discussions with the European Court of Justice, so why is she undertaking this reckless action? Will she undertake a backstop on security?

The Prime Minister: The deal we have negotiated on security does provide. There are, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, two areas where it does not specify the particular instruments that will be used in relation to access, for example, to criminal records, but it does specify that that access will be enabled and the discussions will be on the form that that access takes. The deal we have agreed ensures that we are able to continue the security co-operation with the European Union that has helped to keep us safe.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The Prime Minister just said that she thinks her deal is the best for the UK, so why will she not put her trust in the UK people and put it back to them for ratification?
The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave to that question earlier.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The Prime Minister mentioned the meetings that she had with political parties in Northern Ireland, but she gave no indication at all of having listened to anything they had to say. Sinn Féin and the Social Democratic and Labour party could not have been clearer that tinkering with the backstop is tantamount to tinkering with the permanence of a peace agreement and cannot be accepted. Meanwhile, in a statement issued on 7 February, the Ulster Unionists said that “as time is short, an extension to Article 50 must not be ruled out if a workable deal is to be reached.”

Will the Prime Minister tell us whether she is listening to the majority in Northern Ireland, or is she still obsessed with following the orders of the minority, as is shown by the empty Democratic Unionist party Benches?

The Prime Minister: When I was in Northern Ireland, I met the five political parties. I met representatives from civil society and businesses. They were making a variety of points in relation to this issue. One of the points that civil society was making in particular was the importance of the commitment to no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland in helping to ensure that the progress that had been made in Northern Ireland since the Belfast/Good Friday agreement would continue.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): In her statement, the Prime Minister used the phrase “hold your nerve”, with regards to negotiations with the EU, but is she also not saying to the sensible members of her Cabinet, many of whom are sitting on the Front Bench with her, that they should hold their nerve in refusing to take no deal off the table so that she can run down the clock, come back to this House at the 11th hour and blackmail the House to back her deal?

The Prime Minister: The choice that this House and Members of this House will face—this choice will come at whatever point, but I believe that it should come before 29 March so we can deliver on leaving the EU on 29 March—is very simply whether they do want to leave with a deal, or whether they want to leave with no deal, because unless we stay in the European Union, the only way not to have no deal is to agree a deal.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Since her drubbing in this House in January, the Prime Minister has sought to reopen the withdrawal deal but, in the last two weeks, the Austrian Chancellor, the German Chancellor, the Dutch Prime Minister, the President of the European Council, the French President, the Irish Prime Minister and the President of the European Commission have all been absolutely unequivocal in saying that they will not be reopen the deal. Yet the Prime Minister still acts as if it is all going swimmingly. Can she tell us which one of that group she expects to blink first?

The Prime Minister: Some of the people the hon. Gentleman has referred to have also referred to the need for us to find creative solutions to ensure that we can deal with the issue that has been raised by this Parliament.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): So far, the Prime Minister’s Brexit policy has involved transport arrangements with no ships, a facilitation arrangement in Northern Ireland with no facilitators and a backstop arrangement that does not actually stop anything. On top of that, we have been promised meaningful votes that disappear like mirages as we get near them. When will the Prime Minister get real and recognise that only a customs union with the EU will sort the Northern Ireland border issue, protect our manufacturing and command a majority of the House?

The Prime Minister: It is not the case that the only resolution of the issue of the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland is a customs union with the European Union.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Government’s own economic analysis, which was of the Chequers deal, not the Prime Minister’s disastrous deal, demonstrated that our nation and the people of our country are going to be significantly poorer. Why does the Prime Minister think that, without a customs union, people on these Benches—Labour MPs—will vote for people to be poorer by following her deal?

The Prime Minister: First, I did make it clear that the deal that the Government had put forward was analysed in the economic analysis. We recognise that there was not economic analysis of the political declaration, which is part of the vote that took place in the House of Commons, because there are elements of that that are not yet tied down and agreed. However, variations were indicated within the economic analysis. A mid-term variation in relation to friction at the border was indicated. I say to the hon. Lady that it is not the case that the analysis shows that leaving the EU and the deals that are proposed would leave us poorer than we are today. What it does show is differences in the growth in the economy under the various deals, compared with staying in the European Union, but we are leaving the EU, and the analysis showed that the deal that the Government had proposed was the deal that was best for respecting the referendum and protecting jobs and the economy.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister is offering a choice between being shot in the head with a no-deal Brexit or shot in the foot with her Brexit. When will she realise that the best way of getting her deal through this House is with the proviso that it will be ratified by a public vote, when the public can judge between her deal and the existing deal—staying in the EU? If they opt for that, we will save the two years of the transition period and can get on with the jobs at hand.

The Prime Minister: I am not quite sure what timescale the hon. Gentleman thinks he would save by having a second referendum, because that in itself would take considerable time to take through the House and put in place. I will respond to him in the way that I have responded to others: I do not believe that it is right to have a second referendum. I believe that it is right to deliver on the result of the 2016 referendum.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister could achieve a majority in the House if she were just to recognise the scale of the...
deed that she had on her deal recently and bring forward an amendment to her red lines on a customs union, with a British say in trade deals. That would be the way to break the impasse, but she does not seem to be prepared to do that because it would break her own party in the process, so it is party before country. However, she is also presenting a false choice to Parliament by saying that it is a choice between a deal or crashing out with no deal. We know for a fact that the Prime Minister has the option, if it came down to the wire—to revoke article 50 and stop the Minister has the option, if it came down to the wire—to out with no deal. We know for a fact that the Prime

Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman suggests that I revoke article 50. Revoking article 50 means going back on the result of the 2016 referendum—

Mr Sweeney indicated dissent.

The Prime Minister: It is no good the hon. Gentleman shaking his head. What the European Court of Justice made clear in its determination was that it was open to an individual member state to request a revocation of article 50, but that that meant staying in the European Union.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP) rose—

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

Mr Speaker: Ah! Of course “B” for “Brown” comes before “G” for “Gray”, but on the other hand, “A” for “Airdrie” comes before “K” for “Kilmarnock”. I call Mr Neil Gray.

Neil Gray: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Prime Minister asked us to hold our nerve and essentially to trust her, but does she not have a nerve in asking us to support her plan when it has been her plan, her deal and her intransigence for 30 months that have got us into this mess? How can we trust her when she continues to run down the clock by wasting our time this week and next by re-tabling a motion from last month, and when she continues to gamble by putting a no deal in front of us in order to put her party and her position ahead of the people?

The Prime Minister: What the Government are doing is taking the instruction of this Parliament, which was to get changes to the withdrawal agreement and to the backstop, so that this Parliament can agree a deal. That is what we are working on and what we are determined to deliver.

Alan Brown: On the “trust me” and “hold your nerve” theme, let us look at the no-deal preparations in terms of the ferry contract. Using an emergency procedure exemption for direct awards to the ferry companies in breach of European rules, there was an award to a ferry company with no ships and negative assets. Yesterday at the Dispatch Box, the Transport Secretary said, “Don’t worry, it hasn’t cost taxpayers money”—we now learn that up to £800,000 has been spent on external consultants—and he ducked issues about legal challenges while his Department was in court. Will the Prime Minister sack the Transport Secretary, or is that the general level of competence of this Government, which we are supposed to have trust in?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman talks about money spent. Money was indeed spent on securing all the contracts let. Third-party due diligence was properly carried out and would have been regardless of who the agreements were entered into with.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the Prime Minister and all colleagues.

I have been advised that the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), the leader of the Scottish National party, has a point of order that relates to earlier exchanges. If that be so, I am happy to take it now.

Ian Blackford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I rise more in sorrow than in anger. We live in exceptional times. It is one thing to hear the Prime Minister say she wanted this decided in December, when it was she who took it off the table, but if that were not bad enough, when I pressed her on the economic analysis of her deal, she said the Government had published economic assessments of the proposals. Furthermore, she also said that I had perhaps inadvertently misled the House, which beggars belief, because if anyone has inadvertently misled the House, it is the Prime Minister. The fact is the Treasury published an economic analysis of Brexit in November, before the Prime Minister’s deal, that in no way referred to the Prime Minister’s deal. This goes way beyond spinning.

Perhaps more importantly, the House is to be asked to vote on a proposition without the economic impact assessment. I am asking two things. First, can the Prime Minister correct the record? Secondly, what options are open to us to make sure that before we come to perhaps the most important vote this House will take we have the facts of the economic assessment? It is the case that under any of the Treasury’s Brexit assessments we will be worse off than under the current deal. That is the fact and the reality of the situation. The Prime Minister really has to learn some grace.

Mr Speaker: The Prime Minister has been at the Dispatch Box for two and a quarter hours and has answered all inquiries. She is welcome to return to the Dispatch Box and respond to the right hon. Gentleman, but she is under no obligation to do so.

The Prime Minister: I said that the Government had put forward a deal and that an economic analysis was done on that deal. The political declaration was part of what was brought to the House. The right hon. Gentleman says there was no reference to that in the economic analysis. The economic analysis indicated what might be the impact of the various elements of the spectrum of choice on friction at the border. It reflected the fact that the political declaration had not confirmed the point at which friction would or would not occur. That was in the economic analysis published before the meaningful vote.

Ian Blackford rose—

Mr Speaker: No, no, no. I gently say to the right hon. Gentleman that I think that for today honour is served. I was happy to hear his point of order, and the Prime Minister has graciously responded.
I do not wish to invest the proceedings with levity, but the right hon. Gentleman asks what can be done to ensure that all the facts are in the possession of the House when key votes take place. I do not suppose he is investing me with powers to ensure that state of affairs. I cannot, not least because one person’s fact is another’s opinion. That is in the nature of political argument. I would only say—and another example has been provided today by the exchanges on this statement, for which I again thank the Prime Minister and all colleagues—that the House will always have the fullest possible opportunity, institutionally and individually, to state views, to pose questions and to extract answers. That is the best we can do. My role is simply to try to facilitate that. I am glad that we have, I think, finished on a reasonably harmonious note. Let us leave it there for now.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: Before we move to the second statement—the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has been in his place patiently awaiting the opportunity to make it—I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that Her Majesty has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

- Finance Act 2019
- Voyeurism (Offences) Act 2019
- Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019
- Tenant Fees Act 2019

Cairncross Review

2.54 pm

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, before I make my statement, I invite the House to join me in paying tribute to one of our sporting greats, Gordon Banks, who sadly passed away earlier today. He was one of football’s finest-ever goalkeepers and a vital part of England’s World cup winning team, and his performances for club and country leave behind an exceptional legacy. The tributes in the past few hours are testament to his personal qualities. He was a fierce opponent on the pitch but a kind and generous man off it. I am sure the thoughts of the whole House are with his friends and family.

With permission, I would like to make a statement on the publication of the Cairncross review. I would like to thank Dame Frances Cairncross for leading the review and the expert panel and officials who worked with her to develop it. It comes at an important time. In her report, Dame Frances paints a vivid picture of the threat to high-quality journalism in this country. There are about 6,000 fewer journalists now than there were roughly a decade ago. Print circulation of daily national papers fell from 11.5 million in 2008 to 5.8 million in 2018. In the same period, circulation of local newspapers halved.

As the review makes clear, there are many reasons for this, but the main driver is a rapid change in how we consume content. The majority of people now read news online, including 91% of 18 to 24-years-olds. As this shift has taken place, publishers have struggled to find ways to create sustainable business models in the digital age. As the review sets out, between them Google and Facebook capture the largest share of online advertising revenue and are an increasingly important channel for the distribution of news content online. They also hold an array of data on their users that news publishers cannot possibly hope to replicate, which further strengthens their position in the digital advertising market.

This combination of market conditions threatens to undermine the future financial sustainability of journalism. Even publications that have only ever been online are struggling. This should concern us all. Dame Frances notes that while high-quality journalism is desirable, there is one type of journalism that society and democracy cannot do without, and that is public interest journalism. This is the type of journalism that can hold the powerful to account and is an essential component of our democracy. It helps us to shine a light on important issues, in communities, in courtrooms, in council chambers and in this Chamber, but this type of journalism is also under threat, especially at the local level, and the review cites numerous examples of what happens to communities when a local paper disappears. Dame Frances’s report comes at a vital time, therefore, and I welcome her focus on public interest journalism.

I want to set out to the House how the Government intend to respond to this important issue. There are many substantial recommendations in the review. There are some that we can take forward immediately and other more long-term recommendations where we will consult with stakeholders about the best way forward.
First, I will deal with the recommendations we are able to progress immediately. Online advertising now represents a growing part of the economy and forms an important revenue stream for many publishers, but this burgeoning market is largely opaque and extremely complex, and it is impossible to know whether the revenue shares received by news publishers are fair. The review proposes that the Competition and Markets Authority conduct a market study of the digital advertising market. The purpose of this study would be to examine whether the online marketplace is operating effectively and whether it enables or prevents fair competition. It is right that policy makers and regulators have an accurate understanding of how the market operates and check that it is enabling fair competition, and I have today written to the CMA in support of this study. I will also urge Professor Jason Furman to treat the review as additional evidence in his ongoing inquiry into digital competition in the UK, whose findings are due to be published in the spring. I recognise that online advertising has given rise to a wider set of social and economic challenges, and my Department will therefore conduct a review of the way in which online advertising is regulated.

The Cairncross review cites the concerns of publishers about the potential market impact of the BBC on their sustainability. They argue that the BBC's free-to-access online content makes it harder for them to attract subscribers. The review also questions whether the BBC is straying too far into the provision of “softer” news content—traditionally the preserve of commercial publishers—and suggests that that might benefit from the scrutiny of Ofcom.

Let me be clear: the Government recognise the strong and central role of the BBC. As the review states, “the BBC offers the very thing that this Review aims to encourage: a source of reliable and high quality news, with a focus on objectivity and impartiality, and independent from government.” However, it is right that the role of the BBC, as a public service broadcaster, be appropriately transparent. The review recommends that “Ofcom should assess whether BBC News Online is striking the right balance between aiming for the widest reach for its own content...and driving traffic from its online site to commercial publishers (particularly local ones)”.

Of course, some of those questions were addressed as part of the charter review process, but I have written today to ask Ofcom to look carefully at the review’s recommendations and identify any new concerns that deserve attention. For instance, there may be ways in which the BBC could do more to drive traffic to commercial sites, particularly the local press.

Another recommendation is a proposal for two separate forms of ‘tax relief’ for news publications, one of which is intended to bolster the supply of local and investigative journalism by enabling it to benefit from charitable status. The review notes that in the United States philanthropic donations provide, on average, 90% of the total revenues of non-profit news publishers. Although we have a different media landscape, as the review points out, charitable status could reduce the costs for those producing essential public interest reporting, and could pave the way for a new revenue stream through philanthropic donations. I recognise that that avenue has been explored before and that some hurdles will have to be cleared, but I believe that we should pursue it. I have therefore written to the Charity Commission, and look forward to hearing how it can help in that regard.

As I explained earlier, there are areas in which we shall need to consult further and respond in further detail. For instance, Dame Frances recommends the establishment of an institute for public interest news to promote investigative and local journalism. She proposes that the institute should act as a convener for organisations with the means to support public interest news, including the BBC and online platforms. It would also be tasked with generating additional finance for the sector, driving innovation through a proposed new fund, and supporting an expansion of the BBC’s local democracy reporting service. That BBC-funded scheme is a shining example of what can be done. The first of its kind in the industry, it is embedding 150 journalists in local publishing firms to produce local democracy reporting, particularly relating to local councils. I met some of those reporters last week. So far they have produced 50,000 stories between them, all of which might not otherwise have been heard. The Government will explore, with others, what more can be done in that regard.

The review calls on the Government to do more to incentivise the publishing industry’s transition to digital. It proposes an extension of the current scope of VAT exemptions so that they apply to online payments for all news content, not simply print news content, and a new tax relief for public interest news providers. I know there is passionate support for that in the publishing sector, and we share its ambition for a healthy and sustainable industry. As the House knows, the Government always keep taxes under review. Any decision to amend the UK tax regime is, of course, a matter for the Chancellor of the Exchequer as part of the annual fiscal cycle, but I will discuss the matter further with the industry and with my colleagues at the Treasury.

I want to highlight two recommendations that cover similar ground to work that the Government are already doing. One is the sensible proposal that the Government should develop a media literacy strategy, working with the range of organisations already active in this space. Evidence suggests that there is a correlation between media literacy and a greater propensity to pay for news, so improving media literacy will also have an impact on the sustainability of the press. Ensuring that people have the skills they need in order to separate fact from fiction is the key to long-term success in tackling this issue, and I am pleased that Dame Frances has focused on it. We welcome the recommendation, which relates closely to our ongoing work to combat disinformation. Last month the Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries, my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Margot James), hosted a roundtable on media literacy, and the Government are looking into what more we can do to support industry efforts in that area.

The other recommendation that I want to highlight is the call for the creation of new codes of conduct between publishers and the online platforms that distribute their content. The codes would cover issues relating to the indexing of content on platforms and its presentation, as well as the need for advance warning of algorithm changes likely to affect a publisher. Their development would be overseen by a regulator. The review also proposes that regulatory oversight be introduced as
part of a “news quality obligation”, requiring platforms to improve the way in which their users understand the origin of an article of news and the trustworthiness of its source. Dame Frances recognises that platforms are already starting to accept responsibility in that regard.

Those two proposals deserve the Government’s full consideration, and we will think about how they can inform our approach. Our consideration will include our work on the online harms White Paper, which is due to be published shortly.

The review sets out a path to help us to put our media on a stronger and more sustainable footing, but Dame Frances makes it clear that it is just one contribution to the debate. We cannot turn back the clock, and there is no magic formula to address the systemic changes faced by the industry. However, it is the role of any responsible Government to play an active part in supporting public interest journalism. We will consider the review carefully, and will engage with press publishers, online platforms, regulators, academics, the public and Members of the House as we think about the way forward. I remain open to further proposals that may go beyond the recommendations or scope of the review.

I know that this issue is of great concern to Members in all parts of the House, and today’s review is an important milestone. At the heart of any thriving civil society is a free and vibrant press. The Government—and, I have no doubt, the House—are committed to supporting it through changing times, and ensuring that it can continue to do its job. I commend my statement to the House.

3.7 pm

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for giving me advance sight of his statement. I also thank him for his warm words about the late Gordon Banks, who was not only a great goalkeeper—but a true gentleman. Not everyone will know of his contribution to civic life in the Potteries and in Staffordshire as a whole, from support for veterans to dementia care. To the people of Staffordshire, he was not just a sporting hero but a community hero. He will be greatly missed.

As the Secretary of State said, the release of the Cairncross report is a milestone—a small milestone—on the road of our enormous task of addressing digital and news publishing. Finding the right solutions requires creative policies and cross-party partnership, and Opposition Front Benchers are ready to work with the Government where we can. I thank the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee for the rigour of its ongoing work in relation to the harms caused by digital disruption. I look forward to reading its next report, and I commend its Chair, the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), for maintaining a determined cross-party unity of purpose in the face of corporate obfuscation from companies such as Facebook.

As we have heard, this review addresses an urgent issue: we have lost 6,000 frontline reporter jobs since 2007; newspaper circulation rates have fallen by half; 350 local news titles have closed; and half of Britons are now worried about fake news. Meanwhile, the emerging tech companies continue to increase their bottom lines with ever-increasing advertising revenues, extracting value from content produced by others while taking little responsibility for the destruction they leave in their wake.

Some of the review’s recommendations in this regard are particularly welcome. We said last summer that Labour would extend charitable status to public service journalism, so I am pleased to hear that the Secretary of State has today written to the Charity Commission to pursue that further. We have also publicly supported increased media awareness courses and reporter training schemes, and I am glad to see that the Government might soon be adopting that approach as well. But in other areas I am afraid that the review is barking up the wrong tree.

I understand that the Secretary of State is duty bound by this report to write to Ofcom asking for an assessment of BBC News Online’s market impact, but that could be counterproductive, because while local titles are closing it is the BBC that produces exactly the sort of public interest and publicly trusted content that the review was designed to encourage. Does the Secretary of State therefore agree that it will be a big mistake if the Government choose to pick a fight with the BBC over this, or to raid its budgets even further, rather than tackling the real problem: a distorted digital market?

It seems to me that the problem is clear: savvy tech platforms have developed targeted behavioural advertising that allows companies to direct their products towards certain audiences. Only they can do that, because the data needed to segment markets is overwhelmingly owned by emerging data monopolies, so the only way to reach consumers is through a decreasing number of digital giants. This is all part of surveillance capitalism.

Mergers and acquisitions by digital giants have meant that over half of all digital advertising revenues in the UK are now hoovered up by two companies, Google and Facebook. This is a duopoly. It is the main cause of the 70% reduction in print advertising revenues that has hit newspaper bottom lines so hard, and the dominant position of these social media giants means that in negotiations with news publishers they do not play fair.

I understand that this is a difficult problem to solve: these are global companies so big that they see themselves as being above the law. So let me say to the newspaper industry that I know the situation looks bleak, and it may be disappointed that there are not harder recommendations in this review, but even in these dark days of Brexit and increasing division in politics there is one man who is uniting this House: Mark Zuckerberg.

He insulted us all when he refused to attend the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. He may think that the UK market and our institutions are not a priority for him, but I hope he knows there is now a new resolve that transcends our party differences to deal with abuses by his company and others.

I appreciate that the Secretary of State has asked the Competition and Markets Authority for a market study of digital advertising, but does he agree that this review was actually tasked with looking at that in its terms of reference? It is not his fault that the review has ducked this part of its responsibilities, but the reality is that commissioning the CMA to look at this kicks the can down the road again.

We need a bolder, quicker approach. Having looked at this problem for a couple of years now, I think there is a position and a process that we could all coalesce behind. First, we need to address the immediate symptoms of market abuse caused by the data monopolies: the harms, the hate, and the fake news. To do that we need a
new duty of care obligation on social media companies, enforced by a tough new regulator. Last week a Minister indicated that the duty of care could be enforced by criminal sanctions, not just civil penalties, if companies are found to be in breach. Can the Secretary of State confirm that the Government are considering this?

Secondly, we must address the root cause of the problem, which I believe is a distorted digital market. A review by the CMA is all well and good, and we welcome it, but we need to modernise competition laws to make them fit for the data age to really address abuse in the digital market.

Thirdly, once we have dealt with the symptoms and the causes of the problem, we must improve the health of our digital markets by shaping a digital public sphere to bolster our media sector and protect our democracy. I envisage an online sphere where citizens can access trustworthy news from professional reporters and researchers, content from public institutions, central and local government and public service broadcasters, and public services like our great galleries and collections without being surveilled or targeted by advertisers and having to give up their personal data to transact for services. I hope we can commit today to take our lead from the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee and work in a spirit of unity to deal with the destructive dominance of the tech giants.

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I also welcome his undertaking to work with us; there is undoubtedly a broad measure of agreement across the House, and it would be sensible for us to work together. I also agree with what he said about the Select Committee’s work in this space, and we all await its further and final report on the issue of misinformation, which is due imminently.

On the BBC, the hon. Gentleman mentioned two aspects of what the review says. The first was the issue of market impact and the BBC. As I said in my statement, without prejudging the outcome I think it is appropriate to invite Ofcom to see whether more can be done here. I do not imply criticism in that request, but it is sensible for me to follow through on that recommendation of the review. But as the hon. Gentleman will recognise, the review also congratulates the BBC, and indeed the News Media Association, for the development of the local democracy reporter scheme and suggests that it may well be expanded. Again, it would be right for us to pursue that, and it is a recognition of the positive contribution the BBC is making in this space.

The hon. Gentleman also talked about the dominance of Google and Facebook, and that is undoubtedly a stark feature of the review. It is sensible to follow through on the review’s recommendation to involve the CMA, as it clearly has a role in determining whether the processes over which it holds sway are being appropriately applied, but I do not believe we should stop there, which is why I intend to begin a Government-centred review of the broader policy implications surrounding the online advertising market. That will follow on from the Furman review of competition issues which is already under way.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the work the Government are doing on online harms, and he knows that we are considering a number of the issues he has mentioned, including of course the penalties that ought to be available when online platforms that have understood their responsibilities choose none the less not to exercise them. He also knows that I am committed to ensuring that those penalties are meaningful. He will forgive me for asking him to wait a little longer for the detail, but we will publish the White Paper shortly.

Finally, I agree entirely with what the hon. Gentleman says about the importance of trustworthy news. It is fundamental to our democracy and our society that we can trust what we read, and that there is a means whereby citizens of this country can read proper and informed scrutiny of what those in power are doing. That applies at both national and local level. The purpose of the Cairncross review was always to make a substantial contribution to that debate and to offer some ways forward. I believe it has done that; I have not suggested, and neither has Dame Frances, that it presents all the answers to these very complex problems, but they are problems with which we are right to wrestle as a democracy, and we are right not to let go of the importance of the scrutiny we are all rightly subject to.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I very much welcome Dame Frances Cairncross’s report, which I believe addresses one of the greatest challenges to properly functioning democracy today. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the priority must be to facilitate more professional journalists to report on the proceedings of local councils, local courts and other local institutions, which are currently all too often going unreported? The BBC’s local democracy initiative at least starts to address that challenge, so will he look at ways of expanding that initiative, perhaps by bringing on board to it the technology companies that are currently distributing the content but doing nothing to help collect it?

Jeremy Wright: I agree with my right hon. Friend. A large part of the answer is, as he says, to ensure that there are more professional journalists in the right places at the right times to provide the scrutiny that we all agree is important and necessary. As he has heard me say, the local democracy reporting scheme is a good example of how that might be achieved in the times that we currently live in. I should like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for the part that he played in bringing that scheme into existence in conjunction with the BBC. It is a good thing, but he is right to say that there is scope for further expansion, as Dame Frances Cairncross has also pointed out. That expansion must be paid for, and I will certainly look into his suggestion and pursue further how we might persuade those who are benefiting from the current arrangements to ensure that their worst excesses are mitigated.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I should like to join the Secretary of State and others in paying tribute to Gordon Banks. The sporting world has indeed lost a giant. In Scotland, we lost another sporting giant yesterday. Kat Lindner was 39, and her untimely death has shocked everyone across the sporting community in Scotland, particularly at Glasgow City where she was formerly a player. She moved to Scotland in 2005 from Germany, and she won every domestic trophy with City. She appeared for the team 173 times and scored 128 goals, helping the club to five league titles, two Scottish cups and two league cups. She is survived by her partner of
16 years, Laura Montgomery. She was not just an athlete but a well respected academic at my own alma mater, the University of Stirling. I am sure that the Secretary of State will join me in marking her sad and untimely death.

We on these Benches—I am a little isolated here today—very much welcome the Cairncross review, and I pay tribute to Frances Cairncross and to Enders Analysis, which supported her work. The review comes at an important moment for our democracy. After the mess of the Vote Leave campaign, the scandal of Cambridge Analytica, the death of Molly Russell and the huge damage that online harm is doing to our young people, the public expect more. My team and I met representatives of the NSPCC recently, and they gave us some statistics. One in seven children between 11 and 18 have been asked to send self-generated images, and 7% of 11 to 16-year-olds have sent naked or semi-naked images. It is so important that we get this right and that we do the necessary work on self-harm. The recommendations to create a better balance between publishers and platforms, and to persuade online platforms to act in a more responsible way, are hugely important.

The issue of fake news has been mentioned, and I am sure that many people believe that it is damaging our democracy and, indeed, the reputation of the tech companies that have a duopoly in this area, as the shadow Secretary of State said. We must take this very seriously. I hope that the Secretary of State will not simply kick the can down the road in regard to the Competition and Markets Authority, and that he will consider adopting as many of the recommendations as possible.

I absolutely agree that the BBC’s local democracy initiative has been very positive. However, we have before us the huge issue of the licence fee—a tax on the elderly. I know that that is not a mess of the Secretary of State’s making, and I say gently to him that his predecessors appear to have held the BBC to ransom over this issue. That is unacceptable, and I want to work with him and colleagues across the House to ensure that the BBC can be properly funded and that our over-75s get to keep their free licences.

Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman share my concern over the report’s finding that the number of frontline journalists has dropped in the past 10 years from 23,000 to 17,000, at a time when we are so in need of good-quality journalism both at home and abroad? The report’s recommendations on this are important. Cairncross highlights the fact that although news can be found on television and radio, written journalism supplies the largest quantity of journalism and is most at risk. That has never been more apparent than it is now. I commend to the Secretary of State Lindsay Hilsum’s book, “In Extremis”, about the late Marie Colvin, who was unlawfully killed by the Assad regime in 2012. As she once said, we have to bear witness in order to make a difference. We rely on our foreign correspondents to deliver those messages and bear that witness for our journalists who bear witness to what happens not only at home but around the world. I pay tribute to Frances Cairncross and to Enders Analysis, which supported her work. The review comes at an important moment for our democracy.

The hon. Lady has made an excellent point about the need to bear witness. The review is due and most welcome, and I want to mark the sad and untimely death of Laura Montgomery. Her death should be a huge wake-up call for all involved in the sport that she pursued. The hon. Lady mentioned the licence fee concession and its impact on the BBC. She will forgive me if I do not engage in that debate at this point, but I would say that we should not simply kick the can down the road in regard to the Competition and Markets Authority, and that he will consider adopting as many of the recommendations as possible.

Jeremy Wright: I agree entirely with what the hon. Lady has said about Kat Lindner. Her death is clearly a great tragedy, not just for her family, friends and partner but for all those who have been inspired by her success in the sport that she pursued. The hon. Lady has made a point about the number of aspects of the Cairncross review. She is right to say that we should insist on the platforms taking responsibility for what they can do. One thing they can do is to ensure that the issue of so-called fake news, misinformation and disinformation is addressed robustly. They have the capacity to do that, and as Dame Frances recognises in the review, some good work has been done by the platforms on this, but there is clearly a great deal more that they could achieve.

The hon. Lady is also right to say that it is in the interests of the online companies to do that. If they do not do so, they will cause ongoing damage to their reputations, and I know that they will want to take that very seriously.

The hon. Lady has mentioned the Cairncross review and its impact on the BBC. She will forgive me if I do not engage in that debate at this point, but I would say that we should pay tribute at every opportunity to those brave journalists who bear witness to what happens not only in this country but around the world, and who, at considerable risk to themselves, take the chance to deliver those messages and bear that witness for our benefit. Marie Colvin and others deserve our thanks.

The hon. Lady rightly picked up the fact that the Cairncross review refers to the possibility of an independent regulator taking responsibility for some of the things that Dame Frances has described. That is something that we are considering in the context of the online harms White Paper, and it might well be that some of the recommendations in this review are best dealt with when bringing forward that White Paper. There will be a Government response, which I think will come in tranches. Some of it will come very quickly, some will be brought into the online harms White Paper, and some will take a little longer.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Following up on what my right hon. and learned Friend said, not only was Gordon Banks the greatest goalkeeper that the world has ever seen, but he was my childhood hero, which is more important.

I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. The review is overdue and most welcome, and I want to make two particular points about it. First, it is absolutely right to ask for the BBC to be looked at. If a subsidised organisation is able to become a publisher, which it was
not prior to the arrival of the internet, then it is now in the same space as others that do not benefit from such a subsidy and have to earn money. That has caused a problem, and we must look at how the BBC operates given the amount of money that it receives and at what damage or problems that causes.

Secondly, I agree with the deputy Leader of the Opposition, the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), that the elephant in the room is the social media companies. Adam Smith makes it clear in “The Wealth of Nations” that this kind of monopoly cartel is damaging to people as individuals and to the functioning of a democratic society. At some point, social media companies will need to be broken up, and the way to do that is to make them publishers and responsible for everything on their sites. Just watch what will happen after that.

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. On the BBC, there is a balance. It is right to ask Ofcom to consider whether further measures ought to be taken to ensure that the BBC is using its position for good, and it is important at least to ask whether it is facilitating good local content or effectively squeezing out good local providers. However, that is a matter for Ofcom. I repeat that the review also rightly praises the BBC, and the local democracy reporting service should be praised and expanded.

Turning to social media platforms, my right hon. Friend will know that the Government are engaged in several overlapping pieces of work, and the online harms White Paper will address many of the issues he describes. There is an ongoing question as to whether it is appropriate to apply the label of publisher to online companies. However, I am less interested in the label and more interested in what those companies do, how we ensure that they fulfil their responsibilities to the users of their services and then, of course, what should happen if they do not fulfil those responsibilities.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The market dominance of the duopoly affects all our communities, including places such as Wrexham, where The Leader, the local paper, and Wrexham.com, the new kid on the block, are under threat due to multinational organisations. It is entirely right to confront the monopolistic situation, and I encourage the Secretary of State to take up the line proposed by the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman and be much more aggressive with the CMA in its dealings to break up that situation so that we can have honest news organisations right across the UK.

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman knows well that the CMA is rightly independent and will make its own judgments. However, I hope that he will recognise that I have wasted no time in engaging it on this issue. As for the online platforms, he will have heard what I said about the position they hold within the online advertising market in particular, but we must make a distinction here. We must recognise that advertising has changed, probably irrevocably, which is Dame Frances’s view, but we must also ensure that the behaviour of online platforms is not squeezing what is truly good and useful about local journalism and what is essential to the conduct of our democracy.
Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Only a few years ago, three local free newspapers went to almost every home in Harlow. The last one, the Harlow Star, has shut its doors in the last couple of weeks and residents have nothing. This has disenfranchised thousands of residents in my constituency—not just the elderly but those who cannot afford the internet—and some of them have been ringing my office asking me to send them or read them the news. That is where we are.

Despite our having an incredible online newspaper, Your Harlow, and a possible new paid-for Harlow edition of the Epping Forest Guardian, the fact remains that thousands of people are going to be disenfranchised. Will my right hon. and learned Friend use this opportunity to help small community organisations that may already have small publications either with some kind of tax credit or with a special grant, just as we give grants to entrepreneurs to start small businesses, to ensure that people are not left out of receiving the news, especially as we have had a basically free newspaper in our town since 1953?

Jeremy Wright: I agree with my right hon. Friend, and I join him in paying tribute to Your Harlow, which is a sadly all-too-rare example of a local news institution that has transferred online successfully. He mentions other titles that have not survived and, as he knows, that experience is replicated across the country.

On tax reliefs and other forms of incentive that we are able to offer, we will consider what Dame Frances says very carefully. One attraction of at least one of the methods she suggests is that it will enable us to focus on the public interest news that she speaks so much about and that we want to see supported. If we do that, it would be a good case to make.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I have not yet read the whole report, but I am surprised by the focus on the BBC when these two internet giants are dominating and hoovering up all the advertising revenue. Is it not important that we focus our attention on where the problem lies, rather than undermining the BBC at a time when so much fake news finds its way on to our computer screens so easily via those platforms?

Jeremy Wright: I cannot speak for the exchanges today but, when the hon. Gentleman reads the report, I reassure him that he will see much more focus on Google and Facebook than on the BBC. As I said earlier, Dame Frances’s view on the BBC is much more balanced than some of the reporting would suggest.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Codes and reviews are all very well, but we are being weak with these American tech giants, and I think they are taking us for fools. They are a monopolistic, anti-competitive force in our society. This is not a luddite view; I believe in competition. I very much echo what my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) said: they should pay the same tax, have the same level of responsibility and be held to the same account as every other company—every other publisher. They are simply sucking the life out of our retail sector and out of local newspapers. I agree entirely with what the Opposition spokesman said: we have to be far more robust. They are attacking our children; they are using manipulative, addictive practices to trap our children. We have seen the publicity about dating apps and the rest. So let us be strong and robust, and let these companies play by the same rules as everybody else.

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend will recognise that one reason why these companies are such a force in our society, as he says, is that so many of our constituents use their products so extensively. That is a fact of modern life, with which we must contend. It is also apparent that it will be difficult and perhaps wrong for us to assume that we can treat these companies in exactly the same way as we can treat newspapers and their editors. But none of that means that we need to abdicate our responsibility to ensure that these companies fulfil theirs. The Government intend to ensure that they do, and he will see, when we bring forward the White Paper and we talk about some of the issues that have been canvassed this afternoon, that the Government have every intention of making sure that these companies do live up to their responsibilities.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I would like to associate my colleagues and myself with the tributes paid to Gordon Banks. This weekend, we will have the Northern Ireland BetMcLean league cup final, and I am sure the Secretary of State will want to take the opportunity to wish Ballymena United and Linfield Football Club all the best as they compete for that cup—I hope the sky blues win.

We are dealing here with the concentration of enormous economic power with the few, and with a very few platforms and platform owners; the dangerous monopoly of expertise; the power of surveillance; the fact that the much-promised encryption and privacy of personal data does not exist, even in WhatsApp; and the unlimited potential for the abuse of technology and people. Surely the Secretary of State agrees that the commercial strength and share of the advertising market of these new platforms, the personal wealth of those who own them and the monopoly of personal data are, in the words of this important review, each alone a “justification” for regulation. Surely he agrees that much more must be done immediately. Will he join me and the deputy leader of the Labour party in saying from the Dispatch Box that there must immediately be put on these companies a duty of care to all those who use them? That will be the first wake-up call and the first sobering reality that these platforms will face.

Unfortunately, I fear that the Government, once again, have pulled their punches on the BBC. The BBC has huge firepower compared with ITV and UTV, its subsidiary in Northern Ireland. It has the largest news-watching audience, yet the BBC competes deliberately against it to undermine it in Northern Ireland. That disadvantage must stop as soon as possible.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We have a ten-minute rule Bill and important business to move on to, so I ask colleagues to make questions and, correspondingly, answers short.

Jeremy Wright: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will do my best. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for inviting me to wish both sides in the Northern Ireland cup final well. That is much easier to do, and I
am happy to join him in doing that. As for the BBC, there are no Government punches being thrown here, pulled or otherwise; we are talking about the recommendation of an independent review and, as I say, Dame Frances is making a sensible and balanced set of proposals. As for his comments about the online platforms, I agree with him that there are concerns about the concentration of market power in very few hands and about the responsibilities of these companies to keep their users safe online. I can tell him that the Government are conscious about acting on both those things. I shall be giving some of the messages he has just outlined directly to the online platforms when I travel to the United States next week.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his kind words about Gordon Banks. He was not only England’s greatest goalkeeper, but Stoke City’s—the Potters’—greatest goalkeeper, too. He was also a friend of mine. He lived in my borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme. I well remember going to see him in the 1960s when he first joined Stoke and my dad took me to the terraces of the old Victoria Ground.

I come from North Staffordshire, which is well served by its local newspaper, The Sentinel. It is a tribute to the editor, Martin Tideswell—Stoke born and bred—that in these difficult days and times it not only comes out six days a week, but has managed to keep a lot of display and classified advertising. The Government clearly cannot subsidise newspapers; that is not what journalism is about. Is it not about time that the major beneficiaries online, such as Google and Facebook, not only pay their taxes, but are held better to account over copyright and pay fairer dues to publishers, including those of national and local newspapers?

Jeremy Wright: On the hon. Gentleman’s last point, he will know that the Government supported the progress of the EU directive on copyright. We believe it appropriate that those who create content are properly rewarded for what they do. As he knows, this is a complex area, but we are keen to see further measures to ensure that content creators are properly rewarded.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Having had a career in the media, I appreciate the importance of accuracy in reporting and am a supporter of my local Somerset County Gazette and the Wellington Weekly News, because they should be cornerstones of local democracy. In that respect, I welcome the recommendations in the Cairncross review to set up the independent institute to promote local investigative journalism and the provision of public interest news.

Our Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee inquiry into fake news and disinformation highlighted the threats facing high-quality journalism, largely through the use of algorithms and bots to spread what is effectively fake news—stories that are not true—to huge audiences. Does my hon. Friend agree that those local media outlets that often pick up these clickbait stories should themselves be responsible for promoting good-quality journalism so that the public know who they can trust? Will my right hon. Friend give assurances that that will be addressed through the proposed new institute?

Jeremy Wright: As my hon. Friend knows, and as I have reported to the House, the Somerset County Gazette was the first newspaper I ever appeared in, so I have always had a soft spot for it. What she said is right; it is important that all media outlets take responsibility for checking what they put into their particular publications, whether they are online or not. She can expect that we will be taking up many of the themes that her Select Committee has so expertly covered in its inquiry.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I rise as the chair of the cross-party group for the National Union of Journalists and also as a former local newspaper reporter for the Caernarfon and Denbigh Herald and the Holyhead and Anglesey Mail. Let us face facts: it is not the BBC that is closing down local papers or debate on local democracy. The Cambrian News has been a vital source of news for almost 160 years in mid-Wales. There is a responsibility there for Government to maintain that tradition. The recommended tax relief measures are welcome, but does the Secretary of State not agree that by making Facebook and Google pay for the journalist content they use, he would be taking a first pragmatic step in offsetting the huge loss of advertising revenue to the tech giants, which is what is closing down local papers?

Jeremy Wright: When the hon. Lady has the chance to read the report in full, she will see for herself that the focus of the report is not criticism of the BBC, and it is important that is recognised. So far as payment for content by the online platforms is concerned, when she reads the report she will see that Dame Frances does not suggest we pursue that. Fundamentally, her concern is that if we did that, we may in fact see less news in total. That is not the objective that she or we would have.

Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): A significant source of revenue for papers such as the Scarborough News and the Whitby Gazette are the statutory notices informing local residents about planning applications, road closures and so on. Will the Secretary of State reassure the House that it will continue to be an obligation for these advertisements to be carried in local newspapers?

Jeremy Wright: We will of course have to consider that very carefully, but I know that my hon. Friend will recognise that the primary purpose of the exercise is to make sure that people in a given local area know what is happening. Therefore, it is important that channels are used that will reach the maximum number of people, and that must be the guiding principle in this exercise.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): May I associate myself with the comments about the late Gordon Banks who was both a national hero and a local hero for all his work in Stoke and Staffordshire, particularly in raising huge amounts of money for charity?

I welcome the local democracy reporting service. The Secretary of State and I heard about that work last week. May I encourage its expansion? I also pay tribute to those local reporters who, quite often, face the same kind of attack, online and offline, that we, as Members of Parliament, face, and that our staff face in carrying out our work.
Jeremy Wright: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend. I am grateful to him for hosting and chairing the meeting that gave me the opportunity to meet those remarkable reporters. As he said, they do good work, they face unfair attack and criticism for it and we should take every opportunity to stand up for them.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): When I worked in the policy and strategy department at the BBC, I tasked myself with answering the question of whether the licence fee was sustainable in a digital age. I came to the conclusion that it was not, and others did as well. It was known within the BBC that this was having on local journalism. Is the Secretary of State also aware that the BBC has tentacles in other areas such as BBC Worldwide, Radio 1 and BBC Films, which are all competing with the commercial sector? While we are talking about journalism today, we will, in the future, be talking about other areas.

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend raises much broader questions about the BBC and its place in the broadcasting landscape that I know he will recognise. The problem that the Cairncross review is focused on, which is the diminution of local news outlets of the traditional kind, is a problem that is not restricted to the UK where the BBC is pre-eminent, but exists across the world in other jurisdictions where the BBC has no similar role.

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): In Stevenage, we are well served with the Stevenage Comet, which is a free weekly newspaper that was once delivered to every household but is now delivered to about half the households. However, it is supported by the local community through advertising. Has the Minister considered what the impact would be if we reduced VAT on advertising in free weekly newspapers?

Jeremy Wright: We will certainly consider some of the tax recommendations that are made by Dame Frances in her review, but my hon. Friend will recognise that the fundamental problem is that a large proportion of the advertising that used to find its way into local newspapers is now being done online. That is what has driven the need for us to consider these very fundamental questions about the way in which public interest journalism in particular should be funded. The review gives us a good start on that, and that is what we will persist with.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Our local papers have an essential role in chronicling all that happens in our local communities. Their archives are therefore an important local resource, so the Secretary of State will be alarmed to hear that, when Trinity Mirror took over the Mid Somerset newspapers in 2016, it removed from Wells all of those archives, and despite many promises of their return it has failed to deliver thus far. Will my right hon. Friend intervene and seek to expedite their return from Watford to Wells?

Jeremy Wright: I will certainly look into what my hon. Friend says. I agree with the general tenor of his remarks. It is important that we not only preserve the ability of our local newspapers to report on what happens now and what will happen in the future, but do our best to preserve the crucial record that they have created of what has happened in the past.

3.53 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In answer to an urgent question on 8 January, the Transport Secretary claimed that his decision to award a contract to Seaborne Freight incurred no cost to the taxpayer, telling the House that “we are not spending money unless these ferries operate.”—[Official Report, 8 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 191.]

Yesterday, the National Audit Office found that £800,000 had been spent on external consultants to assess the bid. The ministerial code says that “it is of paramount importance that Ministers give accurate and truthful information to Parliament, correcting any inadvertent error at the earliest opportunity. Ministers who knowingly mislead Parliament will be expected to offer their resignation to the Prime Minister”.

Has the Secretary of State indicated to you that he plans to make a personal statement to the House on his conduct in relation to this matter?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice of his point of order. I understand that he has also advised the Secretary of State’s office that he would be raising the matter. If the Secretary of State believes that he has inadvertently misled the House, I am sure that he will take steps to correct the record. Of course, he may have a different view of the facts, but I am sure that all of this will be the subject of further scrutiny and debate. The shadow Secretary of State has put his view on the record, so the Treasury Bench will have heard it, and there are many other ways in which he can pursue this matter for further information.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Several days ago a local newspaper in Northern Ireland, the News Letter, carried a story about two Sinn Fein MPs with the headline: “Sinn Fein MPs did not register trip at Venezuelan government expense”.

After reading the story, I wrote to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards about the matter. All Members will be aware of sanctions that can be levied against Members who take their seats and fall foul of the registration process, but I seek your guidance and that of the office of the Speaker regarding Members who do not take their seats and are still subject to a registration process, but who in this case appear not to have followed that process. Setting aside the politics of going on a visit to a dictator in Venezuela, the actual registration process appears not to have been carried out. What sanctions will follow given that those Members do not take their seats and therefore do not get a salary? How will financial sanctions or other types of sanction be levied if, indeed, those Members are found to be guilty?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice that he wished to raise this point of order. I can confirm that the requirement to register financial interests applies equally to Members who have not taken their seats as it does to Members who have done so. Registrations should be made within 28 days of
any appropriate hospitality. It is far too early to talk of sanctions, but the hon. Gentleman has raised the matter with the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards and put his concerns before the House.

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

_3.58 pm_

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I beg to move,

_that leave be given to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)_

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to increase the maximum custodial sentence for the offences of child cruelty and causing or allowing a child or vulnerable adult to die or suffer serious physical harm to imprisonment for life; and for connected purposes.

I very much thank all Members of this House who have come here today in support of this Bill. The purpose of this Bill—Tony’s law—is to ensure that individuals who commit the most serious acts of cruelty against children face appropriate punishment when convicted of this crime. At the moment, the maximum sentence stands at 10 years. I would like to see this raised to life imprisonment.

I would like to pay tribute to Tony Hudgell, who is the inspiration for this Bill and is in the Gallery today, accompanied by his mother, Paula, and others from his real family—the family who love and care for him. This House has had the pleasure of their company before—in January, when I presented their petition of 12,000 signatures calling on the Government to reconsider the maximum sentence for child cruelty. This Bill continues their campaign and I am proud to put it before the House today.

Shortly after Tony Hudgell was born, he was attacked by his biological parents. They broke his fingers and his toes. They tore the ligaments in his legs. They caused such terrible damage that both his legs had to be amputated and Tony is now wheelchair-bound. Tony was only admitted to hospital 10 days after these injuries were inflicted. We can only imagine how much pain he suffered in the first weeks of his life. It is Tony’s enormous good fortune that he was fostered and then adopted by Paula, her husband Mark and their children, who have loved and looked after him ever since.

Tony’s case is extreme, but sadly it is not unique. Last December, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children said that almost 17,000 cases of child cruelty or neglect were reported to the police in the past five years—an average of over 3,000 cases each year, double the number reported in the previous five years. Sadly, too few result in a conviction. Paula had to take Tony’s case back to the courts after the Crown Prosecution Service initially failed to bring a successful charge against his biological parents. I am pursuing the possible reasons behind this with the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), with whom I had a fruitful meeting last week. I am grateful to see him in his place. I thank him for the time he has taken in considering this matter and look forward to further discussions with him on it.

I realise that child cruelty is a difficult crime to take through the courts, and those figures reflect this fact. That is, not least, because it is so often conducted in secret behind closed doors, with only the victim, a child, as the witness. I understand that proving the intent to harm is therefore extremely hard. I realise that this means that prosecutions for grievous bodily harm, with the harsher punishments that would then be available, are not easy to bring. But should that really mean that the sentence is lighter than that which would have been
available? Carers and parents who harm the children they are responsible for are betraying a trust and undermining our society. It is a wrong that we all know cries out for justice. That is why I welcome the legal reform that was introduced a number of years ago that enabled us to bring child cruelty charges in the first place.

However, should the difficulty really lead to a more lenient sentence? Why does an individual who commits grievous bodily harm face a maximum sentence of life or, more often, 16 years in prison, while those who commit child cruelty or neglect have a maximum of 10 years? As the judge said, in this exceptional circumstance he would have given more had it been available. In exceptional circumstances such as Tony’s, when the only two people in the house were jointly responsible for the harm done to an innocent baby, the difficulty of proving intent should not allow a lighter punishment. In cases like Tony’s, where the abuse is better described as torture, how can child cruelty attract a maximum sentence that is so much shorter when the young victims of such cruelty may live with the consequences for their whole lives?

To address this discrepancy, and to give judges more discretion, I propose amending two Acts—the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004 and the Children and Young Persons Act 1933—by extending the term of the relevant sentences. These amendments are not intended to be used often. Indeed, I pray, as I am sure we all do, that they are never used at all. But they would, only in exceptional circumstances where judges think that they are more appropriate, allow longer sentences, in line with crimes against adults—crimes that are more public, more visible and are not hidden behind closed doors, but have similarly life-changing consequences.

I seek to do this not only on behalf of Tony Hudgell but for all those innocent children who have been, or are, at risk of falling victims to the most awful of crimes. I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Tom Tugendhat, Sarah Champion, Tim Loughton, Bob Blackman, Philip Davies, Mr Edward Vaizey, Henry Smith, Ruth Smeeth, Ian Austin, Victoria Prentis, John Mann and Nicky Morgan present the Bill.

Tom Tugendhat accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 March and to be printed (Bill 334).

### Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill [Lords]

#### Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

#### Clause 6

**EXTENT, COMMENCEMENT AND SHORT TITLE**

4.5 pm

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): I beg to move amendment 1, page 5, line 10, at end insert—

“(3A) Before making any regulations under subsection (3)(b), the Secretary of State must lay before Parliament a report on—

(a) the likely effects of the provisions of this Act on persons undergoing rehabilitation for brain injuries, and

(b) the interaction between the provisions of this Act and the processes for prescribing for brain injury rehabilitation therapy.”

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle):** With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Government amendments 5 to 32.

Amendment 2, in schedule 1, page 15, line 24, at end insert—

“(d) the effects of any treatment undergone by the cared-for person, including prescription brain injury rehabilitation therapy.”

Government amendments 33 to 37.

Amendment 49, page 16, line 16, insert “out” to the end of line 16, and insert

“by the responsible body.”

This amendment would require the responsible body to carry out the consultation in all cases.

Government amendment 38.

Amendment 50, page 17, line 13, at end insert—

“(ca) the arrangements are being authorised under paragraph 16 of this Schedule, or”

This amendment would require an AMCP to review all cases where the responsible body is authorising arrangements based on a statement provided by a care home manager.

Government amendment 39.

Amendment 48, page 18, line 21, at end insert—

‘Authorisation charges

24A No charges may be made in relation to the steps taken in determining whether the responsible body may authorise the arrangements for the cared-for person.”

Amendment 3, page 18, line 35, at end insert “or

(c) at the end of a period of prescription brain injury rehabilitation therapy undergone by the cared-for person.”

Amendment 4, page 20, line 4, after “met” insert

“taking into account any treatment to be undergone by the cared-for person, including prescription brain injury rehabilitation therapy.”

Government amendments 40 to 46.

Amendment 51, page 23, line 1, leave out paragraphs 39 and 40 and insert—

“(1) The responsible body must appoint an IMCA to represent and support the cared-for person if—

(a) one or more of sub-paragraphs (2), (3), (4) or (5) applies, and

(b) sub-paragraph (6) does not apply.
(2) The cared-for person makes a request to the responsible body for an IMCA to be appointed.

(3) The responsible body has not identified an ‘appropriate person’ to support and represent the cared-for person in matters connected with the authorisation.

(4) The responsible body has identified an ‘appropriate person’ to support and represent the cared-for person in matters connected with the authorisation, and they have made a request to the responsible body for an IMCA to be appointed.

(5) The responsible body has reason to believe one or more of the following—

(a) that, without the help of an IMCA, the cared-for person and any appropriate person supporting and representing them would be unable to understand or exercise one or more of the relevant rights;

(b) that the cared-for person and any appropriate person supporting and representing them have each failed to exercise a relevant right when it would have been reasonable to exercise it;

(c) that the cared-for person and any appropriate person supporting and representing them are each unlikely to exercise a relevant right when it would be reasonable to exercise it.

(6) The cared-for person objects to being represented and supported by an IMCA.

(7) A person is not to be regarded as an ‘appropriate person’ to represent and support the cared-for person in matters connected with this schedule unless—

(a) they consent to representing and supporting the cared-for person,

(b) they are not engaged in providing care or treatment for the cared-for person in a professional capacity,

(c) where the cared-for person is able to express a view about who they would like to represent and support them, the cared-for person agree to being represented and supported by that person,

(d) where the cared-for person is unable to express a view about who they would like to represent and support them, the responsible body has no reason to believe that the cared-for person would object to being represented and supported by that person,

(e) they are both willing and able to assist the cared-for person in understanding and exercising the relevant rights under this Schedule, including with the support of an IMCA if appropriate.

(8) The ‘relevant rights’ under this schedule include rights to

(a) consent to representing and supporting the cared-for person,

(b) exercise a relevant right when it would be reasonable to exercise it;

(c) exercise a relevant right when it would have been reasonable to exercise it;

(d) exercise one or more of the relevant rights;

(e) they are both willing and able to assist the cared-for person in understanding and exercising the relevant rights under this Schedule, including with the support of an IMCA if appropriate.

This amendment would broaden the provision of advocacy, ensuring that advocates are provided as a default unless the cared-for person does not want one.

Government amendment 47.

Chris Bryant: I will speak to amendment 1 and the three other amendments in my name and the names of several colleagues.

I want to start with enormous praise for the national health service, which in many cases makes the key decisions on everything that we will talk about today. Sometimes those are very difficult decisions, including for families, and they need to be managed with care and sensitivity. Ensuring that we have the right law in place to enable clinicians to make the right decisions is vital. I was on the Public Bill Committee for the Mental Health Act 2007 under the Labour Government, and I remember many of the rows and difficulties then. Ensuring that legislation fits the complicated circumstances of real life is not all that easy, and in particular, the definition of what might be proper treatment is not readily come by.

Often lobbyists get a really bad press. My experience of lobbyists in this field is entirely positive, including those working for the pharmaceutical industry, who do an amazing job in providing new drugs that can save people’s lives and manage their conditions much better, and the many charities in this field. When lobbyists are decried, I sometimes want to point out that they play an important part in ensuring that Members of Parliament know exactly what they are doing when it comes to legislation.

All the amendments that I have tabled relate to acquired brain injury. I am aware that several other colleagues who are members of the all-party parliamentary group on acquired brain injury are here today. I do not want to make an apology for that, but I want to explain why I have tabled these amendments. It is partly because I believe that acquired brain injury, though recognised and understood by some, is something of a hidden epidemic in Britain.

Something like 1.4 million people in this country are living with an acquired brain injury. A new person presents at accident and emergency with a brain injury every 90 seconds. Many of these injuries have lasting effects that are completely invisible to an ordinary member of the public. For instance, the person standing in front of us in a queue who is being difficult might look as if they are drunk or just being difficult, but they may have a brain injury. We would have no idea, and the person feels trapped and finds the situation as difficult as we do. The more we come to an understanding of acquired brain injury in this country, the better.

There are many different causes of brain injury, including road traffic accidents, accidents about the home and stroke. One cause that has been brought home to me recently is carbon monoxide poisoning. Not only the high level of carbon monoxide poisoning that follows an incident, but a sustained low level of carbon monoxide due to poor central heating systems or facilities or something like a Calor gas burner in a home, can end up causing a long-term brain injury. This particularly affects some of those who live in the worst housing in the land, and who are the poorest and least able to afford, for instance, to have their boiler mended or assessed every year.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware of the problem that some members of the armed forces face with acquired brain injury? It may be because they were involved in or close to the explosion of an improvised explosive device, or because they had a gunshot wound, when the head covering was hit but not penetrated, and the shock can lead to acquired brain injury.

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. I know the role she has played, in particular in the all-party group on the armed forces, and of course in the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. She is absolutely right, and there are sometimes coup and contrecoup elements of damage to the brain. There is also some evidence to suggest that some people diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder have actually been suffering from a brain injury.
Interestingly, the Ministry of Defence has done some of the most innovative work in relation to brain injuries—physical brain injuries, as it were—and it has been able to transfer some of those skills and research involved in that work to the wider population, which is all to the good. However, I think that the way in which the mind sits inside the brain and the brain sits inside the skull is one of the areas of research that is still underdeveloped, and we still need to do a great deal more about it.

Other causes include brain tumours and chronic traumatic encephalopathy, where somebody may have had a series of relatively minor concussions. There is a complete misunderstanding of what concussion actually involves, particularly in sport. This might be leading to some of the long-term sustained problems of, for example, people in my own constituency who played rugby for many years and had repeated concussions. They may suffer from dementia, depression and anxiety in later life, but have no understanding that that may relate to a brain injury, rather than to anything else.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): While we are talking about sport, may I say that this does not involve only rugby players? There is now evidence that footballers, particularly those heading the ball, suffer sustained brain injuries. It used to be interpreted as dementia, but it is a lot more serious than that. Has my hon. Friend had any discussions with the Football Association about that?

Chris Bryant: I have had lots of discussions, some of them more fruitful than others, with the Football Association.

It is wholly to be deprecated that FIFA still will not allow a full substitution for an assessment of brain injury during a match. Ten minutes are needed to do a proper assessment on the pitch, but at the moment only three minutes is available in a FIFA match. There can be no substitution, and it is not therefore in the team’s interests to take the person off the pitch. I think that this must change. If there is one thing that I hope Parliament will say to FIFA about this in the next few months, it is that this must change. People talk of as heroes, such as Jeff Astle, have died because of heading the ball. If those who are heroes to our young people today end up suffering in later life because of what they sustained in their footballing career, we will have done them a terrible disservice.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that this applies equally to those who play rugby league, and in fact perhaps more, given the impact that some tackles occasionally have?

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. One of the things about rugby league and about rugby union, which I know rather better, being from south Wales—[Interruption. I do not think it is parliamentary to tut-tut from the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker, if you don’t mind my saying so. The truth is that many of the players today are bigger, stronger and faster, so the impacts may be much more significant than they were in years past. Curiously, when I’ve watched some of the commentary on Twitter and Facebook about matches, we see a kind of rejoicing in the physical pain that people are going through, and I think we really need to roll that back. We need to roll that back so that we are actually caring about the players. Quite often the players themselves will be desperate to go back on. It should not be the player who makes that decision; it should be an independent doctor who makes it. [Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): The tut-tut was to say that the hon. Gentleman would benefit from knowing both types of rugby. The only thing I would add, just to help his case, is that in rugby league a player is taken off for a full assessment by a doctor and not allowed back on. That is the benefit on which rugby league is leading the sport.

Chris Bryant: I am glad I took that intervention. It is unusual to get an intervention from the Chair, but I think we welcome this new style of chairing.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It was a clarification.

Chris Bryant: I am tempted to make a point of order! No—you are absolutely right, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The key thing is to have the same protocols for all sports, so that there is the same protection. A child might play rugby league one year and rugby union the next; if there are different protocols, that will undermine the whole system. Incidentally, the point also applies to a whole range of other sports—hockey and ice hockey, as well as American football, in which there is growing interest in the United Kingdom. We should not let the issue be led by litigation, which is what has happened in the United States of America: we should let it be led by the medical science, which is rapidly changing.

4.15 pm

Acquired brain injury affects nearly every Department of Government. We have already referred to defence, thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon). The Department of Health and Social Care is represented here today; I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), is looking at the report that we have produced and I hope he will come back to us about it fairly soon. The issues are also key for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Department for Work and Pensions, which must make sure that people get proper protection and support.

The issues are also important for the Department for Education because there is often a complete misunderstanding when a child has had a brain injury. They may be fine five weeks later, but the real problems come with neuro-cognitive stall—maybe a year later. The teachers, and perhaps even the parents, have forgotten about it. Consequently, when the child is not performing well or is slow at school, it feels as if they are being unruly and disruptive. They end up on the naughty step and that ends in a cycle of not being supported, which can lead into the criminal justice system. The issues, of course, also affect the criminal justice system and the Home Office.

The Bill will, of course, directly affect a lot of people with acquired brain injury. I clearly remember one of my grandmother’s cousins. She was one of three: there were three sisters who never married—Katherine, Isobel
and Alison Gracie. Alison Gracie had a stroke and then a fall down a flight of stairs. The combination of the two meant that we could see the same person inside, but the mental pain that she was suffering was intense. She would hit her head all the time, using a Scottish phrase—her words, not mine: “MD, MD, MD!” That meant “mentally deficient”, the phrase of the time in Scotland. I feel passionately that we need to get this right when it comes to making decisions on behalf of people who may not be able to make them properly for themselves.

ABI, or acquired brain injury, can affect many different aspects of mental capacity. There is short-term memory, which is important for knowing to turn up for the meeting; long-term memory, which is being able to recognise the decision we made last week or month and its consequences; and emotional regulation, which is being able to deal with anger and other emotions that may wash over us. Some of those may be more difficult to regulate when someone has had a physical injury to the brain. Then, of course, the executive function—the capacity for planning and organisation—may be harmed as well.

Mrs Moon: My hon. Friend is being generous in giving way. One of the things that concern me most is that it is easy to label someone with any form of brain injury—whether dementia, Parkinson’s or anything else—when they also have an infection. What can be seen as difficult behaviour can be misunderstood when it is caused by the infection rather than by any acquired injury or illness.

Chris Bryant: Yes. People will also attribute bad intention to the person when what is happening is that the short-term memory is simply not functioning properly. For instance, someone with very little short-term memory may find it difficult to turn up on time, as I mentioned earlier. That may be not because they are being lazy, truculent or difficult but simply because their brain does not work in that way. It may mean that their capacity is so diminished that, according to the Bill, they cannot make decisions. Alternatively, it might just be one of the elements that needs to be dealt with—they need to find tricks to circumvent the problem, and medical and clinical professionals can help.

This is why I tabled my amendments. Neurorehabilitation, when done well and on a sustained basis, can take an individual from being low functioning and high dependency, perhaps needing three or four people just to be able to wash themselves, clothe themselves and provide for themselves physically, to a much higher level of personal functionality and much greater independence. I have made that argument from a different place, in the sense that taking someone from needing four people to look after them to just one person coming in once a day for an hour or so could be an enormous financial saving to the taxpayer. That is why neurorehabilitation and the work that has been done in many cases can be so important.

Neurorehabilitation is really important in relation to the Bill. We might be able to take somebody from a place where they are not truly able to make a decision about what treatment they should be undergoing and, according to the Bill, deprive them of their liberty, to a place where that would no longer be appropriate. My anxiety is that if there is no incentive in the system to ensure that neurorehabilitation is provided to people, there is a danger that we just discard them and leave them by the side, particularly as we are now talking about a three-year term rather than a one-year term. I think the clauses at the end of the Bill militate in favour of renewal, rather than providing a clear option not to renew at that point.

I have an anxiety that perhaps in some care homes and other places there just might be an incentive to think, “Well, this person isn’t going to get better so we’re not going to do anything to try to help them to get better.” I do not want to give up on so many people. Thanks to what the Government have done with the major trauma centres, we now save about 800 or 1,000 more lives every year following road traffic accidents and the like, but we need to give people quality of life. We do not have enough people working in this field. We need to recruit many more people. If 20 people were inspired by what we are talking about today to go and work in that field—there are so many high rewards for people working to take people from high dependency to low dependency—that would be a success in itself.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the all-party group inquiry heard some remarkable examples of people who have gone through the pathway with neurorehabilitation prescriptions and are increasingly able, with great work and support on everyone’s part, to carry out many functions?

Chris Bryant: Absolutely. One key thing that we saw repeatedly—this is an issue for the Bill, I think—was the fluctuating nature of some brain injuries. For instance, fatigue is a very common feature of many brain injuries. I do not mean just feeling tired because you are sitting at the back of a debate in the House of Commons and somebody is wittering on for far too long and you fall asleep, but real, genuine fatigue. I mean the kind of lassitude that leaves you unable to move from one side of the bed to the other. It is often misunderstood, because it might look like laziness to somebody with a judgmental eye. That lassitude can pass or go through phases and can sometimes be a bit difficult to explain or predict. I am therefore really keen that we ensure, in all the processes in the Bill, that anyone with an acquired brain injury is regularly and repeatedly reassessed so that they have an opportunity to escape. That is important.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making some good points. The only point I would make to him is that without a deprivation of liberty order—I agree that they should be open to review, and I am sure the Minister will go on to talk about how that can happen—some of the people he talks about may have to be put under the Mental Health Act 2007 due to the fluctuating nature of their capacity. That would be much more restrictive and could lead to them being sent to entirely the wrong places to be cared for. I would just give that caveat and that warning to him about the potential consequences of what he is saying.

Chris Bryant: I think the hon. Gentleman has just read, in some weird way, what I was about to say—he has a very special mental capacity of his own if he is able to read my notes from that distance. He is absolutely right, however, and I do not want to drive a coach and horses through the Bill at all. I fully accept that there is a requirement for some elements of it.
I have an anxiety about the pace at which the Bill is going. It is a shame that the code is not yet available, because it would significantly affect how we viewed some of the issues that we are talking about today. All the things in my amendments should probably be in the code, rather than on the face of the Bill—that is what the Minister said to me yesterday, and I should have given her a much harder time, by the way—but why do we not have the code now? We are not going to have it before the Bill receives its Third Reading, and I think that is a mistake. It is not as though we have lots of wonderful business to be getting through.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): A young person in my constituency has contacted me—she has a disability and works for a disabled people’s organisation called Inclusion London—to raise concerns about the speed at which the Bill is going through Parliament. There is a sense of it being rushed through without adequate consultation, which it needs, and with little regard for the people who are likely to be affected by it. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Chris Bryant: Yes, I do have that anxiety. I want to be a bit critical of the Government on that, because this is a two-year Session of Parliament and there is no reason why this could not have been done in a proper way. I am slightly conscious that there is not a great deal of time left today, however, so I am keen to bring my remarks to a close.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Before my hon. Friend concludes, since the code is going to be so central to the operation of the Bill, and since none of us will have seen it before the Bill concludes its proceedings, does he think that it is vital for the Minister to say today that there will be proper and extensive consultation on the code before it is implemented?

Chris Bryant: Yes. The Government have effectively already said that, but to be really nasty, we should have had the code before today, in all honesty, even if it was only in draft form, so that we would be able to see what we are really talking about, and I would then not have been talking about these amendments.

I want to bring my remarks to a close as soon as I can. We need to build in an incentive to make sure that there is proper neurorehabilitation provision for people with acquired brain injuries. All too often, patients and carers in this field feel as though they are being processed. That is not because health clinicians are nastily minded, but because people sometimes end up having to deal with so many different departments that they feel as though they are being pushed from pillar to post. That is why it is really important that the Government strike the right note when it comes to the next stage of introducing the code.

Amendment 1 simply says that “the Secretary of State must lay before Parliament a report on” the “likely effects” of the Bill on ABI before it comes into effect. Amendment 2 requires the “relevant person”, who could be somebody managing a care home, to consider “the effects of any treatment undergone by the cared-for person, including prescription brain injury rehabilitation therapy” in addition to the length of time since the assessment was originally made. Amendment 3 would mean that an authorisation that was not renewed would lapse after 12 months, after a time specified in the original authorisation, or, as I would like it to be, “at the end of a period of prescription brain injury rehabilitation therapy”.

I think that is key to making sure that there is an incentive to ensure that therapy is provided. Amendment 4 refers to the renewal of an authorisation and requires the responsible body to take into account “any treatment to be undergone by the cared-for person, including prescription brain injury rehabilitation therapy”.

I do not think that any of those amendments would do the Bill any harm—no harm at all—and I am feeling a bit more grumpy with the Minister than I was yesterday when I met her, so who knows? We might end up voting on them.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): It is good to see the hon. Gentleman on his feet, but I hate to see him grumpy. He will have my response to his all-party group next week. I promised him a recommendation by recommendation response to his report, the launch of which I attended, and he will have it next week.

Chris Bryant: I am very happy with this Minister, but the other Minister—

Steve Brine: She’s nicer than me.

Chris Bryant: That is true, but she has to prove her mettle on this. I do not mean that in a nasty way; I simply mean that we want some changes.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): A lot of people want to speak, but we have to finish at 6 o’clock, so we only have 90 minutes.

4.30 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): I am here today to prove my mettle.

I will start by stating the obvious: our liberty is our most fundamental human right. The challenge today is that the current system of deprivation of liberty safeguards no longer provides protection to all the vulnerable people entitled to it. The system has proved to be overly bureaucratic and inefficient to apply, and case law has resulted in article 5 of the European convention on human rights being understood in a very different way, and this has, in effect, widened the definition of deprivation of liberty eighteenfold. The result is a long backlog of applications that has built up over time such that today about 125,000 people may be subject to a deprivation of liberty without formal authorisation.

The Bill introduces a new system—the liberty protection safeguard—based on work of the Law Commission that involved more than three years of consultation and consideration. It is designed to provide robust protections and to be simpler so that those protections may be afforded quickly and effectively to those who need them. It is absolutely right that any proposed changes to the protection
of some of the most vulnerable people in our society be scrutinised closely, however, and I am grateful for the close examination of the Bill by hon. Members and noble Lords during the Bill’s passage here and in the other place.

I thank the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for raising the issue of how liberty protection safeguards will work for people who have a brain injury or may need to be deprived of their liberty while receiving care or treatment. I also thank him for his chairmanship of the all-party group on acquired brain injury. He does an outstanding job and is a great advocate for the group.

A leading charity in this area, Headway, reports that every 90 seconds someone is admitted to a UK hospital with an acquired brain injury or related diagnosis, such as trauma, stroke, tumour and neurological illness, and many of these will require some form of rehabilitation. For some people, this can be a lifelong need. Having met the hon. Gentleman yesterday to discuss his concerns, I understand that neurorehabilitation can in some cases help people to regain capacity over time and that his amendments are intended to account for this and to ensure that a deprivation of liberty occurs only when strictly necessary.

I would like to provide some reassurance that the first principle of the Bill is that a deprivation of liberty should occur only where it is considered essential and where authorisation conditions are met. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we have considered carefully how this model will work for this group of people and are confident that the reformed model will embed consideration of deprivation of liberty into the earliest stages of care and treatment planning so that from the outset these arrangements will work alongside neurorehabilitation therapy and adhere to the less-restrictive principle of the Mental Capacity Act 2005.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I understand the Minister’s concern not to impose on the rights of disabled and elderly people, but is she not concerned that more than 100 social care and disability organisations have written to her raising continuing concerns, including about the Bill adversely affecting the rights of people who rely on care and support services. Does she think they are wrong, or does she think they have legitimate concerns that still need to be properly addressed?

Caroline Dinenage: Of course, any organisation representing these vulnerable people that raises concerns deserves to have them listened to, and I am sure that the vast majority are legitimate concerns, which is why we have been listening so carefully up until this point. The right hon. Gentleman will know how many amendments we have made in the other place, in Committee and today.

We will continue to listen and collaborate as we deal with the code of practice, about which I shall say more in a moment. A working group of third-sector organisations is helping us to put the document together so that it is not rushed. It is not being prepared for the purposes of Parliament, but it will come before Parliament. Following a wide public consultation, both Houses will vote on it. That collaboration has been and will continue to be important: it is not the end of the conversation, but very much part of it.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): May I pursue the intervention from the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb)? Is the Minister satisfied that the definition of the deprivation of liberty will not lead to litigation in the courts? Some constituents have written to me saying that the proposed changes could open a legal can of worms. Can the Minister reassure me that this will not end in expensive litigation, either for constituents or for the Government?

Caroline Dinenage: I do not think it is ever possible to say that. This particular area of law has always been open to legal challenge. We decided to include a definition because so many stakeholders, as well as the Law Commission and Members of the other place, thought it essential, but the wording is very specific.¹ It refers to what does not constitute a deprivation of liberty rather than what does, because we did not want to leave out accidentally something that could open up a legal challenge further down the line. This is where the code of practice comes into its own. It will include case studies and examples, so that those affected by the Mental Capacity Act will have a better understanding of how it works for them.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): The Minister has just mentioned case studies, and she has mentioned them before. She has circulated case studies to a few people, but they were not circulated to me or to any other members of the Committee, which I think was very discourteous. We keep hearing about things that are in the distance—over there—and will come together at some point, but those case studies have not been circulated, and they should have been.

Caroline Dinenage: I think that there must be some confusion. The case studies will be part of the code of practice. They will be gathered together in the document, and third-sector organisations will contribute to ensure that we cover every cohort. We must bear in mind that we are trying to cater for wildly different groups of people. The document will have to cover the young person with an acquired brain injury to whom the hon. Member for Rhondda referred, a 16-year-old who has had a learning disability since birth and the 97-year-old with dementia. It must not be the box-ticking one-size-fits-all exercise for which the current legislation provides.

We are aware that mental capacity assessments may be of particular concern to the group of people mentioned by the hon. Member for Rhondda. Assessing the capacity of people with acquired brain injuries can be particularly challenging, and will require skilled and careful consideration. Government amendments 28 to 37, which I shall discuss later, outline our intention to publish regulations in order to ensure that the assessors have the appropriate knowledge and experience.

We agree that the likelihood of capacity to fluctuate should be ascertained during the assessments, and we will expect that to be considered in the authorisation, in the length of authorisation and in the frequency of reviews. Fluctuating capacity is complex and fact-specific and deserves in-depth and detailed guidance, which is why we will include the details in the code of practice. I appreciate what the Opposition amendments are trying to do and I fully agree with their spirit, but I hope that my commitment to work with others on the code has

given the hon. Gentleman and other members of the all-party parliamentary group the reassurance that they need.

Through the scrutiny of the Public Bill Committee and the ongoing engagement with stakeholders, we have identified a number of areas in which the Bill could be strengthened further. As I have said before, I firmly intend to introduce a more effective, efficient system of robust safeguards, moving away from the one-size-fits-all approach that no longer works. I am committed to doing this in a very collaborative way, and where possible to identify legislative improvements that can be made to work. I am committed to looking at this again, and as a result a number of Government amendments have been tabled that improve the Bill and the way in which liberty protection safeguards work.

Amendment 5 aligns the definition of a care home manager in Wales with that in England. The Bill as currently drafted defines care home managers in Wales as a registered manager. This amendment changes that so that it is linked to the registered service provider. Amendments 7 to 23 will remove any perceived conflict of interest where a deprivation of liberty occurs in an independent hospital. Under amendment 14 the responsible body in cases where arrangements are mainly carried out in an independent hospital would be the local authority in England and in Wales the local health board for the area in which the hospital is situated. This removes any potential misuse of power or conflict of interest in independent hospital settings. Amendment 22 outlines that in England the responsible body is the local authority responsible for the education, health and care plan or the care plan under the Care Act 2014. If a person does not have one of these, the responsible body is that in the area where the hospital is situated.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): What provision does the Minister think should be made in the code for the families? Often the adult children or the parents know these people extremely well and have very caring approaches, and they may have wisdom to inform the decision, but there might be the odd occasion when the family member has their own agenda and not that of the vulnerable person. So what should the role of the family be?

Caroline Dinenage: The role of the family is much greater in this amended legislation than it is currently. A number of families have told us through our work on this Bill that they feel very disenfranchised by the current system. For example, in the new system a family member or a loved one can be an approved person. That would be the person’s advocate through the process. We must not disenfranchise them; if we do that, we are doing this wrong. So will the Minister confirm that those things are in place?

Caroline Dinenage: Yes, that definition is included in the Bill, and it is also expected that people will have an advocate. That is an approved person; it can be a family member or loved one or it can be an independent mental capacity advocate, or indeed both if the family do not feel they are fully equipped to be able to support their loved one.

Jim Shannon: So the wishes and feelings of the loved ones and their families are at the heart of the Bill?

Caroline Dinenage: The wishes and feelings of the vulnerable person are at the centre of the Bill, and the wishes and feelings of their family will definitely be taken into consideration if their family is the approved person. We must always leave a little space in case the person does not want their approved person to be a family member for whatever reason. The wishes and feelings of the individual must be at the heart of this, and that was at the heart of the original Mental Capacity Act 2005.

Mrs Moon: Does the Minister agree that one of the most essential things everyone should do while they are well is make sure they take out an enduring power of attorney that names the person they want to oversee their health and wellbeing should they be in a situation such as this? Also, many families are intimidated into making bad decisions out of fear that the care home might say, “If you don’t do as we say, or if you complain, move your parent.” Giving power into the hands of care home managers is a very dangerous situation.

Caroline Dinenage: As a Justice Minister, I was responsible for lasting powers of attorney and we spent a lot of time trying to convince people to make those sorts of decisions for themselves as early as possible.

Several hon. Members rose—

Caroline Dinenage: I am going to make little progress now because I have a lot more to say and I know that other Members want to speak as well.

4.45 pm

In Committee, hon. Members raised concerns about the fact that independent hospitals are responsible bodies and that this could represent a conflict of interest. The Government amendments ensure that an independent hospital is never the responsible body. We will ensure independent oversight in every case. I hope that hon. Members will support the amendments.

Amendments 24 to 27 relate to the provision of information. It is vital that those who are deprived of their liberty are provided with the information necessary for them to be able to exercise their rights. There is a duty to provide information in article 5 of the European convention on human rights, but the noble Lords flagged that the Bill should be explicit about this duty. The Government have tabled the amendment as we agree that information should be shared as soon as it is appropriate to do so. Amendment 24 introduces a general duty to publish accessible information for everyone.
about the authorisation process. It goes on to require the responsible body, when arrangements are proposed, to take all practicable steps to ensure that the cared-for person and any appropriate person providing representation understand the information. This is very important. This will ensure that people are all aware of their rights and of the options to challenge the authorisation. Amendments 25 and 26 in effect require the responsible body to remind the cared-for person and any appropriate person of this information after the authorisation is granted.

Amendments 28 to 37 all refer to the requirements of assessors under the Bill. These amendments will ensure that the person who completes the assessments and determinations required for a liberty protection safeguards authorisation has the appropriate experience and knowledge to complete those assessments and determinations. They give the Government the power to determine who can complete medical and capacity assessments and who can determine whether the authorisation conditions are being met. These amendments ensure that the decisions about whether the authorisation conditions are met are made by those with the necessary skills, and will be based on assessments carried out by suitably qualified individuals.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): What assurances can the Minister give that the regulations will be genuinely co-created with practitioners and cared-for people? If they are not, how can we be sure that the amendments are not a way of clandestinely watering down the protections of the Bill?

Caroline Dinenage: The Bill is very clear about the skills and qualifications necessary for those carrying out the assessments, but the code of practice that goes alongside the Bill will be carried out in partnership. We already have a working group made up of third sector organisations that are working to ensure that the statutory document that goes alongside the Bill is as robust as we can make it.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I would like to thank the Minister for meeting me earlier to discuss the Bill. She was very generous with her time. On the question of the code, does she envisage that there will be training on the code for these professionals? If so, how long does she think the training will take, and when will it be properly in force for local authorities to utilise?

Caroline Dinenage: Yes, we envisage that there will be training and we will be working with partners such as Skills for Care to look at the best ways of implementing that sort of support.

Catherine West: Could the Minister outline the role of care staff in preparing the documentation and making ready for the assessments, as opposed to the role of the responsible body—the local authority—that will make the assessment?

Caroline Dinenage: I am actually coming to that very section of the Bill now.

We are proposing that a review of an authorisation will be completed by an approved mental capacity professional when an objection is raised by someone with an interest in the cared-for person’s welfare. It is vital that objections can be raised not just by the person themselves but by others who have an interest in their welfare. This could be a family member. The Government amended the Bill to clarify that objections can be raised at a pre-authorisation stage, and these new amendments clarify that objections can be raised at any time throughout the authorisation and can lead to a review of the ongoing need for deprivation of liberty.

Amendments 39, 40 and 42 relate to authorisations that need to vary in order to prevent them from ceasing because small variations need to be made. Under the current deprivation of liberty safeguards system, an authorisation is tied to one specific location. This creates a situation in which a person has multiple authorisations if they need to move between settings. If a person is in a care home and has a planned stay in hospital, for example, a new application has to start from scratch. The Law Commission recommended that authorisations should be able to cover more than one setting to remove that duplication. There is an exception if someone needs to go into hospital in an emergency; when variations can be made without a review taking place first, but one should be held as soon as possible afterwards. In some cases, the responsible body will change even though the person still resides in the same location. For example, a care home resident may become eligible for NHS continuing healthcare, but their location and care will not change.

Opposition amendment 49 seeks to require the responsible body to carry out the consultation required by the Bill in every case, removing the ability of the care home manager to complete the consultation. We are clear that it is not appropriate for certain functions to be conducted by the care home manager, which relates to what the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) was saying. The Bill explicitly prevents anyone with a prescribed connection to a care home, which will be set out in regulations and will include care home managers and staff, from completing the assessments required for an authorisation and the pre-authorisation review. We are clear that decision making lies with the responsible body, not the care home manager.

Consultation is another matter. We expect, as part of good care, that care providers are consulting with the people in their care, and with those with an interest in that person’s welfare, to establish their needs, wishes and feelings. That applies regardless of whether someone is subject to a liberty protection safeguard and should happen on an ongoing basis. Having care home managers complete the consultation required by the Bill is simply building upon current good practice. The Bill has clear safeguards for that purpose. Objections do not need to be raised through the care home manager. They can be raised directly to the responsible body by the person or by someone interested in their welfare. If there are concerns about the care home manager’s ability to complete the consultation required under the Bill, the responsible body can decide to take on the care home function and complete the consultation itself.

Liz Twist: Many hon. Members will have had a large amount of correspondence from constituents on this matter. Does the Minister accept that there is huge concern about the operation of the provisions and about the role of care home managers more generally? The amendments seek to address that concern, but that feeling remains.
Caroline Dinenage: I accept that there were a number of concerns, but we made changes to say that care home managers would not in any way be responsible for authorisation or for pre-authorisation reviews.

Several hon. Members rose—

Caroline Dinenage: I am afraid that I will not take any more interventions because Mr Deputy Speaker might fall out with me entirely. In short, care home managers will be responsible for consultation, which is already part of good care.

Amendment 50 would require an approved mental capacity professional to complete the pre-authorisation review, where care home arrangements are being authorised and where the care home manager provides a statement to the responsible body. The Law Commission recommended the creation of the AMCP role and also recommended that their use should be focused on those cases where their input is needed. The commission recommended that AMCPs should consider cases where an objection is raised and the Bill does that. The Bill also allows other relevant cases to be referred to an AMCP. We expect, for example, cases where there are complex circumstances, or particularly restrictive practices are proposed, to be referred by the responsible body to an AMCP. We have also specified that an AMCP must carry out the pre-authorisation review in independent hospital cases. However, we agree with the Law Commission that not every case should be considered by an AMCP. By having a targeted system, with a greater focus on more complex cases, we can ensure that people receive the protection to which they are entitled.

Turning to amendment 51, I thank hon. Members for raising advocacy, about which we spoke at length in Committee. Advocacy is of the utmost importance for ensuring that the voice of the person is heard. That is why this Bill creates a presumption of advocacy for everyone who is subject to arrangements under liberty protection safeguards. During our engagement with stakeholders, many people and their families told us that the DoLS system was something that was done to them without family involvement. That is why this Bill introduces the appropriate person role described by the Law Commission. Family members and those close to the person will be able to be an appropriate person and provide representation and support. We recognise that that role can be challenging, which is why it will be conducted only by those who are willing to do it. Otherwise, people will be able to request an independent mental capacity advocate to support them in providing that important representation.

Like Opposition Members, we want to ensure that people receive advocacy, but we recognise that we should not impose it on people, nor should it become a formality without real effect. Our Bill already delivers on amendment 51.

Norman Lamb: Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Dinenage: I am afraid that I cannot take any more interventions at this stage.

Our Bill allows the person themselves to request an IMCA from the responsible body if they have the capacity to do so, and it explicitly states that an appropriate person can request an IMCA or that the responsible body should appoint an IMCA if it believes that the appropriate person having the support of an IMCA would be in the cared-for person’s best interest.

I agree that the appropriate person has a challenging role with vital duties to ensure that the person exercises their rights, and we want to work with others in the sector to establish how best to support them in this role. There is existing provision in the Bill to address the concerns raised by amendment 51. In some areas, the amendment adds uncertainty and over-complication.

This Bill is about protecting vulnerable people and replacing a one-size-fits-all system.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for listening to many of the concerns that have been expressed about the Bill, as shown in the Government amendments. How are we going to deal with the extraordinary backlog of cases, which has left over 125,000 people without protection? The safeguards she has set out will stop this being a rushed process, but will she say something about the backlog?

Caroline Dinenage: The backlog of 125,000 people without the safeguards they need, with their families lacking reassurance and with the people who care for them lacking legal protection, is an enormous concern. That is why, during the long period in which we will set out the code of practice, we will be supporting local authorities to go through those backlogs. From day one, when the system is implemented, any new applications and those still in the backlog will be processed using the new system.

With grateful thanks for your patience, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will now sit down. This new system puts individuals at its very heart, and it removes the one-size-fits-all, box-ticking exercise we have unfortunately come to live with under the current system.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): The opening two speeches have taken 55 minutes, and we have to finish at 6 pm. I recognise that a lot of other people want to speak, and I certainly do not want to put pressure on the Opposition spokesperson, who also wants to make a speech. When other people come in, please remember that we want to get through everybody.

Barbara Keeley: We should not be in this position of having less than two hours on Report. This Bill has been rushed. We were in the same position on Second Reading, and it is absolutely unacceptable for such an important Bill to be rushed through as it has been today. I spoke to the Minister about this yesterday. She could have chosen to bring the Bill back on a different day, and I am sorry that she has not.

I am every bit as concerned about this Bill as I was on Second Reading. It remains deeply flawed. It weakens the current safeguards for people who lack capacity, and we have not even had a clear answer to the question that the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) just asked about the current backlog of DoLS applications. It is not clear how that will be cleared.

The Minister said at the start of Committee that she would work constructively with other parties on this Bill, but that has not been reflected in our experience.
She has dismissed many of the serious concerns raised both by Opposition Members and by the many charities and representative groups outside the House with an interest in the Bill.

I said in Committee that our amendments were the bare minimum required to ensure that the Bill is fit for purpose. The Government rejected all our amendments in Committee, and, despite some movement on one or two issues since, the Bill retains the majority of the significant flaws it contained on Second Reading. It is sad that, having been through all the stages, this is where we are.

We have tabled further amendments to address some of the glaring holes that remain in the Bill, and I thank all the stakeholders who have helped us, including the Alzheimer's Society, VoiceAbility, Mencap and Lucy Series. Without these amendments, we simply do not believe that the Bill is fit for purpose, and we oppose it progressing further.

Janet Daby: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill should be paused until the draft code of practice is ready?

5 pm

Barbara Keeley: I very much agree with that. We have heard about a code of practice and regulations, but we cannot see any of these things. With this Bill, we should have had the promised detail on the code of practice. We should not be passing the Bill without it.

First, I wish to talk about amendment 50, which addresses the role proposed in the Bill for care home managers. A number of Members have raised that issue, and we fundamentally disagree with that role, in the same way that we disagreed with the role in the liberty protection safeguards system being given to independent hospitals, which the Government are now amending. There is no logic in the Government removing one conflict of interest from the Bill and not the other.

When this Bill was introduced in the House of Lords, it placed almost all power and responsibility for the LPS in the hands of care home managers. It would have allowed them to be judge and jury, deciding when to deprive people of their liberty. I accept that the Bill has been marginally improved from the original position. The Government were forced to make concessions in the House of Lords, but what they have done so far is not sufficient.

The Government were forced to make concessions in the House of Lords, but what they have done so far is not sufficient. The Bill still hands far too much power to care home managers. Stakeholders across the sector, including care home managers themselves, are very concerned about this. Care England, the representative body for care homes, has said:

“As providers we are very concerned about the inherent conflict of interest associated with placing Liberty Protection Safeguards assessment responsibilities on care home managers”

I also want to quote something that was written in evidence to the Public Bill Committee. A submission made by the Albert House nursing home stated:

“Managers in Care Homes are already stretched and heaping further responsibility on them could lead to more people giving up and looking for easier work.”

It seems clear that even care home managers do not want this responsibility to be given to them. I cannot understand why the Government are insisting on doing so, unless of course the reason is just cost saving.

Under the Government’s proposals in the Bill, local councils will be able to delegate the assessment and consultation process to the care home manager whenever they see fit. That risks creating a postcode lottery, where some local councils with adequate resources carry out LPS assessments themselves, while others will have to reduce their role to simply rubber-stamping the applications they get from care home managers. That cannot be right.

We have to be clear in this Chamber that one issue facing the current system is that some local councils are not able to properly resource their DoLS teams following years of cuts to their funding. This Bill would allow cash-strapped local councils to outsource the process entirely, with serious consequences for cared-for people. If care home managers organise the authorisation process, they decide who carries out medical assessments, and who determines whether the arrangements are necessary and proportionate. I have heard colleagues expressing concern that the statement provided by the care home manager forms the basis of authorisation. We know that many local councils do not currently have the resources to fund their DoLS teams properly now. Conservative Members have talked about the backlog and concerns about that, but in recent weeks we have seen a further £1.3 billion taken out of grant funding to local councils. The Minister has given us no reassurance that the Government will provide any new funding for the proposed system.

Steve McCabe: While my hon. Friend is on the subject of care home managers, may I ask whether she agrees that if they are responsible for the consultation, which is supposed to be one of the safeguards protecting a person’s liberty, the person cannot possibly be at the heart or centre of the Bill? Such a provision drives a coach and horse through the notion that their liberty is being protected.

Barbara Keeley: I absolutely agree with that. Local councils face a serious resource issue, and we see a pressing of this role away to care home managers. I have got some examples with me, but I do not know whether I will have time to go through them. However, we can see that there will be a strong temptation in local councils simply to presume that the care home manager is right. We have to recognise that over-stretched professionals in local councils will sometimes simply accept the word of care staff without fully investigating the case.

In the Public Bill Committee, I talked about the recent case of Y v. Barking and Dagenham. This was the case of a young man who was placed in an inappropriate care home. Initially his parents were satisfied with his placement, but over time the quality of his care deteriorated. We hear a lot and have great concerns about restraint. That young man was restrained in that care home 199 times in two years and suffered significant harm. Y eventually got out of that placement, following a court-appointed guardian visiting and raising concerns, but it took the intervention of somebody outside the care home—that is the key thing.

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is making a powerful case and she talked about many such cases in Committee. Does she agree that this shows exactly why the DoLS system needs overhauling? It is not offering the required protections for vulnerable people, which is why this Bill is so urgent.
Barbara Keeley: I could not disagree with the Minister more, because what she is doing is putting people into the lion’s den. I do not know whether she is listening to me, but I am reading her a case where the difficulties arose because the local authority listened to care staff and did not listen to the parents’ objections at all. That is the difficulty. Under the new LPS system, that young man would not have had any safeguards or protection, because the care home staff would have been the people sorting out his authorisation.

Caroline Dinenage: Under the new system, family members and parents will be listened to, because they will be the approved person, the representative and the advocate. Their voices will be heard, which is not happening currently.

Barbara Keeley: It is not helpful if the Minister and I argue about this. We have had this argument enough times in Committee. She just needs to see that there is a level of concern. I am quoting a case where significant harm was done to a young person in a care home because the parents were not listened to and the care staff were.

Dr Poulter: I can understand where the hon. Lady’s concerns come from, but having had detailed discussions with my hon. Friend the Minister, I am reassured, perhaps more than the hon. Lady, by the systems and some of the amendments that have been put in place to take into consideration concerns about conflicting provider interest. She makes a good point on the lack of funds and resources and cash-strapped local authorities. Without the money to support local authorities, there is a real risk that scrutiny of care homes and the processes in place under the legislation will be sadly lacking, to the detriment of people under deprivation of liberty orders. What reassurance has she had, if any, during the passage of the Bill that the funding crisis affecting social care and local authorities is being addressed by the Government, both in respect of this legislation and otherwise?

Barbara Keeley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. We have had no reassurances whatever. In fact, since the Committee finished, £1.3 billion has been taken out of central Government funding to local councils. Whatever our position was when we were in Committee, things are now much, much worse. The Minister does not agree, but it is disturbing that we are still in the position on Report of trading the arguments back and forth. We gave lots of examples. There is provision in the Bill for an approved mental capacity professional. With our amendment we want to be sure that we do not have cash-strapped local councils delegating responsibility. There is talk under some amendments to bring in reviews, but reviewers have to be able and willing to stand up to care home managers, and that is a difficult thing.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) said earlier, care home managers have a lot of power. They have the power to evict and the power to stop visits. Amendment 49 would work with amendment 50 to address the role that the care home manager could play. It is one of the most concerning provisions in the Bill, and it must be addressed if the new liberty protection safeguards are to be fit for purpose.

I do not in any way want to stigmatise care home managers, but I ask Government Members to accept that we are talking about a situation where at least 20% of care homes require improvement or are rated inadequate. Care home manager vacancies are at 11%. We are not talking about a situation where all care homes have a proper care home manager in place, or where they are all doing as well as they could. If the Minister reads many CQC reports, she will see that care homes often fall down on care planning. CQC inspectors often find that there is not a proper or adequate care plan for the situation.

Catherine West: Is my hon. Friend satisfied that rights of appeal are being managed correctly in the Bill?

Barbara Keeley: No. On the Opposition Benches, we are not satisfied with very much about the Bill, but I am talking about our amendments for care home managers because we feel that safeguards have been weakened. I will give an example, because there are many cases where the powers of care home managers are used to shut down any opposition to what they are doing. A person whose husband was in a care home visited him every day and took a keen interest in his wellbeing. He had lost the ability to speak and had little mobility. She found that he was in pain and when she raised that with staff, they failed to act and dismissed her concerns. She then raised it with the care home manager who warned her that if she continued to take up staff time, she would be banned from visiting her husband who was actually nearing the end of his life. That is an awful thing—that a wife would be banned from visiting her husband near the end of his life. It was only with the help of an outside organisation that the cause of the pain was identified. If relatives, including spouses, were prevented from visiting in the situation that I have just described, how could they be raising a major objection? How could they be challenging the care home manager? The appeals question that my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) just raised with me is very concerning.

Under the current provisions of the Bill, care home managers are expected to carry out the consultation process, and yet this is the one opportunity that the cared-for person and their family have to register any objections to the proposed arrangements. The process needs to be carried out independently so that people can feel free to speak their minds. Amendment 49 achieves that. It prevents the local council from delegating the consultation process to the care home manager, and then this crucial step must be carried out by the local council itself.

In Committee, the Minister said she believed that it could be appropriate for a care home manager to carry out that process, because those with an interest in the welfare of the cared-for person can flag up objections, but that would not always work in practice. For that to happen, a family member would have to know that they had the right to do that. They have to know with whom to raise their objection and then raise it in a timely manner. That is pretty key in relation to this business of care homes and to challenging on behalf of the cared-for person. It is not reasonable to expect people to understand the intricacies of the system. Similarly, we cannot expect everyone to have the confidence to negotiate the system for themselves. We here perhaps do not always think
how hard it is to challenge those in authority, but it is a very difficult thing to do indeed. We need to offer a cared-for person a chance to object in a setting that they are comfortable with, without fear of reprisals from care home managers.

Government amendment 38 goes against the principles that I set out in relation to our amendment 49. It is unacceptable for the care home manager to be involved in that consultation with the cared-for person and their family, so we are in a situation where the two amendments are directly opposed.

Let me move on to our third amendment, amendment 51, on advocacy, because that addresses the provision of independent advocates for cared-for people. That is a crucial safeguard, which enables people to realise their rights under the Mental Capacity Act 2005. The advocacy system proposed in this Bill is excessively complex. It could see people being denied an advocate when they need one. Our amendment seeks to simplify the system, ensuring that advocacy becomes the default option. Stakeholders have told us that they are concerned about the use of a best interests test to determine whether somebody should receive an advocate.

Clearly, there is a situation in which the Minister thinks that a best interests test is used to avoid overriding the wishes and feelings of the cared-for person. We agree that advocacy should never be forced on somebody, but we must be explicit about this principle of advocacy being available as the default.

Catherine West: My hon. Friend is so generous in taking interventions. Does she agree that there is no consistency in the choice of advocates across the regions?

Barbara Keeley: That may well be the case, but the difficulty here is that we have a complex system when we should have a simple system that clarifies that an independent advocate, an IMCA, should not be appointed if a cared-for person objects to it, but that everyone who wants or needs an advocate can get one. There should be an absolute right to request that an advocate be appointed both for the cared-for person and for any appropriate person who is representing them.

Our amendment would ensure that support is provided where an appropriate person is not able, on their own, to give the cared-for person the support that they need. That is particularly important, and there are many examples. I am sure that the vast majority of responsible bodies would not exploit loopholes, but we feel that there are loopholes in the current situation.

Budget pressures are another concern. There are concerns that advocates may not be allocated because other Members wish to speak. The amendment 24 is not satisfactory. The wording is far too broad, and there are concerns that information rights have loopholes that could be used by those who should be giving information to the cared-for person and the people representing them. We should not be having to worry about that at this late stage of the Bill.

There are still some issues around Government amendment 24, but I do not really have time to discuss them because other Members wish to speak. The amendment has been tabled only because the Government removed in Committee the strong right to information that existed in the Bill when it was sent to us from the House of Lords. Following the undoing of that House of Lords provision, there are ways in which amendment 24 is not satisfactory. The wording is far too broad, and there are concerns that information rights have loopholes that could be used by those who should be giving information to the cared-for person and the people representing them. We should not be having to worry about that at this late stage of the Bill.

I support amendments 1 to 4, tabled my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), as they raise an important issue and would ensure that the impact of treatment for an acquired brain injury was considered throughout the LPS system. Those are vital safeguards.
for the large number of people that my hon. Friend talked about, and I hope that the Government will give them the consideration they deserve.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) for tabling amendment 48. Resolving the issues that he has raised is not simple, and I hope that he gets the time to discuss his amendment. I hope that the Minister will confirm today that nobody will be forced to pay the costs of an assessment because they need a liberty protection safeguard, and that she will accept that amendment.

Let me touch briefly on the definition of deprivation of liberty in the Bill. I want to register the complaint that I have already made to the Minister, which is that case studies have been circulated to Members of the House of Lords but not to the Committee while the Bill was going through the House. That is not acceptable. I have not even had answers to the concerns about the case studies that I raised in Committee. The rush to get the Bill through, which we are seeing all the way along, has caused that problem.

I have also raised additional concerns expressed by the Care Quality Commission, which wrote to me detailing a number of concerns about its role in monitoring the liberty protection safeguards. I have raised those concerns with the Minister, but I want finally to return to one aspect of them. The Minister said that

"the Liberty Protection Safeguards provide a range of safeguards including review and oversight by the responsible body, access to independent representation and support and, where required, the statutory safeguarding system."

The Bill moves us into a situation where the LPS can be used when a cared-for person is in a private home. That is a problem, because the CQC does not regulate domiciliary caring agencies in the same way that it regulates care homes. The Minister needs to confirm that some people will be subject to the LPS without the CQC monitoring the application of the LPS to them. Oversight should not be partial in that way. If the Bill extends the system to people being cared for at home, then that has to be done properly. The Minister has assured us that the Government and the CQC are working together to address these issues, but I remain concerned that we have so many questions to which we have not been given answers.

There is still much to do to improve this deeply flawed Bill. I hope that the Minister and other hon. Members will take this opportunity today to improve the Bill by passing our amendments so that we can improve the safeguards for vulnerable people.

**Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): I rise to support the Bill and, in particular, to speak in favour of Government amendments 24 and 33.

Before I do so, let me respond to some of the points that have already been made. First, with regard to the timescale in which the Bill is being taken forward, there has been plenty of opportunity for colleagues to look at its details. I draw Members’ attention to the fact that there have been not just one but two detailed reports on this issue by the Joint Committee on Human Rights, one in June 2018—our seventh report of this Session—and then, in October 2018, our 12th report, in which we considered the draft Bill in some considerable detail. At that point, we welcomed the recommendations of the Law Commission. Of course, the Law Commission had itself been some three years in preparing its recommendations, so the Bill can hardly be described as rushed.

**Steve McCabe:** Does the hon. Lady recognise that the Law Commission objects to the fact that its recommendations were not taken up by the Government when they constructed the Bill?

**Fiona Bruce:** I was about to say that the Joint Committee welcomed the Law Commission’s recommendations because they clearly highlighted the need for changes to be made.

As we pointed out in our seventh report, as far back as last June, the Cheshire West case that the Minister mentioned had resulted in a 10-fold increase in the number of DoLS applications. That is why there has been such a backlog. That case placed extreme pressure on local authority resources. Some 70% of the almost 220,000 applications for DoLS authorisations in the year up to our report were not authorised within the statutory timeframe. Consequently, many incapacitated people continued to be deprived of their liberty unlawfully. Those responsible for their care, or for obtaining authorisations, were having to work out how best to break the law. That is completely unacceptable, and it is why this Bill needs to brought forward in a timely way.

There also needs to be, as the Committee recommended in our 12th report, a definition in the Bill. I hear colleagues’ reservations about that definition, but, as we said—I am glad that the Government took up our recommendation—that it is important to give cared-for people and their families, and professionals, greater certainty about the parameters of any scheme so that we can ensure that scrutiny and necessary resources are directed where needed. We said:

“It is undeniable that any definition in statute may be refined by future case law”.

That remains that case. None the less, not to have endeavoured to provide a definition would, we believe, have been wrong.

Having made those preliminary comments, I will speak in more detail about amendment 24 and expand on the remarks made about the importance of family engagement and keeping the family informed. Information for the family and those who care deeply about the welfare of the person is the cared-for person’s greatest safeguard against exploitation and bad care. It is paramount that families have a role to play in their relatives’ care planning, wherever that is desired by the cared-for person, not least by giving them the option to stay fully informed and to object to proposed plans if they are not satisfied.

Families can play an important role in monitoring care if they are given sufficient information. The care itself is important. The quality of care will vary between and within care homes, but monitoring the care plan is essential to ensure that the cared-for person’s dignity is maintained. The cared-for person’s quality of life depends on how they are treated day in, day out and whether they receive care in a way that enhances their personal dignity or whether, sadly, they are treated less well.

Families are well equipped to monitor care, but only if they are kept informed. That is why I support amendment 24, which improves access to information for the cared-for
person and their appropriate carers and supporters, which may well include their family. The requirement for information to be “accessible to, and appropriate to the needs of, cared-for persons and appropriate persons”, means that the cared-for person is placed at the heart of the liberty protection safeguards authorisation process. Not only that, but now that relatives can be informed about their loved one’s care plan, they will notice if the plan states something that is not happening and question why.

I am pleased to see that the amendment requires the publication of information on the cared-for person’s rights and the circumstances in which it might be appropriate to request a review or make an application to the court. People must know what their rights are and the legal procedures. This will not be costly. It will certainly be far less costly than the court cases that are likely to come if the requirement to provide information about all aspects of the process and the plan are not on the face of the Bill. It will save costs in the long term and ensure that the approved mental capacity professionals act always as they should.

“The code of practice will play an important role. It would be helpful to see examples of family members working with the responsible bodies and the care teams to ensure that care plans are being delivered appropriately and are in the best interests of cared-for individuals. I am sure we all want to see that.

I turn to amendment 33. In the JCHR’s 12th report, we indicated that there has been concern as to “whether care home managers have the necessary skills and knowledge to arrange or undertake the assessments and whether they are sufficiently independent to do so” and whether care home managers are “trained and resourced to take on these additional responsibilities.” It is heartening to hear that the Government have listened and are clearly stating that care home managers and staff should not, and under these proposals will not, complete assessments. It is equally heartening that the Government, having listened to concerns expressed in Committee, are saying that all those doing such assessments must have the necessary skills, knowledge and qualifications—for example, as physicians, nurses or social workers—and that that will be specified in regulations. I want Ministers to put in place appropriate arrangements to assess whether implementation of this element of the Bill is working well—for example, to ensure that specifications of required qualifications and the experience of assessors are kept updated and that the revised system is working well and without difficulty in practice.

Ministers might consider taking up the recommendation in the JCHR’s 12th report that particular vigilance should be exercised by local authorities where care homes are rated by the CQC through an inspection as inadequate or requiring improvement, to ensure that those who are making referrals are properly competent to do so.

5.30 pm

Norman Lamb: I want to speak primarily in support of the amendments in the name of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), and others. However, I want to comment right at the start—I realise this is not the decision of the Minister—about the time we have to debate a Bill that deals with fundamental human rights. I just think it is absolutely outrageous, and we should place on the record our total opposition to the way in which, wholly inappropriately, it has been rushed through.

I should also say that I completely understand the need for reform. I said that on Second Reading, and I acknowledge the Minister’s sincerity on that. I recognise that we breach the human rights of the people who are on a long waiting list for anything to happen to them, but that is no justification for getting it wrong at this stage. Surely we must not weaken the protections for vulnerable people, yet the organisations that have followed this process all the way through are very clear that that is precisely what we will do.

I just think this is extraordinary: the Government have commissioned a review of the Mental Health Act, and although we have not had the formal response yet, I expect that much of what the review calls for will be supported by the Government, yet the review moves in a diametrically opposite direction to this Bill. The review talks about “rebalancing the system” and about “a real shift in the balance of power between the patient and the professional”.

The review also talks about “a right to advocacy based on an opt-out approach.” That is what the amendments in the name of the shadow Minister seek. This will not, as the Minister implied, force advocacy on anyone; this is about having it as the default option. The Law Commission has called for a right to advocacy as an opt-out approach, yet the Government are resisting it. Why are they resisting it? This reduces the rights and protections of vulnerable people, and for that reason it seems to me that it is unacceptable.

On Second Reading, I said that I would not oppose the Bill at that stage, and I said:

“Our assessment will be at the end of the process: is it workable? Does it genuinely respect and safeguard individuals’ human rights? Does it result in very vulnerable people being better protected?

Yet, within a fortnight, we were in Committee, which is exactly what I had urged her not to do.

Then we come to the views of the sector. I mentioned earlier that over 100 organisations, including care providers, disabled people’s organisations and charities, have written to the Minister. They make it clear that reform should not be at the cost of the human rights of people who rely on essential social services. I want to deal, specifically and finally, with the conflict of interest issue. They say in that letter to the Minister that “serious conflicts of interest will be placed upon care managers who will be in control of key information about assessments and review processes.”

The Law Society—surely we should take its concerns seriously—says of care home managers that “any task or role they undertake must be completely conflict free”,

[Fiona Bruce]
and that they should not be arranging or carrying out critical assessments. Care home managers should not be responsible for consultation with the cared-for person. It describes the current process—it is not a past but a current concern about the Bill, as amended—as “deeply flawed”. It says:

“It is not difficult to envisage a vulnerable person being uncomfortable or reluctant to give an honest answer when questioned by the care home manager on their willingness to stay”—in that care home—

“or their ‘happiness’ in the current placement.”

The Law Society’s concern is also about the capacity of care home managers to undertake this work, given that the whole system is under massive pressure. Bluntly, the quality of care home managers is such—many of them are really good, but some of them are not, frankly, good enough—that we cannot rely on them to undertake this vital work, which goes to the protection of the civil liberties of vulnerable people.

Barbara Keeley: On the training that the Minister has talked about and the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) just referred to, I understand from impact assessments that there is half-a-day’s training for care home managers and two hours of training for social workers. What does the right hon. Gentleman think of that?

Norman Lamb: That is clearly insufficient when it comes to the vital task of playing a role in the protection of people’s civil liberties and human rights. That is what the Bill envisages.

Sue Bott, the deputy chief executive of Disability Rights UK, says:

“Given the rare unanimity across the health and social care sector and disabled people’s organisations we urge the Government to delay the Bill and look again at its provisions. It is better to have a co-produced piece of legislation that works for everyone than rush through a new law that, in its current form, will seriously undermine the human rights of disabled people.”

I urge the Minister to listen carefully to that—the “rare unanimity” across the sector. When I was responsible for taking the Care Bill through Parliament, we ensured that by the end pretty much everyone was on board, although it was a slow and sometimes frustrating process.

The Minister will be applauded if she now recognises that these concerns about the amended Bill are not past ones but current ones. If we are to get people on board and ensure that everyone agrees that we are properly protecting the human rights of very vulnerable people, the right thing to do now is pause, before the Bill goes back to the House of Lords, to ensure in particular that the provisions on conflict of interest of care home managers and the rights of advocacy are properly addressed. If the Minister can do that, she will go a long way towards bringing people on board. I am sure that that is what she wants.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Given the restrictions on time, I will curtail my speech and take out remarks I might have made; I am conscious that colleagues would also like to speak.

I always agree with the passion of the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on these issues, but I do not agree with his conclusions on aspects of the Bill. I am reassured by the Government amendments, particularly in relation to independent hospitals: such a hospital might have a potential business interest in keeping someone in its service, so it will not at any time judge whether that person needs to be under the deprivation of liberty safeguards.

It is important that we have a modern system; as has been mentioned, the backlog of 125,000 people under the existing system is utterly unacceptable. What standards there are will need to be changed. When I look at the Opposition amendments, particularly amendment 49, I take the Minister’s point that the consultation—actually talking to someone about their views and their care—is part of what we would expect a care provider to be doing. There must be clear, independent safeguards around deprivation of liberty, and the ability to have an independent check. In some cases, it would be better for someone who works with the individual every day to do the consultation, rather than someone literally turning up from the local authority or health board, who may not have had any contact with them. We are talking about people with issues when it comes to interacting and understanding some of the engagement, so I do not see why there should be consultation in all cases. We are talking about consultation, not decision, and I do not see what the issue is with that.

I turn briefly to the amendments moved by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). The attention he brings to the issue of acquired brain injury is always welcome—particularly in the football world, on the day when an England 1966 hero passed away. The hon. Gentleman mentioned that those from that era often acquired head injuries as a result of heading heavy leather balls, particularly when wet. That is still an issue in football today. I join the hon. Gentleman in saying that the rules should be looked at. If that can be done in rugby without affecting the flow of the game, there is no reason why it cannot be done in football. Similar arguments were advanced in relation to video referees and they are now in place.

I am conscious of the time remaining for others to have their say, so I will just say that I support the Bill and that I do not see the need for the amendments tabled by the Opposition.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): It will be obvious that three people have indicated they wish to take part. I am sure that they will all limit their remarks not to a very small amount, but if they could be limited to six or seven minutes then everyone will get a chance to put their view.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster).

It is my firm belief that the Bill is deeply flawed. Even with the concessions Ministers have made, and the forensic scrutiny and dogged determination of my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) and her Opposition Front-Bench team, as well as those in the other place, the Bill will do very little to help the crisis in our mental health services. Even at this late stage, I would add my name to those of my many colleagues and a plethora of stakeholder organisations urging Ministers to delay the Bill to allow proper deliberation and discussion. Why do I say that?
First, we cannot debate the Bill without a clear sense of the issues at stake. We are talking about the state’s right to remove liberty from a citizen without trial or the judgment of their peers. That goes to the very heart of habeas corpus and our most fundamental human rights. It concerns the very liberties that this Parliament has stood for centuries to defend. When Parliament has played fast and loose with our right to be free from arbitrary imprisonment, the consequences have brought shame upon us, so we must always think very carefully before passing laws that remove a person’s liberty, no matter how compelling we consider the reasons.

Secondly, we must never forget the history of the treatment of people with mental illness in this country. We have a sorry and shameful history of incarcerating people with mental illness, autism, dementia and other conditions. Often the incarceration was unnecessary and cruel, and motivated by malice not medicine. Women in particular could be locked up for so-called “hysteria” when husbands wanted them out of the way. We must tread very carefully.

Thirdly, there is the question of scrutiny of the Bill. We must act only after the deepest of thought and most widespread discussion and consultation. Unfortunately, the Bill has not been subject to the widest consultation and the deepest discussion. The discussion and suggestions that we made in Committee seem to have been largely ignored by the Government. We might have expected Ministers to have learned the lessons from the Health and Social Care Act 2012, which was imposed without consultation and then had to be delayed after its flaws were exposed. It then cost us hundreds of millions of pounds for an unnecessary raft of reckless reforms.

The Bill has been rushed and the consultation with stakeholders has been incomplete. You do not have to take my word for it, Madam Deputy Speaker. Just consider the remarkable open letter issued on Friday 8 February by so many of the organisations closest to the issue: the Voluntary Organisations Disability Group, Disability Rights UK, Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities, Action on Elder Abuse, Dementia Friends, Sense, the National Autistic Society, Royal Society for Blind Children and Mencap, just to mention a few—a very few—of the more than 100 local and national organisations across England and Wales who wrote to the Care Minister and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Baroness Blackwood.

What did this huge coalition of caring organisations come together to say? They raised “serious concerns” and “significant objections”. They called the Department for Health and Social Care’s consultation “piecemeal”. They talked about “serious conflicts of interest”. They highlighted the facts that impact assessments have been late and limited in coverage, and that there is a lack of clarity about how the system will be regulated with independent oversight. They concluded:

“We believe that the reforms in their current guise pose a threat to the human rights of those requiring the greatest support in life.”

A threat to human rights is a serious charge. When so many organisations are making it, surely Ministers must listen and not just plough on regardless?

There is a saying in the disability rights movement: no decisions about us without us. When I served as a trustee of the Alzheimer’s & Dementia Support Services and as a Mencap Society committee member, that was a principle we held dear, yet those in their place on the Treasury Bench are not listening. To be clear with the House, we have a serious problem that needs fixing. We have vulnerable people waiting for months, families at the end of their tethers and mental health and care professionals feeling frustrated, and that is why the system is broken.

5.45 pm

However, one of the many reasons why it is broken—a key reason—is the lack of funding. Our system, for example, is heavily reliant on the use of police cells to detain people with mental health problems, when a police cell should only ever be used to detain someone suspected of committing a crime. Being seriously ill is not a crime. I raised the lack of funding with the Minister on Second Reading, but I am still waiting for reassurance that there will be adequate funding for the new system of liberty protection safeguards to be effective. Quite simply, this cannot be done on the cheap. It cannot be the excuse for yet more cuts.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on a fantastic, very heartfelt and experienced speech. Does he share my concern that the foundations on which this is being laid—primarily on local government—are very weak, with an £8 million funding gap? The Government have not faced up to that crisis yet.

Mr Dhesi: I thank my hon. Friend and I fully agree with him. The cuts to local government have been devastating and the Bill will merely exacerbate the situation.

Finally, we have come a long way in our understanding of mental illness, dementia and neurodiversity. I note with pride that a new group was founded this weekend—the Labour neurodiversity group—to build on the success of our party’s neurodiversity manifesto. We wish the group all the very best. We have made great strides in tackling stigma and prejudice, thanks to the efforts of people such as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), who deserve nothing but praise.

We are learning all the time and our laws must reflect our enlightened attitudes and the latest thinking, not the outdated views of previous eras. I am happy to associate myself with the Labour amendments being discussed this afternoon. If there is one I would highlight, it is the proposed amendment that guarantees a vulnerable person the right to an advocate. In too many cases, they have no one to speak up strongly on their behalf, to articulate their wishes and to champion their best interests. It is surely right that such a person should always be available.

As a member of the Bill Committee, I know that we made some progress in improving the Bill, but I remain unconvinced that it will be enough to rescue this piece of legislation and to provide a fair, workable system that ensures the best possible care for hundreds of thousands of people and guarantees their human rights. Many hon. Members have highlighted the 2017 Law Commission review.
Fiona Bruce: The hon. Gentleman keeps talking about human rights, but what answer does he have for the fact that up to 125,000 people are currently being unlawfully deprived of their liberty, in breach of article 5 of the European convention on human rights? That is the problem that the Bill seeks to rectify.

Mr Dhesi: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, but in terms of human rights, this issue is being raised not just by me, but by more than 100 pre-eminent organisations in the field. The only way to solve that is through funding—that is the only way in which we can lay this matter to rest. The hon. Lady highlighted the 2017 Law Commission review of the deprivation of liberty safeguards, which stated that the current regime is “in crisis and needs to be overhauled.”

I agree. There is a crisis and the current system cannot cope, but surely the answer is not to replace bad laws with yet more bad laws, and that is what we are in danger of doing.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I will be brief. My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) has tabled an excellent amendment, which I support. We know that the system is broken. What we are doing is replacing it with an even worse system. Just to acknowledge how broken the system is, the Alzheimer’s Society’s national dementia helpline receives over 100 calls a month about the Mental Capacity Act, which is clearly confusing and complicated for people with dementia, as well as for their families and carers. However, as we have heard, so many different disability organisations and a whole range of charities, as well as the Law Commission, are saying that this Bill is not fit for purpose.

I particularly support the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda. The Greater Manchester Neuro Alliance, which I have supported for several years now, has several concerns, particularly about a person who presents inconsistently and has a cognitive impairment, mental health problems or is simply vulnerable and does not accept or appreciate their illnesses and the limitations. One member of the alliance from Oldham told me:

“My son has been deemed as having capacity because he can answer questions yes or no but he can’t be left alone or allowed to go out unsupported, he doesn’t take his medication and doesn’t have the ability to plan or manage anything including lifesaving treatment every three weeks”.

Such examples are not addressed in the Bill.

I will move swiftly on, Madam Deputy Speaker. I share the concern that my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) has expressed so clearly about care home managers and the conflict of interest in the Bill. It is a minefield and needs to be addressed. She made that point clearly.

Amendment 48, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), would rightly prevent cared-for people from being charged for the assessments required by the system, potentially providing a financial incentive to do the mental capacity assessments. Without the amendment, we cannot be sure that people will not be charged more for their care solely because they require liberty protection safeguards to be granted. If the Minister does not accept the amendment, I would like to know why. On advocacy, we need to ensure that the “best interests” test is changed to place more weight on a person’s wishes.

There are several other issues with the Bill. It has not had a sufficient airing. It has not been consulted on greatly, but I will hand over to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I had hoped to address several of the amendments signed by my hon. Friends and me, because this is a bad Bill with huge opposition across our society. It fails to protect people adequately, meaning they could be locked up without a proper process of assessment and without advocacy support—and that includes 16 and 17-year-old children. The protections for them are also inadequate, as they are for their parents. Time is against me, however, so I will turn straight to amendment 48, which stands in my name and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams).

There is a genuine concern among organisations in the sector that vulnerable people, particularly those receiving private care, may be charged for an assessment or for assessments to be carried out. I know the Minister got a bit fed up with me banging on about funding and about the fact that local authorities such as mine in Stockton-on-Tees have lost millions of pounds in funding and that budget reductions are continuing across health. I have also addressed the tight margins on which care homes operate and the need to ensure the sector remains viable.

We know that the sector is strained financially and might feel it has no choice but to implement fees and charges for the assessment of clients’ mental capacity. The intention of the amendment is to ensure that this does not happen. Several written submissions to the Public Bill Committee raised concerns about the absence of any provision for a fee for medical professionals to provide medical evidence.

This is the right point to refer to the revised impact assessment published by the Government. I and other Opposition Members have been contacted by academics accusing the assessment of perpetuating a myth by saying that GPs will provide diagnostic evidence and conduct capacity assessments for the LPS and that this will have no resource implications. What total nonsense. How has this conclusion been reached? I have not heard from a single body or GP arguing it will have no resource implications—quite the opposite.

The experience of judicial DoLS applications to the Court of Protection seems to be that GPs are very reluctant to provide such evidence, either because they do not feel skilled enough to do so or because they require payment. This means that someone will have to pay a fee for the medical assessment, and there is nothing in the Bill or the NHS charging regulations to prevent it from being passed on to the person themselves.

Evidence shows that that is already happening. Southfield House, a care home in Stockport, was found to be charging residents £250 if they required a deprivation of liberty authorisation. A complaint was lodged with the Care Quality Commission by Edge Training, but it was told in response that that was allowed. What was that £250 for? “An application to the local authority requesting an assessment” appears to cover it—and after that, there was the £125 annual fee. Individuals who are going
through what can only be an extremely emotionally
difficult process are being charged hundreds of pounds
for the luxury.

It is frustrating that the care home is well within its
rights to make those charges. A spokesman put it best:
"The social care sector...is currently under huge financial
pressure. All tasks from care to admin to facility carry a cost".
Because the sector is underfunded, the Government
consider it appropriate to take financial advantage of
the most vulnerable people in society.

I do not intend to press the amendment to a vote, but I
think that the Minister must take on board the whole
issue of charges. At present, the law gives care home
managers and others carte blanche to charge exactly what
they want. There are no limitations whatsoever. I ask the
Minister, perhaps at the regulations stage, to come back
with specific ideas to restrict care home managers and
others from exploiting those vulnerable people.

Chris Bryant: I was expecting my hon. Friend the Member
for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) to go on a bit
longer, but now that I have the Floor, let me say this.
There is quite a bit of consensus, certainly among
Labour Members, that there are elements of the Bill
with which we are not happy, and I am sure that we will
vote on those in a few moments. What the Minister said
earlier makes me hopeful that she will do her level best
to ensure that the way in which the needs of people with
acquired brain injuries can be met will be clearly laid
out in the code of conduct. As my hon. Friend the Member
for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) said, some of the issues are very specific to
them; they are different from those affecting other
people in the same category.

The deprivation of liberty is one of the most important
issues that Parliament ever has to consider. We all
accept that, and it was referred to by both the Minister
and my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles
South (Barbara Keeley). I hope that we manage to get
the code of conduct right, at the right time, and that the
process we use ensures that as many as possible of the
users, patients, carers and organisations that are involved
in this matter on a daily basis have a real opportunity to
feel that they can own that code. I think that that is the
point at which the Minister might manage to assuage
some of our concerns, although some Labour concerns
are extremely strong.

As I told the Minister yesterday, I do not intend to
press my amendment to a vote. She is smiling now. I
therefore beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Question put and agreed to.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With
the leave of the House, I propose to put Government
amendments 5 to 37 together.

Schedule 1

SCHEDULE TO BE INSERTED AS
SCHEDULE AA1 TO THE MENTAL
CAPACITY ACT 2005

Amendments made: 5, page 8, line 6, leave out from
"Wales," to end of line 10 and insert
"the person registered, or required to be registered, under Chapter 2
of Part 1 of the Regulation and Inspection of Social Care (Wales)
Act 2016 (anaw 2) in respect of the provision of a care home
service, in the care home;".

This amendment amends the definition of "care home manager", in
Wales, so it will be the person who is the registered service provider.
This mirrors the approach taken for England.

Amendment 6, page 8, line 13, at end insert—
""Education, Health and Care plan" means a plan
within the meaning of section 37(2) of the
Children and Families Act 2014;"

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 22.

Amendment 7, page 8, leave out line 16

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 13.

Amendment 8, page 8, line 17, at end insert—
""independent hospital" has the meaning given by
paragraph 5;"

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 13.

Amendment 9, page 8, line 27, at end insert—
""NHS hospital" has the meaning given by paragraph
5;"

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 13.

Amendment 10, page 8, line 46, leave out "Hospital"
and insert "NHS hospital and independent hospital".

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 13.

Amendment 11, page 8, leave out line 47.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 13.

Amendment 12, page 9, line 15, after "6" insert "(1)".

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 18.

Amendment 13, page 9, line 16, leave out "a" and
insert "an NHS".

This amendment amends paragraph 6(a) so that where
arrangements are carried out mainly in an independent hospital the
responsible body for those arrangements will not be the hospital
manager.

Amendment 14, page 9, line 17, at end insert—

(aa) if the arrangements are carried out mainly in an
independent hospital in England, the responsible local
authority determined in accordance with paragraph 8A;

(ab) if the arrangements are carried out mainly in an
independent hospital in Wales, the Local Health
Board for the area in which the hospital is situated;"

This amendment makes provision for who the responsible body will be
for cases where arrangements are carried out mainly in an independent hospital in England or Wales.

Amendment 15, page 9, line 18, leave out "paragraph (a)
does not apply" and insert "none of paragraphs (a) to
(ab) applies".

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 14.

Amendment 16, page 9, line 27, leave out "neither paragraph (a) nor paragraph (b)" and insert "none of paragraphs (a) to (b)"

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 14.

Amendment 17, page 9, line 28, leave out "(see paragraph 9)" and insert
"determined in accordance with paragraph 9;"

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 14.

Amendment 18, page 9, line 28, at end insert—

'(2) If an independent hospital is situated in the areas of two
or more Local Health Boards, it is to be regarded for the
purposes of sub-paragraph (1)(ab) as situated in whichever of
the areas the greater (or greatest) part of the hospital is situated."

This amendment provides that, for the purpose of determining who
is the responsible body, if a hospital is situated in the areas of two
Amendment 19, page 9, line 29, after “manager” insert “, in relation to an NHS hospital.”.
This amendment is consequential on Amendment 13.
Amendment 20, page 9, line 45, at end insert—

(ca) if the hospital is vested in a Local Health Board, that Board.

This amendment makes provision that the hospital manager for an NHS hospital vested in a Local Health Board will be that Board.
Amendment 21, page 9, line 46, leave out from beginning to end of line 12 on page 10
This amendment is consequential on Amendment 13.
Amendment 22, page 10, line 20, at end insert—

8A (1) In paragraph 6(1)(aa), “responsible local authority”, in relation to a cared-for person aged 18 or over, means—

(a) if there is an Education, Health and Care plan for the cared-for person, the local authority responsible for maintaining that plan;
(b) if paragraph (a) does not apply and the cared-for person has needs for care and support which are being met under Part 1 of the Care Act 2014, the local authority meeting those needs;
(c) in any other case, the local authority determined in accordance with sub-paragraph (4).

(2) If more than one local authority is meeting the needs of a cared-for person for care and support under Part 1 of the Care Act 2014 the responsible local authority is the local authority for the area in which the cared-for person is ordinarily resident for the purposes of that Part of that Act.

(3) In paragraph 6(1)(aa), “responsible local authority”, in relation to a cared-for person aged 16 or 17, means—

(a) if there is an Education, Health and Care plan for the cared-for person, the local authority responsible for maintaining that plan;
(b) if paragraph (a) does not apply and the cared-for person is being provided with accommodation under section 31 of the Children Act 1989, the local authority providing that accommodation;
(c) if neither paragraph (a) nor paragraph (b) applies and the cared-for person is subject to a care order under section 31 of the Children Act 1989 or an interim care order under section 38 of that Act, and a local authority in England is responsible under the order for the care of the cared-for person, that local authority;
(d) if none of paragraphs (a) to (c) applies, the local authority determined in accordance with sub-paragraph (4).

(4) In the cases mentioned in sub-paragraphs (1)(c) and (3)(d), the “responsible local authority” is the local authority for the area in which the independent hospital mentioned in paragraph 6(1)(aa) is situated.

(5) If an independent hospital is situated in the areas of two or more local authorities, it is to be regarded for the purposes of sub-paragraph (4) as situated in whichever of the areas the greater (or greatest) part of the hospital is situated.”
This amendment makes provision as to who the responsible body will be in cases where arrangements are carried out mainly in an independent hospital in England.
Amendment 23, page 11, leave out lines 45 to 47.
This amendment is consequential on Amendment 22.
Amendment 24, page 12, line 19, at end insert—

12A (1) The following must publish information about authorisation of arrangements under this Schedule—

(a) the hospital manager of each NHS hospital;
(b) each clinical commissioning group;
(c) each Local Health Board;
(d) each local authority.

(2) The information must include information on the following matters in particular—

(a) the effect of an authorisation;
(b) the process for authorising arrangements, including making or carrying out—

(i) assessments and determinations required under paragraphs 18 and 19;
(ii) consultation under paragraph 20;
(iii) a pre-authorisation review (see paragraphs 21 to 23);
(c) the circumstances in which an independent mental capacity advocate should be appointed under paragraph 39 or 40;
(d) the role of a person within paragraph 39(5) (an “appropriate person”) in relation to a cared-for person and the effect of there being an appropriate person;
(e) the circumstances in which a pre-authorisation review is to be carried out by an Approved Mental Capacity Professional under paragraph 21;
(f) the right to make an application to the court to exercise its jurisdiction under section 21ZA;
(g) reviews under paragraph 35, including—

(i) when a review will be carried out;
(ii) the rights to request a review;
(iii) the circumstances in which a referral may or will be made to an Approved Mental Capacity Professional.

(3) The information must be accessible to, and appropriate to the needs of, cared-for persons and appropriate persons.

12B (1) Where arrangements are proposed, the responsible body must as soon as practicable take such steps as are practicable to ensure that—

(a) the cared-for person, and
(b) any appropriate person in relation to the cared-for person,
understands the matters mentioned in sub-paragraph (3).

(2) If, subsequently, at any time while the arrangements are being proposed the responsible body becomes satisfied under paragraph 39(5) that a person is an appropriate person in relation to the cared-for person, the responsible body must, as soon as practicable, take such steps as are practicable to ensure that the appropriate person understands the matters mentioned in sub-paragraph (3).

(3) Those matters are—

(a) the nature of the arrangements, and
(b) the matters mentioned in paragraph 12A(2) as they apply in relation to the cared-for person's case.

(4) If it is not appropriate to take steps to ensure that the cared-for person or any appropriate person understands a particular matter then, to that extent, the duties in sub-paragraphs (1) and (2) do not apply.

(5) In this paragraph “appropriate person”, in relation to a cared-for person, means a person within paragraph 39(5).”
This amendment inserts new paragraphs 12A and 12B of the new Schedule AA1 to require responsible bodies to publish information about authorisation of arrangements under the Schedule and to take steps at the outset of the authorisation process to ensure that cared-for persons and appropriate persons understand the process.
Amendment 25, page 12, line 32, after “practicable” insert “and appropriate, having regard to the steps taken under paragraph 12B and the length of time since they were taken.”.
This amendment amends the duty in paragraph 13(2) of the new Schedule AA1 for a responsible body to take steps, as soon as arrangements are authorised, to ensure that cared-for persons and appropriate persons understand matters relating to the
Amendment 26, page 12, line 33, leave out from “any” to “understands” in line 34 and insert “appropriate person”.

This amendment amends the duty in paragraph 13(2) so that the duty to ensure that cared-for persons and appropriate persons understand matters relating to an authorisation does not also apply to independent mental capacity advocates (who can be expected to understand those matters in line with the new duty in paragraph 12B (inserted by Amendment 24).

Amendment 27, page 12, line 34, leave out from “understands” to end of line 5 on page 13 and insert “the matters mentioned in paragraph 12A(2)(a), (c), (d), (f) and (g) as they apply in relation to the cared-for person’s case”.

This amendment aligns the description of matters that must be explained to the cared-for person and any appropriate person with the list of matters in new paragraph 12A (inserted by Amendment 24).

Amendment 28, page 14, line 46, at end insert—

‘(1A) The person who makes the determination need not be the same as the person who carries out the assessment.’

This amendment makes it clear that a determination need not be made by the same person who carries out an assessment. A person could, for example, make a determination based on an assessment carried out previously by a different person (paragraph 18(6) of the new Schedule AAI allows for this).

Amendment 29, page 14, leave out lines 47 and 48 and insert—

‘(2) The appropriate authority may by regulations make provision for requirements which must be met by a person—

(a) making a determination, or

(b) carrying out an assessment,

under this paragraph.

(2A) Regulations under sub-paragraph (2) may make different provision—

(a) for determinations and assessments, and

(b) for determinations and assessments required under sub-paragraph (1)(a) and determinations and assessments required under sub-paragraph (1)(b).’

This amendment provides power to make regulations setting out requirements which must be met for a person to make a determination or carry out an assessment. The requirements will relate to matters such as knowledge and experience. Different requirements may be set out for a person making a determination than a person carrying out an assessment.

Amendment 30, page 15, line 12, after “the” insert “determination or”.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 29.

Amendment 31, page 15, line 14, after “the” insert “determination or”.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 29.

Amendment 32, page 15, line 16, leave out “The” and insert “An”.

This amendment is to make it clear that the assessment being referred to is an assessment on which a determination under the paragraph is made.

Amendment 33, page 15, line 32, leave out “made on an assessment” and insert “by a person, who meets requirements prescribed by regulations made by the appropriate authority, made on an assessment by that person”.

This amendment is to make it clear that a determination required under paragraph 19 of the new Schedule AAI must be made by the same person who carries out the assessment on which that determination is based and that person must meet requirements set out in regulations.

Amendment 34, page 15, leave out lines 38 to 44.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 33.

Amendment 35, page 15, line 46, leave out from “16,” to “by” in line 1 on page 16 and insert “a determination may not be made”.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 33.

Amendment 36, page 16, line 7, leave out “assessment” and insert “determination”.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 33.

Amendment 37, page 16, line 9, leave out “assessment” and insert “determination”.—(Caroline Dinenage.)

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 33.

Amendment proposed: 49, page 16, line 12, leave out from “out” to the end of line 16, and insert “by the responsible body.”—(Barbara Keeley.)

This amendment would require the responsible body to carry out the consultation in all cases.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 252, Noes 303.

Division No. 325

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amess, Mike
Antoniassi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neil
Creagh, Mary
Greasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John

Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nic
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Gairant
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debonnaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodd, Anneliese
Dougherty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edward, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fitpatrick, Jim
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Heron, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hiller, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollobone, Kate
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killean, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly (Proxy vote cast by Mark Tami)
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorran, Anna
Miliband, rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Norris, Alex
Onn, Melanie
Onurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, rh Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Vineendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, rh Mr Gavin
Siddiqi, Tulip (Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft)
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Elijah
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeling, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Tami, rh Mark
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Colleen Fletcher and Stephanie Peacock

NOES
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Downing, Oliver
Drey, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evnett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Frer, Mike
Fysh, rh Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garner, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Naz
Gis, Fr John
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83E).

Amendment made: 38, page 16, line 13, leave out from second “arrangements” to end of line 14 and insert “and—
(i) authorisation is being determined under paragraph 16, or
(ii) renewal is being determined under paragraph 32, by”.—[Caroline Dinenage.]

This amendment is to make it clear that consultation under paragraph 20 of the new Schedule AAI for the purposes of renewal of authorisation under paragraph 32 of that Schedule is to be by the care home manager.

Amendment proposed: 50, page 17, line 13, at end insert—
“(ca) the arrangements are being authorised under paragraph 16 of this Schedule; or”—[Barbara Keeley.]

This amendment would require an AMCP to review all cases where the responsible body is authorising arrangements based on a statement provided by a care home manager.

Question put. That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 249, Noes 301.

**Division No. 326**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AYES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abbott, rh Ms Diane</td>
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<td>Abrahams, Debbie</td>
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<td>Ali, Rushanara</td>
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<td>Alin-Khan, Dr Rosena</td>
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<td>Amesbury, Mike</td>
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<td>Antoniazzi, Tonia</td>
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<td>Ashworth, Jonathan</td>
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<td>Bailey, Mr Adrian</td>
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<td>Baron, rh Sir Kevin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beckett, rh Margaret</td>
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<tr>
<td>Benn, rh Hilary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Tellers for the Ayes:**

Wendy Morton and Iain Stewart

**Question accordingly negatived.**

6.15 pm

Proceedings interrupted (Programme Order, 18 December).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83E).

Amendment made: 38, page 16, line 13, leave out from second “arrangements” to end of line 14 and insert “and—
(i) authorisation is being determined under paragraph 16, or
(ii) renewal is being determined under paragraph 32, by”.—[Caroline Dinenage.]

This amendment is to make it clear that consultation under paragraph 20 of the new Schedule AAI for the purposes of renewal of authorisation under paragraph 32 of that Schedule is to be by the care home manager.

Amendment proposed: 50, page 17, line 13, at end insert—
“(ca) the arrangements are being authorised under paragraph 16 of this Schedule; or”—[Barbara Keeley.]

This amendment would require an AMCP to review all cases where the responsible body is authorising arrangements based on a statement provided by a care home manager.

Question put. That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 249, Noes 301.
Hayes, Helen
Harris, Carolyn
Harman, Ms Harriet
Hardy, Emma
Harman, Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Harman, Ms Harriet
Hardy, Emma
Harman, Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Norris, Alex
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip (Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft)
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Solom, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Tami, rh Mark
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Ayes:**
Colleen Fletcher and Stephanie Peacock

**NOES**
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breeroton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Briune, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverty, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Question accordingly negatived.

Amendments made: 39, page 18, line 7, after “being” insert—

“, and the responsible body for the time being,”

This amendment is to clarify that the responsible body in relation to a cared-for person may change during the lifetime of an authorisation and, if it does, that change is to be recorded in the authorisation record.

Amendment 40, page 20, leave out line 45 and insert—

(a) on a variation under paragraph 34;”

This amendment ensures that a review will take place on a variation under paragraph 34.
Amendment 41, page 21, line 7, after “(4)” insert “or (5A)”.
This provides for a duty to carry out a review in the circumstances described in the new sub-paragraph (5A) (inserted by Amendment 44).
Amendment 42, page 21, line 10, at end insert—
“(3A) A review under sub-paragraph (3)(a) must be carried out before the authorisation is varied or, if that is not practicable or appropriate, as soon as practicable afterwards.”
This amendment provides that a review under sub-paragraph (3)(a) must be carried out before the authorisation is varied, or if that is not practicable or appropriate, it must be carried out as soon as possible after variation.
Amendment 43, page 21, line 18, leave out from “paragraph” to end of line 19 and insert—
“(2) The cared-for person makes a request to the responsible body for an IMCA to be appointed.

Paragraph 39 and 40 and insert—
“(5A) ‘paragraph’ to end of line 19 and insert—
(5A) “. This amendment expands the duty to refer to an Approved Mental Capacity Professional on a review so it applies in certain cases where a pre-authorisation review under paragraph 21 of the new Schedule AA1 has been carried out by an Approved Mental Capacity Professional.
Amendment 44, page 21, line 26, at end insert—
“(5A) This sub-paragraph applies where sub-paragraph (4) does not apply and—
(a) the arrangements provide for the cared-for person to reside in, or to receive care or treatment at, a specified place,
(b) a relevant person informs thereviewer or (if the reviewer is not the responsible body) the responsible body that they believe that the cared-for person does not wish to reside in, or to receive care or treatment at, that place, and
(c) the relevant person makes a reasonable request to the person informed under paragraph (b) for a review to be carried out.

(5B) In sub-paragraph (5A) “relevant person” means a person engaged in caring for the cared-for person or a person interested in the cared-for person’s welfare.”
This amendment provides for an additional situation which will trigger a duty to review an authorisation.
Amendment 45, page 21, line 32, at end insert—
“(7A) On any review where sub-paragraph (5A) applies, the reviewer or (if the reviewer is not the responsible body) the responsible body may refer the authorisation to an Approved Mental Capacity Professional and, if the Approved Mental Capacity Professional accepts the referral, the Approved Mental Capacity Professional must determine whether the authorisation conditions are met.”
Where a duty to review arises due to the new sub-paragraph (5A) (inserted by Amendment 44) this amendment provides for a power to refer the authorisation to an Approved Mental Capacity Professional.
Amendment 46, page 21, line 33, after “determination” insert “mentioned in sub-paragraph (7) or (7A)”.
This amendment is consequential on Amendment 45.
Amendment proposed: 51, page 23, line 1, leave out paragraphs 39 and 40 and insert—
“(1) The responsible body must appoint an IMCA to represent and support the cared-for person if—
(a) one or more of sub-paragraphs (2), (3), (4) or (5) applies, and
(b) sub-paragraph (6) does not apply.
(2) The cared-for person makes a request to the responsible body for an IMCA to be appointed.
(3) The responsible body has not identified an “appropriate person” to support and represent the cared-for person in matters connected with the authorisation.
(4) The responsible body has identified an “appropriate person” to support and represent the cared for person in matters connected with the authorisation, and they have made a request to the responsible body for an IMCA to be appointed.
(5) The responsible body has reason to believe one or more of the following—
(a) that, without the help of an IMCA, the cared-for person and any appropriate person supporting and representing them would be unable to understand or exercise one or more of the relevant rights;
(b) that the cared-for person and any appropriate person supporting and representing them have each failed to exercise a relevant right when it would have been reasonable to exercise it;
(c) that the cared for person and any appropriate person supporting and representing them are each unlikely to exercise a relevant right when it would be reasonable to exercise it.
(6) The cared-for person objects to being represented and supported by an IMCA.
(7) A person is not to be regarded as an “appropriate person” to represent and support the cared-for person in matters connected with this schedule unless—
(a) they consent to representing and supporting the cared-for person,
(b) they are not engaged in providing care or treatment for the cared-for person in a professional capacity,
(c) where the cared-for person is able to express a view about who they would like to represent and support them, the cared-for person agree to being represented and supported by that person,
(d) where the cared-for person is unable to express a view about who they would like to represent and support them, the responsible body has no reason to believe that the cared-for person would object to being represented and supported by that person,
(e) they are both willing and able to assist the cared-for person in understanding and exercising the relevant rights under this Schedule, including with the support of an IMCA if appropriate.
(8) The “relevant rights” under this schedule include rights to request a review under Part III of this Schedule, and the right to make an application to the court to exercise its jurisdiction under section 21ZA of this Act.”.—[Barbara Keeley.] This amendment would broaden the provision of advocacy, ensuring that advocates are provided as a default unless the cared-for person does not want one.

Question put. That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 249, Noes 300.

Division No. 327 [6.30 pm]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniacci, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blomfield, Paul

Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Ciwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Coyle, Neil
Creagh, Mary
Cresay, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummings, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nic
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Elford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flinth, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gill, Prêt Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollett, Kate
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keelley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly (Proxy vote cast by Mark Tami)
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Maraden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
Mckinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorran, Anna
Meares, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Norris, Rhod
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Jo
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip (Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft)
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smethurst, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stammer, rh Keir
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Tami, rh Mark
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timmings, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Stephanie Peacock and Colleen Fletcher

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afroimi, Bin
Afrinie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Msimi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Baron, Mr John
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, rh Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Bretherton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carling, James
Cauflfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey

Tellers for the NOES:

Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stammer, rh Keir
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Tami, rh Mark
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timmings, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
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Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the AYES: Stephanie Peacock and Colleen Fletcher

NOES:

Braverman, Suella
Bretherton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carling, James
Cauflfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey

Tellers for the NOES:

Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stammer, rh Keir
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Tami, rh Mark
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timmings, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the AYES: Stephanie Peacock and Colleen Fletcher

NOES:

Braverman, Suella
Bretherton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carling, James
Cauflfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
The Division bells will be rung two minutes before the House will now suspend the House for no more than five minutes to allow Chaucer to be subject to the arrangements.

Please note: where requirements that apply in relation to the person who is to be appointed under the new Schedule AA1 if there are no "mental health requirements", these arrangements cannot be subject to the arrangements.

This amendment is to make it clear that arrangements can be subject to the arrangements:—

(1A) And, for the purposes of this Schedule, arrangements which relate to a person are "not in accordance with mental health requirements" if the person is subject to mental health requirements and the arrangements are not in accordance with them.

The Division bells will be rung two minutes before the House is suspended for no more than five minutes in order to make a decision about certification. The Division bells will be rung two minutes before the House is suspended for no more than five minutes in order to make a decision about certification.
House resumes. Following my certification, the Government will table the appropriate consent motion, copies of which will be made available in the Vote Office and will be distributed by Doorkeepers.

6.43 pm
Sitting suspended.

6.47 pm

Mr Speaker: I can now inform the House that I have completed certification of the Bill, as required by the Standing Order. I have confirmed the view expressed in my provisional certificate issued on 11 February. Copies of my final certificate will be made available in the Vote Office and on the parliamentary website.

Under Standing Order No. 83M, a consent motion is therefore required for the Bill to proceed. Copies of the motion are available in the Vote Office and on the parliamentary website and have been made available to Members in the Chamber. Does the Minister intend to move the consent motion?

Caroline Dinenage indicated assent.

The House forthwith resolved itself into the Legislative Grand Committee (England and Wales) (Standing Order No. 83M).

[DAME ELEANOR LAING IN THE CHAIR]

6.48 pm

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): As the knife has fallen, there can be no debate in the Legislative Grand Committee. I remind hon. Members that, if there is a Division on the consent motion, only Members representing constituencies in England and Wales may vote.

Resolved.

That the Committee consents to the Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill [Lords] as amended in the Public Bill Committee and on Report.—(Caroline Dinenage.)

The occupant of the Chair left the Chair to report the decision of the Committee (Standing Order No. 83M(6)).

The Speaker resumed the Chair; decision reported.

Third Reading

6.50 pm

Caroline Dinenage: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Our liberty is the most fundamental of our human rights. By passing this Bill, we can be proud that we have helped to promote the human rights of our country's most vulnerable people and increased access to protections for the 125,000 individuals who are being deprived of their liberty and are not receiving the safeguards they deserve. That means 125,000 people whose families do not have the peace of mind that their loved ones are being protected, and 125,000 care providers who do not have the requisite legal protection.

Members of both Houses have contributed to the discussions and debates on this Bill, for which I am extremely grateful. We have made changes in both Houses to ensure that the liberty protection safeguards system introduced by the Bill does everything possible to protect human rights—to give a voice to the person and those close to them—while also ensuring that the system is targeted and not cumbersome to people, their families and our health and care sector. I committed from the outset that we would collaborate on this Bill, listen and take on board all the ideas and feelings of stakeholders and Members from both Houses, and many of the amendments we have put forward today are exactly in that collaborative spirit.

Dr Poulter: I thank my hon. Friend for the conciliatory way in which she has gone about dealing with this Bill, engaging with colleagues on both sides of the Houses, and putting forward some good and sound amendments to get the Bill to a better place. However, on the issue of funding, which was raised during the debate earlier, if we are going to make social care legislation or legislation of this sort appropriate and have the right safeguards in place, we need local authorities to have a better funding settlement. Is that something she can take away and raise with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government?

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. I am grateful to him for all his feedback on this Bill, because it is very helpful to be able to speak to somebody from a medical background to understand how such a Bill will work in practice at the sharp end. We have given councils access to £10 billion over this three-year period, which just shows the scale of the issues we are facing in adult social care. The Green Paper that will be published shortly will go further in setting out the long-term sustainability of the sector.

As we have heard today, there is no question but that the current DoLS system is failing. In 2014, a House of Lords Committee identified the system as being complex and bureaucratic, and since then the situation has only got worse. An increased number of cases means that local authorities are unable to process all the applications. With more than 48,000 people now waiting over a year, we cannot risk people being subject to overly restrictive health and care practices. This new system will enable quicker access to safeguards, meaning that we can ensure less restrictive practices are being used.

The Government tasked the Law Commission with reviewing the DoLS system and recommending improvements. After more than three years of careful work and consultation, it published its report, which stated the urgent need for reform. That was followed by a report from the Joint Committee on Human Rights, which also recommended having a more targeted system by focusing resources on those who are the most vulnerable or those who have the most complex circumstances, and on cases where objections have been raised. Coupled with this, we have ensured robust safeguards in the system, including independent review and oversight, alongside access to representation and support.

I am grateful to all our partners who have worked with us on this Bill. The input of third sector groups, those who work in the health and care sector and of course those who receive safeguards themselves has all helped to shape our Bill for the better. The Law Commission was absolutely right when it said that DoLS needed to be replaced as a matter of urgency, and that is why we have brought this legislation forward now. We cannot
continue with the current system. We are proud to bring forward the Law Commission's recommendations in this Bill, and we are proud to reform the system and introduce a less bureaucratic, more personalised approach that will work better for people, their families and professionals. I commend this Bill to the House.

6.54 pm

Barbara Keeley: It is appalling that we should have had less than two hours for Report stage of a Bill affecting the human rights of some 2 million vulnerable people who lack capacity—and we had less than two hours for Second Reading. Given that there is no appreciable business to occupy ourselves with next week, it is ludicrous that the Government should have forced the Bill through today.

The Bill that we are being asked to pass today is simply not fit for purpose; it simply replaces the current flawed system, which the Minister has just described, with a new one that is actually more flawed. There are a number of issues that we still consider unacceptable. The largest is that the Bill still creates a major conflict of interest in relation to the managers of private care homes. It is simply wrong that a business with a financial stake in seeing a deprivation of liberty authorisation granted can do all the legwork and then just have its recommendation rubber-stamped by the local council.

I hope that care home managers will seek to carry out their new role well, but we know that they are already overstretched. The Bill creates extra pressures.

Norman Lamb: Does the shadow Minister share my confusion and concern that the Mental Health Act review, which the Government commissioned, appears to be moving in one direction—strengthening the rights of individuals—while this Bill appears to be moving in precisely the opposite direction?

Barbara Keeley: That is very much the case. We asked on Second Reading for some consideration of the interface between the two.

As well as the issue of care home managers, there is a real concern about the restrictions on access to advocacy under the Bill. Advocacy is a fundamental pillar of any system for authorising deprivation of liberty. The Bill means that vulnerable people who need an advocate may not get one, and amendments that could have changed that have been rejected. The use of a best interest test to decide whether someone gets an advocate has been widely criticised. The Government could and should have removed the reliance on the best interest test.

The maximum renewal period of a deprivation of liberty authorisation is tripled by the Bill. As the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) said, the Mental Health Act review is moving in one way while this Bill moves in another. The Bill could see people being detained for three years at a time without a full reconsideration of their case. The only safeguard against that being misused is a series of regular reviews, but we do not know how regular those will be or what they will look like.

In Committee, the Government introduced a new definition of deprivation of liberty to the Bill. It is woefully inadequate and will inevitably result in costly litigation. The Government introduced the definition late on, with next to no consultation. The clashes between that definition and existing case law will lead to court challenges. The definition will see some people deprived of their liberty without the safeguards they need, while the issue is sorted out in the courts.

The process that the Bill has been through could be used as a case study of how not to make legislation.

Alex Cunningham: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Barbara Keeley: I do not have time, I am afraid.

The Government have consistently tried to push the Bill through as fast as they can, with minimal consultation. It should be clear that stakeholders are united in thinking this a poor piece of legislation, and on many issues the Government have failed to address their concerns. On Second Reading in the House of Lords we heard the Bill described by Baroness Barker as “one of the worst pieces of legislation ever brought before this House.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 11 December 2018; Vol. 794, c. 1247.]

The Bill may have improved slightly, but there has been too little progress for us to support its becoming law. It would enshrine a fundamental conflict of interest and weaken the current safeguards of people without capacity.

It was clear from the start that the Bill was intended to shift the costs of authorising deprivation of liberty away from the state and on to private providers. This matter is too important for us to pass a Bill that we know will not work properly simply because Government budget cuts have created a problem. The Government chose to continue to cut local council budgets; as a result of that lack of resourcing, tens of thousands of people are being deprived of their liberty without authorisation. Letting the backlog build up was a political choice, but this Bill is not a solution. It will not adequately protect people’s human rights, and replacing one bad system with another will not be progress. If the Government were serious about protecting people’s liberty, Ministers would have paused the Bill, which we called on them again today to do, and given local authorities the resources they need to address the backlog. They could then have given this matter the time, consultation and consideration it needs before beginning a new Bill that does not weaken the protections that vulnerable people rely on.

I thank members of the Public Bill Committee, our excellent Whip, all the hon. Members who contributed to this shortened debate tonight and, particularly, the Clerk to the Committee. I urge right hon. and hon. Members to join us in voting against this flawed piece of proposed legislation that undermines the human rights of vulnerable people who lack capacity.

Question put. That the Bill be now read the Third time.


Division No. 328

AYES

Adams, Nigel  
Afroimi, Bim  
Afinjé, Adam  
Aldous, Peter  
Allan, Lucy  
Allen, Heidi  
Amess, Sir David  
Andrew, Stuart  

ARGAR, Edward  
Atkins, Victoria  
Bacon, Mr Richard  
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi  
Baker, Mr Steve  
Baldwin, Harriett  
Baron, Sir John  
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Brearet, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Bums, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Caims, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cautilfield, Maria
Challen, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Cleerey, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Ann
Coffey, Dr Therese
Colburn, Glyn
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelain, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evannett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gilb, rh Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damien
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gjmiah, Mr Sam
Hair, Spen
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harrison, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damien
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkins, Sir Bernard
Jenkins, David
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Loresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Maesterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
Mcloughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sherryl
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Paisley, Ian
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pauwsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pouw, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, rh Mark
Purseglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, rh Laurence
Robertson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Angela
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Sturdy, Julian
Sunnak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warnham, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy

Tellers for the Ayes:

Wendy Morton and
Iain Stewart
Bill read the Third time and passed, with amendments.

Business Without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 4 to 10 together.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ANIMALS)

That the draft Farriers and Animal Health (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 13 December 2018, be approved.
That the draft Veterinary Surgeons and Animal Welfare (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 13 December 2018, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION
(PUBLIC PROCUREMENT)
That the draft Defence and Security Public Contracts (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 13 December 2018, be approved.

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE
That the draft Representation of the People (Election Expenses Exclusion) (Amendment) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 17 December 2018, be approved.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT
That the draft Combined Authorities (Mayoral Elections) (Amendment) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 12 December 2018, be approved.

That the draft Local Authorities (Mayoral Elections) (England and Wales) (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 12 December 2018, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION
(ENERGY CONSERVATION)
That the draft Ecodesign for Energy-Related Products and Energy Information (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 19 December 2018, be approved.—[Jeremy Quin.]

Question agreed to.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION
(INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY)
That the draft Intellectual Property (Copyright and Related Rights) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 19 December 2018, be approved.—[Jeremy Quin.]

The Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 13 February (Standing Order No. 41A).

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

NORTHERN IRELAND
That the draft Northern Ireland (Ministerial Appointment Functions) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 9 January, be approved.—[Jeremy Quin.]

Question agreed to.

Mr Speaker: I propose, with the leave of the House, to take motions 14 and 15 together.

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

SOCIAL SECURITY
That the draft Social Security (Contributions) (Rates, Limits and Thresholds Amendments and National Insurance Funds Payments) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 16 January, be approved.—[Jeremy Quin.]

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS
Roadside littering from vehicles

7.14 pm

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): This is no nostrum of an idea. The petitioners are supported by notable local organisations: Denny & Dunipace Heritage Society, the Communities Along the Carron Association, Community Green Initiative, and Forth Environment Link.

The petition of the residents of Falkirk constituencies declares that roadside litter discarded from moving vehicles is an unacceptable blight in our communities and increases risk to other motorists and costs to local authorities and private business; further that it causes flooding in drainage infrastructure, causes disruption to normal traffic flow and is a national embarrassment, specifically to the tourist industry; and further that it contradicts the sustainable, renewable and green ambitions the communities of Falkirk desire.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department for Transport to instruct the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) to issue penalty points on the driving licenses of individuals who allow litter to be thrown from their vehicle.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Community Energy Savings Programme: Lowestoft

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of 65 residents and homeowners. It relates to the poor quality of insulation work carried out in properties in Lowestoft by Mitie Property Services as part of a Government-backed community energy savings programme, which is causing considerable personal distress and is having a negative impact on the value and saleability of dwellings.

The petition states, “The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to set up a means whereby each house be assessed by an external specialist ECO assessor and we obtain redress for our individual issues, compensation for financial losses and have assurance our homes can be insured without penalties.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

The petition of residents of Lowestoft, Suffolk,

Declares that roadside litter discarded from moving vehicles is an unacceptable blight in our communities and increases risk to other motorists and costs to local authorities and private business; further that it causes flooding in drainage infrastructure, causes disruption to normal traffic flow and is a national embarrassment, specifically to the tourist industry; and further that it contradicts the sustainable, renewable and green ambitions the communities of Falkirk desire.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department for Transport to instruct the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) to issue penalty points on the driving licenses of individuals who allow litter to be thrown from their vehicle.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[The petition of residents of Lowestoft, Suffolk,

Declares that the Community Energy Savings Programme is causing us significant suffering: accruing detriments to our finances, health and wellbeing, and private and family lives; further that residents of Lowestoft particular grievance is with the standard of external wall insulation installed to certain properties as part of the Community Energy Saving Programme 2009 - 2012 (CESP); further that the CESP was a Government policy, set down in legislation, designed to improve domestic energy efficiency standards in the most deprived geographical areas across Great Britain; further notes that many vulnerable residents are having to live with the impact on our homes from the premature deterioration of the very poor installations; further notes that there is no evidence of appropriate training certification for the external wall cladding insulation and thus many residents are unable to obtain a valid guarantee/warranty which has affected the value of our homes and at worst has meant homes cannot be sold; further that the GCS Chartered Surveyors who were instructed to comment on the standard and workmanship
of the external wall insulations have concluded that the external wall insulations do not meet system designer and BBA specification; further that the GCS Chartered Surveyors found the insulations were installed by MITIE Property Services who did not have approvals in place to install the system at the time; further that many partners are responsible for the failure of this programme including: MITIE Property Services, The Bright Green Lowestoft Organization, Waveney District Council, Suffolk Climate Change Partnership, Climate Energy Limited and npower; further that whilst the project was delivered by the main contractors, MITIE, have overall responsibility for ensuring the installation is compliant to the system designer's specifications; and further that the installations were found to fall fault of numerous problems including: incorrect sealing, missing trims, faulty cladding and poor rendering.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to set up a means whereby each house be assessed by an external specialist ECO assessor and obtain redress for their individual issues, compensation for financial losses and have assurance our homes can be insured without penalties.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Closure of York's Crown Post Office

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to present a petition on behalf of 1,816 residents of York and a further 1,278 who engaged through online and other petitions: a total of 3,094 residents who, alongside city businesses, opposed a proposal to move York's Crown post office from Lendal, where it has been located since 1884, to the back of WHSmith in Coney Street, which is inaccessible to many disabled people. The move will be seriously detrimental to my city.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to put an immediate stop to this franchising plan, and to work with stakeholders, including the CWU, to develop a new strategy that sees the Post Office at Lendal safeguarded for the future and retained in public ownership.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

The future of maintained nursery schools

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): I rise to present three petitions on behalf of parents, carers, staff and governors of nursery schools in Derby. The maintained nursery sector is the jewel in the crown of the early years but is facing an uncertain future as a result of Government policy.

The first petition states:

The petition of parents, carers, staff and governors of Whitecross maintained nursery school in Derby.

Declares that the plans to close York's Crown Post Office and open a franchise in WHSmith are not supported by the people of York, will put the jobs of well trained and efficient staff at risk and will have a detrimental impact on local retailers and our city centre business community; further that the Crown Post Office was built in 1884 and is one of the last surviving late-Victorian purpose-built post offices still in use; notes this is one of 74 Crown Post offices scheduled by Post Office Ltd to be franchised to WHSmith which CWU estimate will cost £30m in staff compensation alone and will see 800 jobs put at risk and yet the public have not been consulted on this privatisation; further that the Crown Post Office plays a major role in drawing people into the city centre and this change will add to existing pressures on the city centre; further that there are concerns about the sustainability of the store which is located on Coney Street that has seen foot falls drop by 15% over the past 2 years; further notes that research by Citizens Advice in 2016 shows that WHSmith franchises result in longer queueing times, inferior service and advice; further that deep concern about the valued staff whose jobs are at risk and face a future of employment with a company that is closing stores and relies on a business model of low pay and part-time employment; and further notes an uncertain future for a very important war memorial which will be relocated if these plans go ahead.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to put an immediate stop to this franchising plan, and to work with stakeholders, including the CWU, to develop a new strategy that sees the Post Office at Lendal safeguarded for the future and retained in public ownership.

And the petitioners remain, etc.
Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—[Mr Goodwill.]

7.20 pm

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): I rise to talk this evening about medical devices and the way in which they are licensed and regulated. They are a very important and growing part of medicine, and they can save and transform lives—indeed they have done for millions of patients over many generations. However, when faulty or poorly designed or poorly looked into and proven, they have also damaged, and indeed ended, the lives of many thousands of patients around the world. My principal point is that the regulatory system for medical devices in our country, and across Europe and arguably the wider world, is simply not fit for purpose and must be properly reformed.

The term “medical devices” is rather vague. It refers to everything from bandages to syringes through to heart pacemakers and artificial joints, and I want to be clear that what I am talking about is the more complex end of the spectrum: the more high-risk, class III as they are called, implantable devices.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): I want to put on record my thanks for all the work my hon. Friend has done on mesh. Does he agree that we must be careful that what might appear to be a relatively cheap quick fix can turn out to be a massive problem for a lot of patients?

Owen Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for his thanks, and I will talk about mesh shortly as it is illustrative of the wider problem.

The problem is best summed up not in my words but those of the Royal College of Surgeons, which said at the tail end of last year, in response to a big journalistic investigation, that we need to see in our country urgent and drastic regulatory reform and in particular that we need to start with the creation of a compulsory register for all new devices and implants that go into patients in the UK. Will the Minister commit to that?

Let me give a couple of examples of what I am talking about. Last year alone in the UK surgeons operated on patients for 80,000 knee joints, 60,000 hip replacements, 50,000 pacemakers and 7,000 usages of surgical vaginal mesh, down from its height in 2008 when there were 14,000 instances of surgical vaginal mesh inserted into women. Let me pause for a moment to talk about that example of vaginal mesh and why its use has declined so precipitously. The answer lies in what I am talking about—in the development and marketing, and the fact that, as with so many of these devices, their true safety and efficacy is only revealed in the real world once they have been implanted into patients, and sometimes after many years. Many of the variants of vaginal mesh, like most of the other devices now on the market, are developed without any real clinical trials, and certainly without the randomised controlled clinical trials that are carried out by three people at a cost of £20,000. Does he agree that that example fundamentally shows that the way the MHRA is reviewing these devices is not fit for purpose, is completely inadequate and, as we know from the work of the APPG, puts patients, and in the case of mesh implants lots of women across the UK, at risk?

Owen Smith: The hon. Gentleman, who has also done excellent work on mesh as co-chair of the group, is completely right.

Our regulatory system for these devices, including mesh, is more akin to the system that applies to toasters or plugs, and the way in which they get kitemarks, than to the way in which medicines are approved. It is so problematic that, last year, the journalist I was talking about applied to get a kitemark—known as a CE mark—for surgical mesh. However, the item in question was a bag that had previously been used to keep oranges in, but they still succeeded in getting a CE mark for it. It obviously was not put into a woman, but real mesh has been and is being put into thousands of women all over the world, including those suffering from organ prolapse and stress urinary incontinence. The real impact of the mesh has been revealed in the chronic pain, disability and even death suffered by many women as a result of the mesh warping, breaking, morphing, changing its constitution and cutting into organs inside the body. This was revealed only after years of sales.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech about the devastating impact that mesh has had on women. I discovered the real impact of it when a constituent came to visit me on Friday. Wendy talked about the impact that it had had on her life. She said that she had been concerned about the mesh and had discussed it with her surgeon, who had insisted that it was not mesh but tape. She was therefore misled by a medical professional. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is another worrying aspect of how these medical devices are being marketed and communicated to patients?

Owen Smith: Yes, I absolutely agree. There are many instances of similar mis-selling of these products to women. We need to examine the relationship between the doctors who are selling or marketing these products to their patients and the companies that develop them. Some have an interest in those companies, and others are getting a money benefit through doing this in the private sector. All these things desperately need to be looked at.

The terrible truth is that the surgical mesh scandal that is unfolding is just one of the scandals relating to medical devices. We had the metal-on-metal hip joint scandal, with metallosis poisoning people’s bodies. We had the scandal of textured PIP breast implants poisoning women’s bodies. Those implants are now connected
with increased incidences of cancer. We had spine-straightening devices for children that were only ever tested on corpses. We had pacemakers such as the Nanostim, which was designed to sit inside the heart and work for up to 19 years. It has now been removed from the market because the batteries started to break down and cease to work and, worse, it was giving people electric shocks. The devices are now being cut out of people. Between 2015 and 2018, UK regulators alone received reports of 64,000 adverse events involving medical devices. A third of those incidents resulted in serious medical repercussions for patients, and 1,004 resulted in death.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I would like to pay tribute to the tremendous work that my hon. Friend has done on mesh. Quite a number of people in my constituency have suffered as a result of the use of mesh, and they are extremely grateful for the work that he has been doing. About 20 years ago, we had the scandal of silicone implants, and someone in my constituency had a double mastectomy because the silicone had leaked inside her body. These problems are still happening. We set up a register, but suddenly the register disappeared. I am glad that my hon. Friend has made a point about the register and asked for the Minister’s commitment on this.

Owen Smith: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her kind words. She is completely right to say that there are devices on the market here and across the world that are still causing grave medical problems for patients. The question we have to ask is: how did these things get on to the market in the first place? How have we got so many of these devices that are causing such significant problems? The common problem that unites them is the use of mesh with all the other device scandals in our country and across the globe is the weakness of the regulatory system in the UK, in the EU and, to a lesser extent, in America, where the pathway for testing approval, marketing and surveillance of such devices just is not good enough.

How does the system work? It will shock people to hear that we do not have a central body that is responsible for checking and authorising all the licensing devices in the same way as for medicines. If a company in the UK wants to create a new prosthetic hip joint, it does so and then it shops around among a group of what are called notified bodies. These are effectively commercial organisations that are in turn licensed by the MHRA to be a body that checks safety and efficacy through the clinical data provided by the companies and then gives them their conformity Européenne—their EU kitemark. Once a company has received that mark, the device can be sold all across the EU.

Companies do not need clinical trial data in order to substantiate their claims that devices are efficacious and safe. Quite often —this is true of a remarkable proportion of the devices on the market—they do not even have to undertake first-hand clinical evaluations themselves and can rely on being follow-on products that go through a regulatory pathway that is termed as being “substantially equivalent” to the products that have gone before. For instance, there are examples of mesh on the market now that are the 61st generation of an original licensed mesh that is no longer on the market because it was proven to be dangerous. There is no real mandatory post-marketing surveillance of these devices.

Given that the difficulty of randomised control trials versus placebo for a device—someone cannot put a wooden heart into one patient and a pacemaker into another in order to see which one works—meant that there will be a degree of risk in testing such things in the real world, one would think that we would have a system that would test how devices are doing in the real world and get companies or the Government to monitor them, but we do not, which is in stark contrast to the regime for medicines. Changes are coming into effect, however. A new medical devices regulation was launched across the EU in 2017 and will come into effect in May 2020. It was introduced with the acknowledgement of many of the problems that I have highlighted.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate on an issue that is important to many of us. With the EU’s new medical device rules coming into place in May 2020, as he says, does he agree that the number of available notified bodies is already diminishing? The Government must be aware of that and must work to find a way to secure acceptance of UK notified bodies as part of any arrangement, allowing for the smooth transition of notified bodies and product certification.

Owen Smith: I agree in part with the hon. Gentleman. One thing that I did not say earlier is that there are 50 notified bodies across the EU, so if a company goes with its new artificial hip to one body and says, “Will you approve this for my CE mark, because I would like to sell it in the EU?” and the body says no, because it does not think the data is good enough, all the company has to do is go to the next notified body, and if it says no, the company can go to the one after that, and if the third body says no, the company can go to the fourth one. Neither any of the notified bodies nor the manufacturer are under any obligation to disclose that the device had been turned down earlier. I agree that fewer notified bodies would be a good thing, but there are big questions for us in the UK because we will have no notified bodies once we have left the EU.

There are other problems with the new directive, which is a strengthening of the regulations, but it is not strong enough. For example, it now says that companies should summarise their clinical trials data, that they should take clinical data that is, if possible, sourced from clinical investigations carried out under the responsibility of a sponsor—meaning something more akin to randomised control clinical trials—and that they should ordinarily have a quality management system and a post-market surveillance system that should be proportionate to the risk class of the device in question. However, the point is that none of those things is mandatory.

There is no mandatory requirement to conduct proper trials or to max out the tests that are done. There is no mandatory requirement to publish data. There is no mandatory requirement to publish all data, including negative data. There is nothing to stop the companies continuing to conceal data, or shopping around between different notified bodies, and there is nothing to stop the cost iterations of the bare minimum of saying how their product is doing in the marketplace. The directive is a strengthening but, unfortunately, it is not the strengthening we need.
If we leave the EU, the directive will not necessarily apply in all regards in the UK. The Government have tried to respond to the concerns voiced by others before me by saying that they will effectively apply the regulation in future, but that would bring difficulties in and of itself. As I said, we would effectively be accepting products that are kitemarked and approved elsewhere in Europe, and not by our own notified bodies, because we will not be part of that system any longer. I assume we will be using the European database on medical devices, which is designed to work right across Europe, but we will not be part of the expert panels that reflect on the findings reviewed through that database.

Crucially, I assume that the MHRA will be filling some of those gaps. It will already have an almighty job on its hands in trying to fill the gap on medicines once we are outwith the purview of the European Medicines Agency. I fear that devices will once again be the Cinderella of the medical game. We did not have regulations for devices at all before 1990, and we may find that we are playing catch up with the European Union in future. Whichever way Brexit turns out, and in reflecting on the flaws in the regulatory system I have highlighted, I ask the Minister, first, to try to get the MHRA, or whatever replaces our current regulatory pathway, to go back to the first principles of protecting patient safety at all times. There is too much talk in Europe of maintaining our advantage over other markets as an early adopter of innovation. Well, early adoption can go wrong if the innovation has not been adequately tested, and mesh is a great example.

Secondly, will the Minister do what the Royal College of Surgeons has asked her and the Government to do and set up a national registry of all “first implanted into a man or woman” devices—the innovations—that so that we can track what happens with those devices, as we should have been able to do with mesh? Thirdly, will the Minister make sure that whatever system we have imposes much more stringent obligations on companies to undertake the most rigorous tests in respect of such medicines? In any new system, we should rule out anything like the substantial equivalence model that has been deployed in Europe for so long. It seems crackers to have a system that is basically a paper-based exercise without any real-world tests.

Lastly, I would like our Government to follow the example of the Australian Government, where the Minister’s counterpart, Greg Hunt, issued a national apology to those women whose lives have been ruined by the debilitating effect of pelvic mesh implants:

“On behalf of the Australian government I say sorry to all of those women with the historic agony and pain that has come from mesh implantation, which have led to horrific outcomes”.

Our Government should similarly apologise to women damaged by surgical mesh. Irrespective of how Brexit turns out, they should pledge to radically reform the regulatory pathway for this class of medicines in order to make sure that no patients, men or women, suffer, as patients have in the past, as a result of medical devices.

7.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I congratulate the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) on securing this debate and again challenging me on the regulation of medical devices. Obviously, we have discussed issues relating to mesh before, but this evening he has given a comprehensive critique of the weaknesses in the regulation of medical devices. We have to be very conscious that, unlike drugs, once a medical device is implanted, it stays there for good; the body does not process it and it does not leave the body. We can, therefore, imagine that clinical evidence and trial evidence will take many years to build up. Our perspective, from the point of view of trying to guarantee patient safety, needs to consider that in any future method of regulation.

The hon. Gentleman has highlighted some of the weaknesses. It is fair to say that perhaps in the past regulation has focused excessively on what is in the commercial interests of businesses to maintain competition, rather than having patient safety at its heart; I think that, when it comes to medical regulation, it should have that at its heart. Naturally, he referred to mesh, which he and I have discussed many times before. There is no doubt that mesh has transformed the lives of some women when they were living with the debilitating consequences of stress incontinence, but it is becoming clear that mesh was deployed far too insensibly—far too many women were given this treatment, often at comparatively young ages, given that this was going to stay in their body for a long time.

I do not want to pre-empt what will come out of the Cumberlege review, but I have discussed some of the findings with Baroness Cumberlege. On the whole issue of how our medical establishment have dealt with this, the conversations that have taken place with women who were having this treatment were utterly inadequate and we will learn many lessons. I say to those women who have suffered badly at the hands of mesh treatment that there are clear medical criteria relating to that product and, if they have any complaint about the treatment they have received, they should be pursuing claims for clinical negligence against their practitioners. We look forward to the conclusions of Baroness Cumberlege’s review.

The hon. Gentleman and the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) mentioned the issue of the national devices registry. I will say, up front, that I can assure them that this matter is already under consideration by the Department and it is linked to our wider digitalisation agenda for the NHS. We have the technology and we should use it, in the interests of patient safety. We will be implementing that under new EU regulations to trace medical devices through unique device identifiers. I would be more than happy to meet him at a later date as we progress these proposals. As we depart from the European Union, we have an opportunity to alter our regulatory system. I am not sure that all my Conservative colleagues, in pushing Brexit, see it as an opportunity to tighten regulation, but that opportunity remains, so I look forward to that dialogue.

We clearly need to improve the existing system of regulation. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, the EU directive currently under consideration will deliver that improvement, and we fully intend to take that forward. As he has described, medical devices are regulated in an entirely different way from medicines, and we need to make sure that that regulation remains fit for purpose and that it responds to technological innovation. We also need to make sure that we have sufficient pre-market assessment, so that in assessing their efficacy we can really give evidence of how these devices are used by
patients. That is why manufacturers, notified bodies and the MHRA conduct ongoing post-market surveillance. We will all wish to be made more confident that that is fleet of foot where it identifies any potential weakness. The more data we can collect, the more we can make those judgments earlier. The emergence of a better registry will enable us to do exactly that. I acknowledge wholeheartedly that there is scope for improvement and that systems and processes need to be constantly tested against the ultimate purpose—that guiding star, the principle of patient safety. No patient who presents themselves to any area of the national health service should expect anything other than the best possible care. They should be able to trust that we have in place a regulatory regime that will protect them. I am personally committed to that review and challenge.

As I mentioned, we will implement the regulatory improvements currently being taken through the EU, even though we are now leaving the EU institutions. We are confident that the regulation will drive system-wide improvement, including to the levels of clinical data mandated before products can be placed on the market. That will establish a strong and improved baseline for any system we implement after our departure from the EU. These changes to our system will place more stringent requirements on those manufacturing and supplying medical devices and will enhance the MHRA’s market surveillance responsibilities, resulting in clearer obligations to conduct inspections and the ongoing safety monitoring of devices.

In advance of those new regulations, the Government have taken a number of actions to ensure that existing legislation is operating as effectively as possible. That includes a programme of joint assessments of notified bodies, including inspections by multiple competent authorities to ensure that notified bodies’ assessments of new products and robust implementation of new standards for the clinical data are required for the new high-risk devices coming to the market.

It is true, I have to confess, that there has been a historic lack of transparency in the current system. It has not always been easy for patients to investigate and find more data about the things being put in their bodies. That is why the Government have prioritised the issue in negotiations on the new EU legislation. When those changes are implemented, there will, as the hon. Gentleman said, be an EU database that will contain details of all devices on the UK market, including where safety issues are identified. We are committed to ensuring that that will happen as part of our planning for a no-deal exit from the European Union.

Before I run out of time, I again want to mention the Cumberlege review, which will report later this year. It will give us many lessons about just how our medical device regulation has been less than optimal in the past. We will of course commit ourselves to any changes to respond to that review. I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate and I look forward to further debate with him on these issues.

Question put and agreed to.

7.47 pm
House adjourned.
The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

1. Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): What her priorities are for the London initiative 2019 on opportunities for growth and development in Jordan. [R] [909191]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): Mr Speaker, I hope you will allow me to pay a brief tribute to the Department for International Development staff and partners who were caught up in the terrorist attack in Nairobi last month. Some of them, including a British national, lost their lives that day. Despite the trauma of that event, our staff immediately joined the crisis response team, and I want to thank them, as I am sure the whole House wishes to do, for all that they did.

The Prime Minister will lead the London initiative on 28 February to unlock growth, jobs and investment in Jordan. The UK is convening an international coalition of businesses and political leaders to support Jordan’s stability and self-reliance, generating jobs for all, but, in particular, for young people, women and refugees.

Kate Green: May I associate myself with the comments that the Secretary of State made about DFID staff caught up in the attack in Nairobi?

I was pleased to hear that the Prime Minister will be leading the UK-Jordan initiative at the end of this month. The Secretary of State mentions the importance of the inclusion of refugees and Jordanian women in the labour market. Will the Government be taking steps to draw to the attention of the Jordanians the barriers women face, including those relating to transport, access to childcare and a sense of physical safety?

Penny Mordaunt: First, I thank the hon. Lady for her interest in this tremendously important conference, which is a real turning point for Jordan. We are absolutely looking to secure investment in that country to enable the public funds to build that infrastructure to support everyone getting to work. Unless women and refugees are included, we will fail in that task.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): May I declare an interest, having recently joined the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) on a visit with Oxfam in Jordan? I very much welcome the London initiative. Will urgent steps be taken to take account of the fact that youth unemployment in the country is now some 38%? Not only is there a high level of female unemployment, but the participation rate of women in the workforce in Jordan is even lower than that in Saudi Arabia. Will those urgent objectives be at the heart of what the Secretary of State is trying to achieve?

Penny Mordaunt: I can reassure my hon. Friend that that will absolutely be the case. This issue has been a focus for me personally on my visits to Jordan, and I will be focusing on it at the London conference.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State realise that one thing holding back development in Jordan is the number of children and young people killed on the roads there? I spoke at a conference in Jordan recently, where we looked at this area. Jordan is one of the better countries in the middle east and north Africa on this, but we need some action to be taken to stop children and young people being killed in Jordan in this way.

Penny Mordaunt: I pay tribute to the work the hon. Gentleman has done on this issue. We often think about disease and other such killers of children, but road traffic accidents take an enormous number of lives—I believe that they are the biggest killer of individuals in developing countries. He will know that we have a new programme looking at this, and we will continue to lean in on the issue.

Female Genital Mutilation

2. Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): What steps she is taking to help eradicate female genital mutilation in developing countries. [909192]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): The UK leads the world in our support to the Africa-led movement to end FGM. In 2018, we announced the biggest single investment worldwide to date by any international donor: a UK aid package of a further £50 million to tackle this issue across the most affected countries in Africa.

Rachel Maclean: I am sure that I speak for all Members in expressing disappointment that the FGM Bill did not receive its Second Reading in the House last week. I am pleased to see that the Government have committed to bring the Bill back in Government time. Will my hon. Friend confirm that her door always remains open for any Member of this House who wishes to discuss what the Government are doing to stop this appalling crime?

Harriett Baldwin: I am pleased to be able to confirm that, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, wearing her gender equalities hat, has reached out to my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope). She hopes to sit down with him and other colleagues should they wish to discuss this important issue.
Harriett Baldwin: I encourage the hon. Lady to continue with that confidence. We can point to a strong track record of working on this issue, not only in the UK but with some of the African-led initiatives in African countries. She will have heard it announced during the urgent question on Monday that the Chief Whip has committed to taking forward the UK legislation as quickly as possible.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Will the Minister tell us why the Government have not introduced legislation—they control the House and could get it through—rather than leave it to the vagaries of a private Member’s Bill? If they are interested in it, they should do something about it.

Harriett Baldwin: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight the fact that FGM happens in many countries in the world. The DFID funding that I mentioned and the work that we have been doing has been focused specifically on 17 African countries. In that regard, I am pleased that 8,000 communities, representing more than 24 million people, have pledged to give up the practice.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Minister alluded to the Africa-led initiative, which has been positive, but will she not undertake to be much more emphatic in trying to co-ordinate an Africa-wide initiative to eliminate this vile practice?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend would lead me down paths that are best left to the Government Whips and the Ministry of Justice, but the UK does of course believe that we can work with some of the citizen-led movements in Africa to change perceptions around FGM.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): We have just had the first prosecution for FGM in this country; what more can this country do to prevent families from taking their girls abroad to have FGM done to them?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we have done a lot in this country to change domestic legislation—for example, to put reporting requirements on parts of the NHS. One must pay tribute to the tireless campaigning by courageous activists, both here and overseas, in respect of changing the practice and changing communities on the ground.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Everyone would agree that we need to tackle female genital mutilation. The Minister will be aware that the private Member’s Bill on the issue was scuppered. In the light of that, does she understand that confidence in the Government’s willingness to deal with the issue has been shaken? It is important that they now move quickly to restore that confidence.
Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): The Stockholm agreement is indeed very welcome, but the Minister is right that it is also fragile. One of the features is the World Food Programme supplies, to which it is hard to get access. Will he update the House on the prospects of getting that access because the head of the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs has said that there is a risk that the food will simply rot and therefore not be available for consumption?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman is right. I spoke to the World Food Programme director, David Beasley, last week. The situation is that it has been difficult to get to the Red sea mills because of mining. There is a concern that some food not only has rotted, but has been stolen by illicit elements, so we have to find out what is there. The continuing progress in relation to peace will make access to those mills more likely, and we will continue to press for that.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I welcome what my right hon. Friend and his Department are doing in this tragic situation. What more can the UK do to make sure that children in particular who are suffering so much are helped more?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his words. The best thing that we can do is, first, support the negotiations to ensure that the conflict comes to an end—that is the best thing. Secondly, we should keep up our support for humanitarian aid and assistance, which has been significant. In relation to the children, we should back things such as a nationwide measles and rubella vaccination campaign, which is under way and which will target 13.3 million children in Yemen between 9 and 14 February. That demonstrates how much we owe to the aid workers who are involved there and also the contribution that the UK is making.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): There is no doubt that the Minister has done a huge amount of work on this issue, but the key is the resumption of the peace talks. The parties last met on 18 December. When will they meet again? That will unlock the corridor and unlock the humanitarian needs.

Alistair Burt: The right hon. Gentleman of course is right. I spoke to Alistair Burt: The hon. Lady, who understands this issue very well, is right to point to the importance of the global polio eradication initiative, which has been the bedrock for disease eradication efforts. Innovative approaches have helped to provide timely and high-quality surveillance. What we need to do is ensure, through both in-country programmes and the work being done through WHO, that surveillance on polio does not slacken off because of potential eradication, and we will continue to do that.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): What potential is there for the work that the Department did last year with the Met Office, NASA and other US scientists on cholera in Yemen to be scaled up and used in other crisis situations to prevent the spread of disease?

Alistair Burt: My right hon. Friend points to a remarkable innovation that, recognising the importance of wet and damp weather for the spread of cholera, used the resources of the Met Office to ensure that accurate support was provided in areas of risk. It is a very good use of modern technology, which we intend to see replicated elsewhere.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): The Minister will be aware of some of the excellent work done by researchers in universities across the UK, including the University of St Andrews and the University of Dundee, in tackling illnesses such as AIDS, TB and malaria. Given the drop in aid to health spending recently, will he commit to ensuring a fully funded global fund?

Alistair Burt: We have been one of the leading donors to the global fund, and there is no suggestion that that should end. My father was a graduate of St Andrews and was also at Dundee, and we will be making sure that good research facilities remain key to the United Kingdom’s support efforts.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I associate the Labour party with the Secretary of State’s comments in respect of DFID staff in Nairobi.

We in the United Kingdom are rightly proud of our publicly run national health service, and it is thanks to our incredible NHS staff that we are able to effectively tackle the causes and symptoms of infectious diseases here. Does the Minister agree that this experience should underpin the Department’s work on health and that our overseas development work should therefore focus explicitly on supporting Governments and citizens to invest in their own universal healthcare systems?

Infectious Disease Surveillance

4. Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What steps her Department is taking to support global surveillance systems for infectious diseases.

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): Infectious disease surveillance is vital to global health security. The UK supports global, regional and national efforts to strengthen surveillance, including through the World Health Organisation, the global fund and the global polio eradication initiative. The Department for International Development’s tackling deadly diseases in Africa programme and Public Health England are helping to strengthen regional and national surveillance capacity.

Dr Whitford: The eradication of polio in the next few years represents an incredible achievement of both vaccination and international co-operation, but the infrastructure and staffing of the global polio initiative has provided a lot of the surveillance that helped to detect epidemics such as Ebola. How does the Minister plan to replace the polio resources and ensure that both vaccination and surveillance continues?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Lady, who understands this issue very well, is right to point to the importance of the global polio eradication initiative, which has been the bedrock for disease eradication efforts. Innovative approaches have helped to provide timely and high-quality surveillance. What we need to do is ensure, through both in-country programmes and the work being done through WHO, that surveillance on polio does not slacken off because of potential eradication, and we will continue to do that.

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Alistair Burt: Absolutely. Much of our work in global health is designed to support particular projects to eradicate individual diseases, but it is also crucial that we support and sustain health systems where they are. These health systems will do an incredibly valuable job in looking for the sort of illnesses and infectious diseases, such as antimicrobial resistance, that could spread around the world.

Prosperity Fund

5. Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to ensure that aid spent through the prosperity fund complies with her Department’s duty to reduce levels of poverty.

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): The primary purpose of the prosperity fund is to reduce poverty through sustainable and inclusive economic growth in middle-income countries. Other Departments are responsible for ensuring that their overseas development programmes from this fund meet the requirements of the International Development Act 2002.

Daniel Zeichner: Climate change will hit the world’s poorest people hardest, so why on earth is 29% of the energy component of the prosperity fund being spent on oil and gas extraction, including supporting fracking in China?

Harriett Baldwin: I know that the hon. Gentleman shares my commitment to doing what we can to tackle the incredibly important issue of climate change. We should be wholeheartedly supporting opportunities that work as climate change initiatives to move power beyond coal.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: What a pleasure to call a west country knight, no less—Sir Gary Streeter.

Sir Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): I strongly support DFID Ministers’ approach to the prosperity fund, which looks to promote economic reform in middle-income countries, where 70% of the world’s poorest people live. Are not trade and economic reform still the most effective ways to lift people out of poverty?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct that the way in which the world will end poverty is by having sustainable and inclusive economic growth. To achieve the sustainable development goals, we need to crowd in not just development finance, but $2.5 trillion annually for development.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Alleviating poverty should be at the core of everything that DFID does. As such, I am sure that the Secretary of State will be just as deeply concerned as I was to see the former Foreign Secretary throw his weight behind a report published this week that calls for changing the Department’s purpose from poverty reduction to furthering “the nation’s overall strategic goals”.

Will the Minister take this opportunity to confirm that the Department will not become a subsidiary of the Foreign Office and that the 0.7% of gross national income will be firmly committed to poverty reduction?

Harriett Baldwin: Yes, I can confirm that that is the Government’s policy.

Leaving the EU: Developing Countries

6. Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for International Trade on the effect on the economies of developing countries of the UK leaving the EU.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): Our Departments are working together to ensure that development stays at the heart of UK trade policy. For example, we are creating a trade preference scheme that will continue to provide the same level of market access to about 70 countries as is provided through the EU’s generalised scheme of preference.

Jo Swinson: As we learned today that only six of the promised 40 trade deals will actually be in place by the end of March, it seems that the International Trade Secretary is in competition with the Transport Secretary for who can do the worst job. What assurance can this Secretary of State give to the House that we will see full impact assessments on the social, environmental and human rights impacts of any trade deals before they come into force?

Penny Mordaunt: What the hon. Lady says is not the case. We are looking at the EPAs—economic partnership agreements—and other arrangements. The numbers she gave are not accurate. Our first priority is obviously trade continuity, and after that we will then be able to introduce the UK’s trade preference scheme, which will not only grant duty-free, quota-free access to 48 least-developed countries, and grant generous tariff reductions to about a further 25.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Is it not an absolute disgrace that coffee producers in the developing world are, at the moment, not allowed to do the value-added bits of putting coffee into packaging, selling and marketing it, and all the rest of it? Under EU rules, that has to be done within the EU. Brexit will enable those countries now to do the value-added bits in their own countries, thereby being of huge benefit to developing countries.

Penny Mordaunt: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. We want people to be able to trade their way out of poverty, and it is high time that we walked the walk as well as talked the talk.

Topical Questions

T1. Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): I am sure that the whole House will be deeply concerned to see the distressing images of the suffering of the Venezuelan people, with the UN estimating that 4 million people are suffering from malnutrition. UK aid will deliver an additional £6.5 million aid package focused on dealing with the most severe health and nutrition difficulties. We have had staff deployed in the region last year and will keep our humanitarian
efforts under review. I would call on all actors to ensure that we have unhindered humanitarian access.

[ Interruption. ]

**Mr Speaker:** I understand the predictable air of anticipation in the Chamber just before Prime Minister’s questions, but I would remind the House that we are discussing the plight of some of the most vulnerable people on the face of the planet. I think some respect is in order.

**Mr Carmichael:** Indeed, Mr Speaker, and there are few parts of the world that see more vulnerable people than Gaza. Medical Aid for Palestinians reports that since March last year at least 250 Palestinians have been killed as part of Israel’s use of force against the Great March of Return protests. Among them were three health workers, killed by Israeli forces while trying to reach, treat and evacuate wounded demonstrators. A further 600 health workers have been injured. What are our Government doing to ensure the safety of health workers in Gaza and to hold the Israeli Government to account for these actions?

**Mr Speaker:** I look forward to reading the right hon. Gentleman’s treatise in the *Official Report* tomorrow.

**Penny Mordaunt:** The right hon. Gentleman will know that my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East does as he asks on a regular basis. With regard to the humanitarian work that we are doing, he will know that we have stepped up our offer—in particular, looking at providing additional medical support. We will continue to do that.

T5. [909213] **Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): Will the Minister ensure that her Department’s education policy and financial decisions prioritise making sure that all children have an opportunity to learn, as recommended in the Send my Friend to School coalition’s new report?

**The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin):** I know that my hon. Friend will want to tell the schoolchildren of Dudley, who are supporting this campaign, of the great work that is done through UK Aid, which has ensured that some 7 million children have had access to a decent education.

**Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): Why does the Secretary of State believe that the UK’s commitment to spending 0.7% of national income on aid is unsustainable?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to remind the House that it was under a Conservative-led Government that the commitment to 0.7% was introduced, and it is a Conservative Government who have retained that commitment. What we want to do in future, though, is look at maintaining that with public funds but reducing the burden on the taxpayer.

**Dan Carden:** I ask that because the former Foreign Secretary has called for the Department to be closed, and the Secretary of State has said nothing. Her party colleagues have called for aid to be redefined away from poverty reduction, and she has said nothing. Is it not the sad truth that Conservative Members who are now circling the Prime Minister know that their leadership prospects are buoyed by appealing to the tiny number of Tory party members who hate aid as much as they want to bring back capital punishment? Why should anyone trust a Government who have pushed 14 million of their own citizens into poverty to stand up for the world’s poorest people?

**Penny Mordaunt:** They should trust me as the Secretary of State and as someone who has been an aid worker. They should trust this Government because we introduced the policy and are retaining it. The hon. Gentleman mischaracterises the comments of certain colleagues. For example, the former Foreign Secretary has not said that he wishes to abandon the 0.7%. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to talk about the global goals at the Dispatch Box. We want to deliver them, and to do so, we need additional funding of $2.5 trillion going into developing countries. That is what this Government are focused on delivering.

T7. [909213] **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): What work is the Department doing to ensure that our independent trade policy will lead the way globally in alleviating poverty?

**Penny Mordaunt:** Seventy of my staff are embedded in the Department for International Trade, forming a new post-Brexit trade offer, and a great deal of that effort is looking at what we can do to enable developing countries to trade their way out of poverty.

T2. [909207] **Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): It has been reported that up to 300,000 Venezuelans could die if aid does not reach them shortly. Given that the Maduro regime will not allow aid from America, what can Britain do politically and practically to help Venezuelans on the ground?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that critical issue. The Foreign Office is doing a tremendous amount and is meeting its counterparts in not only the US and Canada but in the region to see what more we can do. We stand ready to do more, and what we do will be driven by what we find on the ground. He will understand that this is sensitive, because some of our partners with whom we work in the region are very vulnerable if we identify precisely who they are and what they are doing, but I assure him and the House that we will stand by the people of Venezuela.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know that the restrictive common agricultural policy has damaged agriculture in Africa. After Brexit, what can we do to stimulate trade, particularly with farmers in sub-Saharan Africa?

**Harriett Baldwin:** I am pleased to reassure my hon. Friend that there is already a lot that we can do. There are many products, such as avocados and cashew nuts, that we simply cannot grow in the UK, and I know that UK consumers and African producers will benefit from growth in those areas in years to come.

**PRIME MINISTER**

The Prime Minister was asked—

**Engagements**

Q1. [909176] **Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 13 February.
The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Later today, this House will have an opportunity to pay tribute to the Clerk of the House, Sir David Natzler. May I take this opportunity to add my own? Sir David has served this House for over 40 years with dedication and tireless devotion. His support and advice on parliamentary procedure and business has been invaluable, and I know that Members from all sides of the House will want to join me in thanking him for his service and wishing him the very best for the future.

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

Helen Whately: May I too pay tribute to the work of the Clerk of the House?

In January, the mother of a three-year-old girl was convicted of female genital mutilation. It is our first FGM conviction, but a chilling reminder that young girls are still being cut not just in Africa and around the world but here in the UK. Will my right hon. Friend in the remarks he made about the cadet at Sandhurst refer to the work that he has done in relation to mental health in our armed forces?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this abhorrent practice and to recognise the importance of the first prosecution that took place on female genital mutilation here in the UK. It is only right that we find time for this Bill, and the Government will provide time to deliver it. We have strengthened the law on FGM, leading to that first conviction, and we are helping communities around the world to end this appalling crime, but it is important that we give time to this Bill and act further to ensure that we end what is an absolutely abhorrent crime that scars young girls for the rest of their lives both physically and mentally.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I am sure the Prime Minister and the whole House will join me in sending our deepest sympathies to the friends and family of the cadet who died at Sandhurst last week. I am sure the Ministry of Defence is supporting the family and fellow cadets at a difficult time, but I also hope it will be reviewing the mental health support it gives to all members of the armed forces at all times.

We also mourn the loss of Gordon Banks, and send our condolences to his friends and family and to the entire football community. He was one of the greatest goalkeepers of all time, with 73 caps for England, including playing in every single game during the victorious 1966 World cup campaign, which I remember with joy.

I too want to thank Sir David Natzler for his work as Clerk of the House and wish him well in his retirement. He has been here even longer than I have and has always been a source of advice to all Members, irrespective of their party, and I always admire his dry wit and humour while describing the proceedings of the House. I think we owe him a big debt of gratitude.

The Government’s handling of Brexit has been costly, shambolic and deliberately evasive. Nothing symbolises that more than the fiasco of Seaborne Freight—a company with no ships and no trading history. On 8 January, the Transport Secretary told the House: “We are confident that the firm will deliver the service.”—[Official Report, 8 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 193.]

What went wrong?

The Prime Minister: First, may I join the right hon. Gentleman in the remarks he made about the cadet at Sandhurst. He referenced the issue of mental health. This is an important issue overall, but it is obviously an important issue in our armed forces as well. I would like to pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) for the work that he has done in relation to mental health in the armed forces.

I would also like to send my deepest sympathies to the family and friends of Gordon Banks. Like the right hon. Gentleman, I am old enough to remember the 1966 World cup—

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Never!

The Prime Minister: Let us be honest in this House; I think that is important.

From being part of that team to something else that I think people remember—the astonishing Pelé save in 1970—Gordon Banks was regarded as one of the world’s greatest goalkeepers. I also know that he did a lot of community work in his local area as well. I know Members from all parts of the House would like to join me in paying tribute to him.

As regards the freight capacity, the Government let three contracts: 90% of that was let to DFDS and Brittany Ferries. Those contracts remain in place, and that capacity has been obtained. Due diligence was carried out on all of these contracts. As the Secretary of State for Transport made clear in this House earlier this week, we will continue to ensure that we provide that capacity, which is important in a no-deal situation, and we will ensure the capacity is there.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Transport Secretary told the House that the decision to award the contract to Seaborne Freight had no cost to the taxpayer. This week, the National Audit Office found that £800,000 had been spent on external consultants to assess the bid. Will the Prime Minister use this opportunity to correct the record?

The Prime Minister: I have to tell the right hon. Gentleman that he is a bit late to the party, because I was asked that question yesterday on the statement, I think from the SNP Benches. Labour following the SNP—well, whatever next? Of course, as I just said, when the contracts were all let, proper due diligence was carried out. That included third-party assessment of the companies that were bidding for the contracts. There would have been a cost attached to the process regardless of who the contracts were entered into with.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am really impressed that the Prime Minister could keep a straight face while she said that due diligence was carried out. The Transport Secretary said that “its business and operational plans were assessed for the Department by external advisers.”—[Official Report, 8 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 190.]

On the basis of that advice to his Department, he was told that Seaborne was a start-up company with no ships and that the contract was “high-risk”. Why, if he was told that it was high risk, did he proceed with the contract?
The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman appears to be suggesting that the Government should never look at start-up companies or at opportunities for new companies. It is entirely right that the Government ensured that the majority of the contracts went to established companies, and it is entirely right that a company on which due diligence had been carried out—[Interruption.] It is no good saying it wasn’t, because it was. We will ensure that the ferry capacity is there.

What we are doing in these contracts is ensuring that we are able to deal with the situation we enter into no deal. The right hon. Gentleman has said in the past that he does not want any money to be spent on no-deal preparations. He has also said that he does not want us to go into a no-deal situation. That is fine, but if he does not want us to be in a no-deal situation, he is going to have to vote for the deal.

Jeremy Corbyn: To be fair to the advisers, it appears that they were instructed to restrict their due diligence to the face value of the presentation put to them by Seaborne Freight—a company that had no trading history. Looking at the directors of Seaborne, it appears that some of them would not have passed a due diligence test.

The Transport Secretary told the House:

“This procurement was done properly and in a way that conforms with Government rules.”—[Official Report, 8 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 192.]

However, a freedom of information request reveals that the Secretary of State bypassed those rules, because the procurement assurance board—a senior panel of experts and lawyers—was denied the chance to scrutinise the deal. What action will the Prime Minister take over what appears to be a very clear breach of those rules?

The Prime Minister: The contract was awarded following commercial, technical and financial assurance at a level in line with the company’s status as a new entrant to the market, carried out not only by senior DfT officials but by third-party organisations with experience and expertise in this area, including Deloitte, Mott MacDonald, and Slaughter and May. It was designed in recognition of the risks posed: no money was paid to the contractor and no money would be paid until services were delivered. Therefore, no money has been paid to that contractor.

The right hon. Gentleman has stood here time and again and said that, actually, we should not be doing anything to prepare for no deal. It is entirely right and proper that this Government are taking the action necessary to ensure that, should we be in that no-deal situation—it is not our policy to have no deal; it is our policy to get a deal—we have the capacity we need, and that is exactly what we are doing.

Jeremy Corbyn: Could I bring the Prime Minister back to the question of Seaborne ferries? Eurotunnel has called the ferry contract procurement a “secretive and flawed” exercise. Taxpayers now face a legal bill of nearly £1 million to contest that—the money goes up and up. The Secretary of State’s decision to award the contract to Seaborne has increased the budget deficit of Thanet Council, the owners of Ramsgate port, by nearly £2 million. When questioned by the hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay), the Transport Secretary refused to give a guarantee. Can the Prime Minister today give a cast-iron commitment to the people of Thanet and confirm that they will not be picking up the bill for the failure of this contract?

The Prime Minister: The Department for Transport and other parts of the Government are in discussion with Thanet Council about the impact of the contract. I remind the right hon. Gentleman why the Department for Transport has taken these actions in relation to ferry capacity: to ensure that in a no-deal situation we are able to guarantee that medicines, primarily, will brought into this country. We are prioritising medicines being brought into this country. Again, that was a question I seem to remember being asked on more than one occasion yesterday by SNP Members who had an interest in that. The right hon. Gentleman does not seem to be interested in ensuring that we can, in a no-deal situation, provide the medicines that people in this country need. That is what we are doing. That is the sensible approach of a Government who are taking this matter seriously.

Jeremy Corbyn: Maybe the Prime Minister should follow the advice of the House and take no deal off the table and negotiate seriously with the European Union. It cannot be right that a hard-pressed local council and local taxpayers are footing the bill for the incompetence of the Secretary of State for Transport and this Government.

The spectacular failure of this contract is a symptom of the utter shambles of this Government and their no-deal preparations. The Transport Secretary ignored warnings about drones and airport security; he gave a £1.4 billion contract to Carillion despite warnings about their finances; he oversaw the disastrous new rail timetable last year; and rail punctuality is at a 13-year low and fares at a record high—that is some achievement. And now the Transport Secretary is in charge of a major and vital aspect of Brexit planning. How on earth can the Prime Minister say she has confidence in the Transport Secretary?

The Prime Minister: Let me tell the right hon. Gentleman what the Transport Secretary is delivering: the biggest rail investment programme since the Victorian era, spending nearly £48 billion on improving our railways to deliver better journeys—20% higher on average every year than under a Labour Government. That is what the Transport Secretary is delivering: commitment to transport in this country and commitment to transport across the whole of this country.

I notice that the right hon. Gentleman wanted to focus his questions in that way, rather than asking more general questions in relation to Brexit. There are still a number of issues on Brexit where we do not know his answers to the big questions. We do not know if—[Interruption.] It is no good Labour Members burying their heads in their hands. We do not know whether their leader backs a second referendum. We do not even know whether he backs Brexit. He prefers ambiguity and playing politics to acting in the national interest. People used to say he was a conviction politician—not any more.

Q3. [990178] Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): On Friday, I visited Tiverton High School, a great local school rated good by Ofsted. However, Tiverton High
School is facing many challenges: the buildings are old and stressed, and there is not enough capacity for all local children to attend Tiverton High School. Tiverton is a growing town and a great town, but poverty is higher than both the county and the English national average. The school buildings are located in a flood zone, so when the River Exe bursts its banks there is a significant risk to life. That means we really do need a new school. Fortunately, we have a site with planning permission and Devon County Council has completed a plan. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister facilitate meetings between me and schools Ministers, so that we can together deliver a new school that Tiverton deserves?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that with me. Obviously, the quality of school buildings is an important issue in our education system. That is why we are putting more money into it—we are investing £23 billion in school buildings through to 2021. He raised the specific issue of Tiverton High School, and I will make sure that a Minister from the Department for Education will be happy to meet him—and the head teacher and the council, if that is appropriate—to discuss this issue.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I congratulate so many of my colleagues on sporting yellow today as a mark of solidarity with those from Catalonia who are on trial for the political principle of supporting self-determination.

Will the Prime Minister rule out bringing the meaningful vote to this House less than two weeks before 29 March?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman was present yesterday when I made my statement to the House and he heard the process that we will be following. Of course, a debate is taking place tomorrow, and then, as we have made clear, if a meaningful vote has not been brought back and passed by this House, we will make a statement on 26 February and have a debate on an amendable motion on the 27th.

Ian Blackford: I am afraid that that was no answer from a Prime Minister who continues to run the clock down. This is the height of arrogance from a Government set on running the clock down. Just 44 days from a no-deal scenario, the Prime Minister is hamstringing her own party and rejected by European leaders. The no-deal scenario, the Prime Minister is hamstrung by her own party and extending article 50?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, rather than relying on what someone said to someone else, as overheard by someone else, in a bar. It is very clear that the Government’s wish him well on his retirement and thank him for all the support he gave me, particularly when I was Deputy Speaker. Thank you, David—good luck.

Slaidburn health centre serves 1,100 people in the village and surrounding rural areas. It is well used and well loved by an ageing population with no bus service. The contract is up for renewal and people really do fear the salami-slicing of services, or even worse, the closure, so will the Prime Minister publicly give her support to health services such as Slaidburn today and say that either the reduction of services, or even worse, the closure, would be totally unacceptable?

The Prime Minister: I am aware of the issues with Slaidburn country practice, and of course, we are aware of the pressures facing GPs. That is why there is going to be a major new investment in primary and community healthcare. This is a very important element of our national health service, and that has been set out in the long-term plan. In the event of a practice closure—NHS England assesses the need for a replacement provider before dispensing the list of patients at that GP surgery. I understand that in relation to Slaidburn health centre, discussions are ongoing on the future of the practice, and the local clinical commissioning group is currently exploring options.

Q7. [909182] Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I will be chairing a Delegated Legislation Committee while the tributes to David Natzler are paid, so I publicly congratulate so many of my colleagues on sporting yellow today as a mark of solidarity with those from Catalonia who are on trial for the political principle of supporting self-determination. The right hon. Gentleman talks about certainty for business. Can he give business certainty by voting for the deal—that is what gives business certainty. He complains about no deal, but of course, it is specifically referenced in the political declaration. Will the Prime Minister now face down the extremists in her own party and extend article 50?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the action that the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is taking on social media sites and the action the Home Office is taking in conjunction with DCMS. We want social media companies to do more to ensure that they do not promote harmful content to vulnerable people. He raised the specific issue of the impact on people with eating disorders. We want to take action in a way that helps to keep people safe in looking at images, and I will ensure that a Minister from the Department meets him to discuss this issue.

Q8. [909183] Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Notwithstanding Brussels bar-room chatter, will the Prime Minister rule out a delay to Brexit beyond 29 March and a future customs union arrangement that would prevent us from doing those global trade deals that the Bank of England Governor says could spark a golden age for trade?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend knows, I and the Government have been very clear in our customs proposals that we want an independent trade policy—it is specifically referenced in the political declaration. We believe it is important, and I am pleased to hear what the Governor of the Bank of England has said today about the importance of free trade around the world.

On my hon. Friend’s first point, I am grateful he has asked me that question, rather than relying on what someone said to someone else, as overheard by someone else, in a bar. It is very clear that the Government’s
position remains the same: the House voted to trigger article 50; that had a two-year timeline that ends on 29 March; we want to leave with a deal, and that is what we are working for.

Q4. [909179] Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Two weeks ago, I asked the Prime Minister to unblock the funding for Dawlish and give us the investment to improve that train line. Two weeks later, we still have no funding. I worry that Brexit is causing the Government to sit on announcements that need to be made on both rail funding and the long-term basing of the Royal Marines in Plymouth. Will she tell the Transport Secretary to get on with it and announce the funding for Dawlish this week without any further delay?

The Prime Minister: As I said previously to the hon. Gentleman, the Department is reviewing Network Rail’s proposals for an effective and resilient solution on the Dawlish line, and there will be an update on funding in due course. The first phase of work to protect the sea wall at Dawlish began in November, of course, as part of the £15 million of wider investment to make the railway at Dawlish and Teignmouth more resilient to extreme weather.

Q10. [909185] Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I know from the doorstep in Corby and east Northamptonshire that local people want to see more police officers out on the beat catching criminals and deterring crime. Will the Prime Minister join me in calling for the additional money she has rightly announced for policing to be invested in frontline presence?

The Prime Minister: I recognise my hon. Friend’s comments from the doorstep, and I know that he is an assiduous Member who listens to his constituents and brings their views to this Chamber. It is important that we have made more money available to police forces, and I am pleased to say that the number of people joining police forces as officers is at its highest level for 10 years. We made more money available to police forces—£970 million over the next year—although it is a sadness in this Chamber that the Labour party voted against it.

Q5. [909180] Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): What has the Prime Minister got against towns in north Wales? In the week following the loss of a £20 billion Hitachi contract in the region, the Government announced the moving of 380 Wrexham tax office jobs to Liverpool and Cardiff city centre. Is it her view that towns across the UK should not have public sector jobs?

The Prime Minister: No it is not. On Hitachi and the Wylfa site, we offered a package of support that no previous Government had been willing to consider of one third equity, all-debt financing and a strike price of no more than £75 per MWh. Ultimately, we could not at that stage reach an agreement among all the parties, and Hitachi decided on a commercial basis to suspend the project, but it has made clear that it wishes to continue discussions with the Government on bringing forward new nuclear at Wylfa, and we will support those discussions.

Q11. [909186] Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Over the past four years, the number of people stopped and searched by the police has fallen by two thirds. At the same time, the number of stabbings has increased by a third. Does the Prime Minister agree that, carried out in the right way, stop-and-search is an effective part of the battle against knife crime?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree that, carried out in the right way, stop-and-search is an effective tool for our police forces. We recognise the concern felt about violent crime—the hon. Gentleman has raised the specific issue of knife crime—which is why the Home Secretary published the serious violence strategy, and why we established the serious violence taskforce.

Let me reiterate that we want the police to use stop-and-search properly and lawfully. It is a vital and effective policing tool, but when they use it, we expect them to do so lawfully.

Q6. [909181] Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I am sure you recall, Mr Speaker, the halcyon days when the Prime Minister was telling a rapturous Tory conference that she would put an end to rip-off energy companies once and for all. On Thursday Ofgem relaxed the energy price cap, and on Monday E.On announced a 10% price increase. Now we discover that the number of households in official fuel poverty has risen to more than 2.5 million. How does the Prime Minister think she is doing?

The Prime Minister: It was, of course, this Government who introduced the energy price cap. That was not done by the previous Labour Government. The cap has protected 11 million households, and energy suppliers will no longer be able to rip off customers on poor-value tariffs. It will save consumers £1 billion a year. Citizens Advice has previously said:

“the cap means people are paying a fairer price now, and will continue to pay a fairer price even if the level of the cap rises”.

Q15. [909190] Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Since 2014, the number of children being excluded from schools has risen by 67%. In every school week, 4,253 children with special educational needs have been permanently excluded or excluded for a fixed period. That is a burning social injustice. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the progress of the Timpson review of exclusions, and will she tell us whether the Government will make schools accountable for the outcomes of the pupils whom they exclude, as recommended by our Education Committee and as suggested by the Education Secretary?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend and the Education Committee for their work on this important issue. Obviously we all recognise that good discipline in schools is essential, but it is also important to ensure that any exclusion is lawful, reasonable and fair. Guidance sets out that headteachers should, as far as possible, avoid permanently excluding any pupil who is subject to an education, health and care plan, and make additional efforts to provide extra support to avoid excluding those with special educational needs. We want to ensure that schools play their part in supporting children who have been excluded, in collaboration with alternative providers and local authorities.
My right hon. Friend mentioned the Timpson review. It is still ongoing, but I can assure him that when it reports in due course, we will look very seriously and very carefully at its recommendations.

Q9. [909184] Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Since 2013, 220 parliamentarians and 450 members of their staff have received mindfulness training in the House. Our cross-party mindfulness all-party parliamentary group has published a report, “Mindful Nation UK”, on the uses of mindfulness in education, health, prisons and the workplace, and it has been well received by the Government. After Brexit negotiations have been concluded—when the Prime Minister might need to de-stress—will she meet representatives of our cross-party group and senior scientists to discuss what more can be done through mindfulness to reduce human suffering and promote human flourishing?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important issue, and I thank the mindfulness APPG for its work and its recent report. As the hon. Gentleman knows, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy is recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence for adults with depression.

I am aware of the training that staff have received. A few weeks ago, a constituent came to my surgery to talk about mindfulness. A member of my parliamentary staff who was with me had undertaken that training, and was therefore able to speak about the impact that it had had.

The commissioning of psychological therapies is a matter for NHS England, but I will ensure that it is aware of the report.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) is obviously a beneficiary of mindfulness himself. He seems a very calm and phlegmatic fellow these days, which was not always the case in the past.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): The honours system is designed to acknowledge and celebrate great public service to our nation. Does my right hon. Friend agree that when a small minority of recipients of honours, like Philip Green, bring the system of honours and business into disrepute by being found to have behaved disgracefully, setting down the vast majority of businesses who set the highest standards, then it is right for this party and this Government to be the first to stand up for decent standards and look at beginning a process for seeing whether people who behave in that way should be stripped of their honour?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend said, the honours system recognises exceptional service and achievement in a wide range of spheres of public life, and if the recipient of an honour brings that honour into disrepute it is important that steps are taken to review that honour. There is a forfeiture process for that purpose; that includes an independent forfeiture committee which gives recommendations to me for Her Majesty’s approval. That is the process, and it is important that we have that so that when anybody who has been in receipt of an honour brings that honour into disrepute steps can be taken to review that.

Q12. [909187] Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Last weekend Millwall Lionesses from my constituency played and beat Lewes FC in the fourth round of the FA cup. In the women’s competition, the Lionesses received £2,000 in prize money; the winners in the same round of the men’s competition received £180,000. Is the Prime Minister willing to put pressure on the FA to equalise prize money for the men’s and women’s competition as Wimbledon did in 2007?

The Prime Minister: As president of the Wargrave girls football club, I am very willing to commend all those girls and other females who play football. Members across this House have been concerned to hear of the disparity between the winnings that the hon. Lady has raised with the House. Obviously this is a matter for the football authorities, but I am sure they will have heard the concern expressed in this House about the current position.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): It takes courage and leadership to admit difficult things, because that is how we start to recognise the need for change, so I would like to thank the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions for acknowledging that there has been a link between accessing universal credit and food bank usage. But it is not the case that there has been a link; there is a link. Will the Prime Minister please urgently review the five-week wait and the benefit freeze? Both must go, because the unpalatable truth is that our welfare safety net is no longer holding up those most vulnerable in society; it is tangling around their feet and dragging them under the water.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend and I have discussed universal credit and its roll-out in the past. As she will know, as we have been rolling this out slowly and carefully, we have taken a number of measures to address issues that have arisen. Shortly after I became Prime Minister we cut the taper rate so people could keep more of the money they earned. Subsequently we have of course scrapped the seven-day waiting. We have introduced the two-week “up-and-off” process in relation to the in receipt of housing benefit. And of course we have also ensured that 100% of a full monthly payment is available to people at the start, for those who need it. So we have been taking steps and will continue to look at universal credit, but universal credit is a system that encourages people into work and makes sure that work pays, compared with the legacy system from the Labour party that left 1.4 million people for nearly a decade trapped on benefits.

Q13. [909188] Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): Despite the Prime Minister’s party’s manifesto promise, nearly 7,000 pensioner households in my West Lancashire constituency could lose their free TV licences. Often the television is their only source of company. Are the Government going to keep their manifesto promise by taking back the responsibility they have outsourced to the BBC, to ensure that older people keep their TV licences?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the value that people across the country place on having a television, and for many elderly people the connection that brings with the world. That is why the free licences for the over-75s are
so important. We have been clear that we want and expect the BBC to continue free licences when it takes over responsibility for the concession in 2020. May I just say that taxpayers rightly want to see the BBC using its substantial licence fee income in an appropriate way to ensure that it delivers fully for UK audiences?

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): My constituent, Ben Seaman, receives employment and support allowance benefits and was awarded £20,000 after the recent court ruling on ESA underpayments. Ben has to spend a lot of this within a year in order to avoid having more than £16,000 of assets and risk losing his eligibility for ESA. Clearly this is an unintended anomaly, so will my right hon. Friend encourage the Work and Pensions Secretary, who I know is sympathetic to the situation, to resolve this as soon as possible through an exemption for Ben and for any others who are similarly affected?

The Prime Minister: This is a concerning case that my hon. Friend has raised with me. I understand that the Department for Work and Pensions is aware of it and I am assured that it is looking into the issue, and I will ensure that he receives a response as soon as possible.

Q14. [909189] Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): The Prime Minister’s determination has been widely acknowledged, but the truth is that she cannot get her deal through unless something fundamentally changes in that deal. However, there is a way in which she can get it through unchanged and which would also help with the reconciliation of our country on the other side. It would mean following the example of the Good Friday agreement and having confirmation from the people afterwards, but there would be fundamental benefits from that happening. I am not asking her to pass judgment on this at the Dispatch Box right now, but will she agree to meet me and my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson), just to briefly talk it through and explore the possible benefits?

The Prime Minister: I think the hon. Gentleman knows my view in relation to a second referendum; I have expressed it many times in this House and it has not changed. I believe it is important that we deliver on the first referendum, but my colleagues and I are meeting Members from across the House to discuss the issues that they wish to raise in relation to the Brexit matter, and I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Sedgefield can meet, if not with me then with an appropriate Minister.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): With the return of the Royal Air Force Tornados from operations for the last time, will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the plane and to all those men and women who have flown and maintained her?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the Tornado and to the men and women who have flown and maintained the fleet over the last 40 years. He has referenced the cold war and the mountains of Afghanistan, but to the remarkable men and women who have flown and maintained her?

RAF operations. As my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary said last week, it is with a heavy heart but enormous pride that we bid farewell to the Tornado from operations after it has played that vital role in keeping Britain and the allies safe. It will of course be replaced with worthy successors in the improved Typhoon and the new F-35s, which will keep us as a world leader in air combat, but I am happy to pay tribute from the Dispatch Box to the plane and to all those men and women who have flown and maintained it over those 40 years.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The UK’s democracy is defunct. Its economy and society are chronically unequal. Britain is breaking. Let us speak as others find us. This plain truth has not gone unnoticed. In pubs, clubs and homes, on pavements, at schools and workplaces, and at a Yes Is More gig in Cardiff on Friday, people are talking about this place and about how Westminster is failing them. Will the Prime Minister lift her gaze above party interests and the Westminster interest? When will she work with others to remake this island as three self-sufficient, thriving nations, rather than perpetuating the assumption of privilege for one?

The Prime Minister: When I became Prime Minister, I was very clear that I wanted a country that worked for everyone, and that was the entire United Kingdom. I note that in her question the hon. Lady failed to recognise that Northern Ireland was part of the United Kingdom. We want Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom. I also say to her that democracy is not defunct. Democracy in this country will be shown by this House recognising the vote that took place in 2016, delivering on the result of the referendum and voting for a deal for us to leave the EU.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): Despite our comparative size, the UK has more Government Departments than even the USA. We hear in this place all the time about the challenges of cross-departmental working. Will my right hon. Friend commit to looking carefully in the spending review at opportunities to shrink the size of government and instead focus our spending on public services?

The Prime Minister: The question of the size of government is something that several colleagues raise from time to time. I must put my hand up and admit the role that I played in that by creating the Department for Exiting the European Union and the Department for International Trade, and of course we are also employing more civil servants to ensure that we deliver on Brexit, something which I believe is close to my hon. Friend’s heart.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Maryam is just six months old, and she is beautiful. She was recently diagnosed with a devastating form of muscular dystrophy. Her brother had the same condition and died tragically young. Spinraza is a new and highly effective drug produced by Biogen that is available in 23 countries, but not in England. If Maryam lived in the west of Scotland instead of West Ham, she would get it. Negotiations between the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and Biogen have been unsuccessful, leaving
Maryam and two other babies as tiny pawns in an argument about price and profit. Will the Prime Minister please intervene and help prevent Maryam and others from suffering an early and painful death?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady raises that case with great passion, and I will ensure that a Minister from the Department of Health and Social Care looks at the matter and responds to her.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): The consumption of dog and cat meat goes against our British values. They are our companions. They are not food. Does my right hon. Friend agree that a ban on consumption here, where, astounding, it is still legal, would put us in a leading position and send a clear message to the rest of the world that the sickening and horrific suffering that the animals experience during slaughter should be stopped? If so, will she commit to the change, which has cross-party support, as demonstrated by my amendment to the Agriculture Bill?

The Prime Minister: I am aware of my hon. Friend’s amendment, and I thank him for raising the issue. Animal welfare is a priority for this Government. I am pleased that it is illegal to sell dog and cat meat in the UK. No abattoirs are licensed to slaughter dogs and, thankfully, there is no evidence of human consumption of dog or cat meat in the UK. I certainly hope that other countries will join the UK in upholding the highest standards of animal welfare.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. In wishing the hon. Lady a very happy birthday and hoping that the House will join me in doing so, I call Rachel Reeves.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker—21 again.

My constituent Harriet recently gave birth to her baby three months premature. When Harriet was due to return to work, her baby had only recently come out of hospital, and she had to choose between taking additional time off work but struggling to pay the bills or returning to work but missing crucial bonding time with her baby. The Government had committed to reviewing the issue by the end of January, but we are now halfway through February. Will the Prime Minister commit to taking action and to extending parental leave for the parents of children who end up in neonatal wards?

The Prime Minister: First, happy birthday to the hon. Lady. We are reviewing the situation, and we are also looking at what applies in other circumstances, such as miscarriage. I will ensure that she receives a written response.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): The Leader of the Opposition has shown today that a little knowledge is a very dangerous thing. He chose to ask about Seaborne Freight and Ramsgate port, which is in my constituency, but he does not speak for South Thanet; I do. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that the people of Thanet are ready and prepared to keep the port open for Brexit eventuality? Can she give a commitment to Thanet District Council that it will be indemnified for costs here on in?

The Prime Minister: No one can doubt the passion and vigour with which my hon. Friend speaks up for the people of his South Thanet constituency. He mentions Ramsgate port, and I am aware of the discussions between the council and the Department for Transport, and I believe that they are continuing. Obviously, I recognise the significance of the possibility of ensuring that suitable capacity is available at Ramsgate harbour, and I will ensure that the Department for Transport looks at the specific issue that he raises.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Yes, on this occasion I will take a point of order from the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) because I gather that it appertains to the session that has just concluded. I very gently say to him that I hope that this is not a cheeky ruse to be deployed on a weekly basis to secure for himself a third question, which our procedures do not allow. That would be very wrong, and I am sure he would not knowingly do anything very wrong. We will put it to the test. [Interruption.] There is a certain amount of chuntering from a sedentary position, not least from the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), who suggests that she thinks that he might engage in such behaviour. I am a charitable chap, and I am prepared to give him a chance.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Heaven forbid that anyone would abuse the privilege that you afford us on such occasions.

We all recognise our responsibility for the language we use in the discourse that we have in this House. I want to be helpful to the Prime Minister because she perhaps inadvertently misled the House when she said that there was no plan for Scottish independence. Unlike the Brexit campaign, which was no more than a slogan on the side of a bus, we had—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I am very grateful to the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) because he has made his point with force and alacrity, and it requires no reply. I hope he is satisfied with his prodigious efforts. We will leave it there.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah! The hon. Gentleman ought to know about good behaviour in the Chamber and elsewhere as he is a distinguished football referee.

Douglas Ross: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I appreciate your comments. For clarification, given that the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) held up a copy of the SNP’s White Paper, how can I put on the record the fact that it contained many errors and omissions? For example, it did not include any transition costs, it wildly overstated the predicted revenue from oil and, interestingly, many
of the proposals in it related to powers that the Scottish Government and the SNP already had in Holyrood in Edinburgh.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has found his own salvation, as he well knows. Hitherto, I had always thought that the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) was a notably cheeky chappie in the Chamber, but I realise that the role of cheeky chappie is not confined to the Scottish National party. We are grateful to the hon. Member for Moray, who has made his point and looks very delighted with his efforts. We will leave it there.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar looks very happy. We do not need to hear from him further at this time. I remind him that he also has cerebral status as the Chair of a Select Committee and should behave with due decorum to reflect the very high standing he enjoys, possibly in Scotland but certainly in the House.

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is something that has been troubling me for a few weeks now. When I first came here, I was told that the protocol of the Chamber is that hon. Members must never cross the line of sight between you and whoever is speaking. However, on multiple occasions this Chamber has emptied when my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) has stood up, to the point at which people cut off your line of sight when you are in the middle of speaking to Members. Could you advise us on how that can be corrected?

Mr Speaker: What I would say to the hon. Lady is twofold. First, it is a breach of the conventions of this House for a Member to walk past a Member who has the Floor on that side of the House. That is unseemly and discourteous behaviour, and it falls into the category that the hon. Lady is helpfully deprecating.

Secondly, I hope the hon. Lady will not take it amiss if I say that it is regrettable that her prodigious efforts on behalf of her party leader have not been witnessed by the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber himself, for the simple reason that he has already exited the Chamber. However, the saving grace for the hon. Lady is that her efforts have been observed by no less a figure than the Chief Whip of the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady). That probably bodes well for her in the future. We will leave it there for now.
EU Trade Agreements: Replication

12.55 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab) (Urgent Question):
To ask the Secretary of State for International Trade to make a statement on the progress he has made in replicating trade agreements between the United Kingdom and those countries with which the EU has a trade agreement.

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): As a member of the EU, the UK currently participates in about 40 free trade agreements with more than 70 countries. In 2018, the trade agreements in force constituted about 11% of our trade. They cover a wide variety of relationships, including free trade agreements, economic partnership agreements with developing nations, association agreements that cover broader economic and political cooperation, and mutual recognition agreements.

The Government’s programme for providing continuity and stability for businesses, consumers and investors in our international agreements is of the utmost importance. We are committed to ensuring that those benefits are maintained, providing for a smooth transition as we leave the EU, but the House will be well aware that the best way to provide that continuity and stability is to ensure that we have a deal with the European Union so the UK remains covered by all those agreements during the implementation period.

We have already signed a number of agreements, including with Switzerland—the largest in terms of our trade flows, representing more than 20% of the value of all our roll-over agreements. We have also signed agreements with Chile and the Faroe Islands, and an economic partnership agreement with eastern and southern Africa. The texts, explanatory memorandums and parliamentary reports for those agreements have already been laid in the Libraries of both Houses.

As we leave the EU, we have no intention of making our developing country partners worse off, as the Opposition would have us do by abandoning EPAs. It is important for the prosperity of their people that we maintain our trading relationships so they have the opportunity to lift themselves out of poverty. We have recently reached agreements with Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and we intend to sign them shortly. Just today, we reached agreement on the UK-Pacific EPA. We have also signed mutual recognition agreements with Australia and New Zealand, and will be closing two with the United States soon. A number of negotiations are at an advanced stage. All international negotiations—indeed, any negotiations—tend to go down to the wire, and I would expect nothing different from these agreements. That is the way that countries do business.

To put the economic value of the agreements in perspective, the countries covered by 20 of the smallest agreements account for less than 0.8% of the UK’s total trade. For the countries with which we may not be able to sign a full agreement by exit day, it is responsible to ensure that we have contingencies in place should we end up, unfortunately, in a no-deal scenario. That is exactly what my Department, alongside the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development, is doing. We will shortly be updating businesses and the House about the progress on these agreements, and will continue to inform the House as soon as further agreements are signed, in line with our established parliamentary procedures.

Barry Gardiner: Yesterday, the Department’s risk matrix for the so-called roll-over agreements was published in the media. Of the 40 agreements that the Secretary of State famously promised would be ready one second after midnight on exit day, precisely four have been signed. Nine are off track, 19 are significantly off track, four cannot be completed by March 2019 and two are not even being negotiated.

Throughout the passage of the Trade Bill, Members repeatedly said that they were concerned that it would not be possible to replicate the terms of those agreements fully, and that many countries would seek to renegotiate terms in their favour. I therefore ask the Secretary of State to write to me to set out for each country what objections or demands to concluding a new roll-over have been presented, what concessions he has offered in respect of preferential access to UK markets in order to overcome such obstacles, and what assessment he has made of the impact on trade flows with the UK of a failure to conclude a new deal.

Many in the business community feel that the Secretary of State has diverted too many of his Department’s resources to entirely new free trade agreements, and so keen has he been to grandstand with the new that he has ignored the fundamental grinding work of securing what we already have. So I ask the Secretary of State to write to set out: the number of full-time personnel engaged on securing entirely new agreements; the number engaged on securing the roll-overs; and whether he believes his Department has been adequately resourced to handle so many trade negotiations at once.

Recently, the Secretary of State suggested the unilateral liberalisation of tariffs in the event of a no-deal Brexit. Will he explain to the House how he thinks negotiations would go with the remaining roll-over countries once he had given up our key negotiating leverage by reducing all tariffs to zero? Most Members might think that by doing so we were the ones being rolled over. Will he categorically rule out such a proposal? As we speak, goods are being loaded on to vessels that will be arriving in our markets from overseas after 29 March. How does he intend to support business with these transactions, given that nobody knows what tariffs and non-tariff barriers they will face when they arrive at their destination port? Increasingly, the Department for International Trade looks as though it has inadequate resources, focused on the wrong priorities, set by incompetent Ministers.

Dr Fox: As ever, the hon. Gentleman gives us a rich menu of the things on which he is wrong. First, if we want to ensure that all our agreements are rolled over, the best way to do that is by reaching a deal with the European Union so that they will apply one minute after midnight. I voted for that continuity. Did the hon. Gentleman? Did his party? Secondly, he asks about the reasons why countries may not want to continue these things. I have had discussions with a number of Opposition politicians about this. Some countries have said that they did not like some of the human rights elements that were incorporated by the EU and they would like
us to drop those in order to roll the agreements over. I am not inclined to do so, because the value we attach to human rights is an important part of who we are as a country. The hon. Gentleman was wrong in that, rather than diverting resources in my Department from roll-over agreements to future free trade agreements, I have done exactly the opposite, reducing the number working on potential future FTAs in order to give maximum resource for this. Finally, he was wrong as I did not advocate unilateral liberalisation of tariffs—that was something mentioned in a newspaper—and the Government will determine what their day one tariffs will be as a collective decision in the event of no deal.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): My right hon. Friend is right to stress that if we were to leave on 29 March with no deal, it would have a disastrous effect for many industries, because we would suddenly lose very important trading agreements across the world that we have enjoyed for many years. I agree with him on that, but does he not accept that when we get into the transition period he is still going to face enormous difficulties and will need a very long transition period to start negotiating so many trade deals with so many important markets for our economy? Does he not accept that his principal problem is the lack of bargaining power that the UK has on its own compared with what the EU has as a bloc in carrying out bargaining arrangements? He mentions human rights and other things, but very important countries such as Japan and South Korea, and others, are going to expect better terms from the UK, at the expense of the UK, than they have had to give to the EU. He says that they will take it to the wire. He accepts that he is having tough negotiations. Would he contemplate urging on his colleagues, even at this stage, moving to some sort of customs arrangement and regulatory alignment with the rest of the EU which will rescue us from these chaotic negotiations and allow us to enjoy the benefits of trade agreements which, for the most part, were ones that previous Conservative Governments urged upon our EU partners and took a leading role in getting put in place in the first place?

Dr Fox: As ever, my right hon. and learned Friend raises interesting points. Although there would undoubtedly be a greater risk in the case of no deal, I do not agree that this would be disastrous, because we are likely to maintain a high proportion of the continuity of these agreements. Let me just remind him that five of those 40 agreements represent 76% of the trade, by value, that falls into this category. My Department has developed a great degree of expertise and knowledge in the process of transitioning to new agreements. There are those who say, “If we end up getting a deal, much of this work that has been done will be wasted.” I completely disagree with that, as it has created a body of knowledge, experience and expertise in the Department that will stand us in good stead. As for our ability to negotiate with other countries, we remain the world’s fifth biggest economy and many countries have said to us that it would be much easier to do an agreement with the UK as a single country which would then negotiate and ratify than to have to do it with 28 countries, as they do at the moment. On Japan, we have of course made clear our position and finished our public consultation on potential membership of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership—CPTPP—a subject on which we are likely to have a debate in this House next week. Finally, he asks whether we should not stay in a customs union. That would preclude us from having negotiations on new agreements, such as with the United States, or even with China, with which the EU has no agreement at the present time.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): The Secretary of State has just said that countries say it would be easier to do a deal with the UK. One might ask the simple question: if it was so easy, why have we not even been able to roll over more than half a dozen of the deals we currently have? The leaked documents paint a picture of unvarnished failure: with South Korea and Canada we are off track; and with Japan we have no chance of completion. These deals are not simply necessary in the event of a no-deal Brexit; they may well be required at the end of the transition period if the negotiation then is as miserable as we have seen to date. So why does he not own up? The time to negotiate these deals has run out, and it is highly unlikely that the Prime Minister’s deal, which he supports, will be accepted by this House. This is the evidence that he and others need to put their weight behind an extension to article 50 so that his Government and his Department at least can complete the simple task of rolling over the deals we currently have.

Dr Fox: Again, I make the point: if Opposition Members want us to get trade continuity, the best way to do so is to vote for the deal that the Prime Minister has already set out. As for future FTAs, we could not negotiate those were we to follow the hon. Gentleman’s advice and remain in a customs union.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): I have had a careful look at the passage of these agreements through this House in the first place. Every one of them was supported by my right hon. Friend. But most of them have been opposed by the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner): CETA—the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement—in February 2017; the EU-Japan agreement in June 2018; and the EU-Singapore agreement in September 2018. He voted against those. Does my right hon. Friend share my consternation at this urgent question, given that the hon. Gentleman never wanted us to be in these trade agreements in the first place?

Dr Fox: First, let me thank my right hon. Friend for the work he has done in my Department as part of this overall process. What stands out in this debate is the utter humbug we hear from the hon. Member for Brent North, who talks about the need to roll over agreements such as the one with Canada and asks why the Government are late in doing so. The Labour party voted against the agreement in the first place; Labour did not want us to have the agreement. So now, to come to the House asking why we are not rolling it over on time is, sadly, absolutely typical of the way he does business.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The serious matter here is that on 29 March, transition or no transition, the UK is going to be at the mercy of the sovereignty of 70 other countries in their agreeing to the trade deal roll-over. The EU seems to have been very
good at these trade agreements, which include human rights. The Secretary of State wants to maintain those agreements, despite wanting to rip up trade agreements with the most important partners, namely the 27 countries in the EU trading bloc.

The importance of the 40-odd trade agreements with 70 countries is recognised by the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, which warns that even if EU trade agreements are rolled over, advantages will not always be met. For example, the EU-Korea agreement allows for 55% automotive content, but the UK cannot reach 55% automotive content. As the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders has warned, that will put the UK at the disadvantage of not being able to fulfil the rates of the trade agreement, and we will be on the more disadvantageous World Trade Organisation terms as well. In the 40 agreements with 70 other countries, how many other instances are there of clauses such as the one on 55% content that cannot be met? People who trade and export from the UK need to know, and they need to know now, with 44 days to go.

**Dr Fox:** The central premise of the hon. Gentleman’s question is that we intend to rip up our trade agreement with what he describes as our most important trading partner, the EU27. We have no intention of having a breach. We want to have a full, liberal trading arrangement with the European Union. We do not want Britain to be subjugated in a political relationship that the voters have told us to leave. When it comes to continuity, the Government have set out what we will do with the agreements. For each of them, we have set out to Parliament—this is in both Libraries—the text of the agreement, an explanatory memorandum and the political statement on where there is any change between the agreement in place and the one we are rolling over, if utter and complete replication has not been possible. We have done that already, and we shall do that with the others.

**Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): I heard the Secretary of State give the commitment on the guidance that he is going to give. My constituents who are seeking to export to countries now do not know, at the point of departure, what regime their goods will face on arrival. I note the Secretary of State’s attacks on the Opposition parties, but he may wish to recall that 117 Government MPs did not vote for the Prime Minister’s deal, many because of their ideological commitment to WTO rules. Given that we are 44 days away, when will that guidance be issued to companies in my constituency? I was one of the 40 Back-Bench MPs who supported the Prime Minister’s deal.

**Dr Fox:** The Government are assessing where we are with each of the agreements. Where we believe that it will not be possible fully to replicate, we will set out a technical notice in the coming days. Let me give my hon. Friend the example of Turkey, which is part of the customs union: unless we get an agreement with the European Union, we will not be able to maintain the current pattern of trade with Turkey, although we would look to see where we could mitigate any problems that came up.
agreement. We will take a more liberal view of that and will be able to do things as an independent nation that we cannot do as a member of the European Union.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): It is my understanding, and the Secretary of State has referred to this as well, that the EU has not permitted Turkey to engage in talks with the UK on continuity of trade post Brexit under the terms of its goods-only customs agreement with that country. It is the kind of arrangement that I understand we would fall into under the backstop. Will the Secretary of State please update the House on any progress in talks with Turkey to ensure smooth future trade with this important partner? Does he share my concern about limitations on our ability to negotiate freely with trade partners should we enter into a goods-only customs arrangement with the EU?

Dr Fox: There are issues with Turkey, which is in a customs union, although it is a partial customs union, so we can discuss our future relationship in areas such as agriculture and services. I refer in all humility to the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), who put it best. He said of a customs union that “as an end point it is deeply unattractive. It would preclude us from making our own independent trade agreements with our five largest export markets outside the EU”.

That was then; it is not the policy today.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Secretary of State will recall that last week I asked him to provide this risk matrix to the House, but he would not. Instead, he asserted that if only I listened to his contribution in the International Trade Committee, all would be revealed. I went back and listened to it and nothing was revealed about the content of the matrix. Why would he not make this information, which has now been leaked to The Sun, available to Members of Parliament in the same way that he was happy to make it available to businesses? Is it because he does not believe that we have a role in the scrutiny of his activities? Or was it simply to save him the embarrassment of Members seeing what lack of progress there has been on the 40 trade deals he said would be signed by one minute after midnight on 30 March?

Dr Fox: It is tedious to have to give the same answer, but if the same question keeps getting asked, I will keep doing so. The way that we get continuity at one minute after midnight is to have an agreement with the European Union so that we have continuity of the agreements. A number of the agreements are very close to completion, but there is a level of confidentiality around that. At the same time, the Government clearly want to give business an indication of where we think a trade agreement may not be able to be rolled over on time. I will do that in the coming days, following an assessment of where we are at the present time, and I will make a written ministerial statement to the House as well.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): Is it not necessary for us to take lessons from the fact that we have failed to land a pre-Brexit trade deal with Japan or with most of the other 70 countries with which the EU enjoys FTAs, such as that actually we would be better off being in a customs union or having some close customs arrangement with the EU, backed up by the firepower of 510 million consumers rather than 65 million?

Dr Fox: But we are leaving the EU. Were we to attempt to have a customs union relationship, which is what the Labour party says, we would have no say in that trade policy; we would actually be worse off than we are today in the European Union. The EU has made it very clear—and the European Union treaty makes it very clear—that a third country outside the EU cannot be involved in setting EU trade policy. At best, it is a fantasy, at worst, a dangerous delusion.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): On free trade agreements with Japan and South Korea, the Secretary of State for Business made it clear to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee last week that the deadline for companies exporting to Japan and South Korea is this Friday, 15 February, because shipments take six weeks to arrive. What advice would the Secretary of State give to businesses that are exporting to Japan and South Korea? If the Government get their deal through, will the free trade agreements with those countries roll over? If we do not manage to secure a deal, what happens to those shipments when they arrive at the end of March and the beginning of April?

Dr Fox: The hon. Lady raises a very important point. On Japan, the Japanese Government have said to us that if there were a deal with the European Union, they intend to roll over the Japan economic partnership agreement at that point, and the UK would continue to benefit. I have to say, though, that we have been trading with Japan for many years, but trading on World Trade Organisation terms. We have been trading under the Japan EPA for a matter of days. When it comes to British business continuity, firms are used to dealing on WTO terms, and I envisage our trade relationship with Japan to be largely effected by our potential membership of CPTPP, to which the Japanese Government have given enormous encouragement.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): But from whom were representations had to the effect that remaining in a customs union would be a disaster?

Dr Fox: It would be unparliamentary of me to use the same term as the shadow Secretary of State for some of Labour’s tests that have led it to its policy today. It is nonsensical to say that we can be both in a customs union with the European Union as a third country and still have an effect on trade. Those tests would increase the chances of the UK remaining permanently as a rule taker, which would not be advantageous to the UK.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): There has been a great deal of focus on the number of trade deals, but, as the Secretary of State has outlined, the value of the trade in each deal varies significantly. He has indicated that many of the deals will go down to the wire. How many is he anticipating will be signed before that date? More importantly, what is their value as a percentage of our current trade value for the entire third-party free trade deals?

Dr Fox: As ever, I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. On the UK’s trade, 48% of our trade is with the European Union and 52% with the rest of
the world. Of the rest of the world trade, around 11% occurs under EU FTAs. Of the 40 or so agreements, five represent 76% of the 11%, and the bottom 20 represent less than 0.8% of 1%. Therefore, there is very clear advantage in getting those larger agreements across the line first, and we are making excellent progress in that regard.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): There are two groups in this House who underestimate the value of free trade agreements. The first includes those Opposition Front Benchers who did not vote for them in the first place and whose leader believes that free trade agreements benefit only multinationals at the expense of everyone else. He should try explaining that on the workshop floor of some of the small and medium-sized manufacturers in my constituency of Gloucester that export around the world. The second group are some Conservative Members who believe that leaving the EU with no deal will be no problem. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, in the event of no deal, the tariffs that will come into play with the EU will be devastating for farmers and manufacturers and all the rest of the 148,000 companies that export only to the EU and that the simplest way to take this risk off the table is for everybody to get behind the Government’s withdrawal agreement Bill and make sure that all these deals are rolled over without problem?

Dr Fox: It seems that the country is caught between the irrational pessimism of those who fail to be reconciled to the referendum result and believe that everything to do with Brexit will be disastrous for the UK and those who are irrationally optimistic that it would be no problem whatever to leave the European Union with no deal. The truth is that we would be better off with a deal, which is why the Government want to get that deal with the European Union across the line. I still urge Opposition Members to support it. If we do not achieve it, we will end up with the uncertainties that they have identified today.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): As the Secretary of State rails against irrational pessimism, I assume that he will tell us that the rest of the world is looking at the United Kingdom right now and saying that Brexit is a great example that it must follow.

I wish to go back to the point that the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) raised yesterday, which is that, under our current arrangements, UK businesses will be part of one of the biggest trade deals ever negotiated between the EU and Japan, but, under the Secretary of State’s policy, UK businesses will not be part of that agreement and we will have to start again. We are told that Tokyo’s trade negotiators are under instruction to extract every advantage possible, as we would expect them to do in a tough trade negotiation. Will he promise UK businesses that their market access to Japan under any deal that he manages to negotiate will be as good as it is under the EU-Japan trade deal, which has already been negotiated?

Dr Fox: As I have already said, the Prime Minister and Prime Minister Abe have both indicated that they want a close trading relationship for our countries after we leave the EU, but the Japanese Prime Minister has been very clear that he is hugely encouraging of the UK’s accession to CPTPP, which would then become a trading bloc of almost exactly the same size as the European Union itself. As for his first point, many people are looking to the United Kingdom and saying what a great example it is of democracy that a country wants to take control of its own constitutional future.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): And we buy a lot of goods from Japan anyway, particularly cars, and I am sure that it will want us to carry on doing that. Am I not right in thinking that, during the referendum campaign, David Cameron said that, by leaving the EU, we would be leaving the customs union? He recognised that that would be essential. Although a customs union would have the advantage of allowing all these deals to be rolled over, it would be a betrayal of what the people voted for in 2016 because we would still have to pay to access the customs union and there would still be free movement of labour. Furthermore, we would simply not be allowed to do those trade deals with countries such as China, the United States of America and, indeed, some of the fastest growing economies in the world.

Dr Fox: My hon. Friend, who has considerable knowledge from his work on the Select Committee, is quite right. If we were in a customs union, but a third country outside the European Union—I do not hear people say that we should stay in the EU and simply behave dishonourably towards the referendum—we would not be able to affect European Union trade policy and would become complete rule takers and would in fact be in a worse position than we are today. As a member of the European Union, we were able to affect policy. We have been given a clear instruction by the voters to leave the European Union, and that means leaving the customs union and the single market.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Manufacturers in Crewe and Nantwich have expressed very real concern about the lack of progress in this area. Does the Minister accept that committing to a new customs union as part of our future relationship with the EU would resolve this issue, allowing us to continue to take advantage of our current deals with all major global markets while allowing us the ability to strike our own deals for trade in services, which make up the vast majority of the UK economy?

Dr Fox: Just how would it give us greater certainty in the exercise of our own trade policy if we were a third country outside the European Union in a form of customs union that specifically prohibited us from having a say on that trade policy itself? That would diminish the ability of this Parliament to give certainty to any business in our country, rather than what the hon. Lady suggests.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that, if the Labour party really cared about the continuity of our trade arrangements, it would stop blocking the Trade Bill in the other place?

Dr Fox: I hope that we will see the progress of the Trade Bill, which the Labour party voted against in this House. Those involved in manufacturing, including in
the constituency of the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith), will note that the Labour party voted against the establishment of the Trade Remedies Authority, which is how we would protect our businesses from unfair international competition.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Home Secretary has said in this House on a number of occasions that international student numbers will be uncapped, that the number of skilled workers who are required for the economy will be uncapped and that our public services will be able to get the people that they wish for from all over the world to work in our those services. Can the International Trade Secretary tell us how many of these roll-over agreements—or how many of the post-Brexit agreements—will be rubbed off or dictated by the fact that many of our partners that want bilateral trade deals want a loosening of the UK’s hostile environment policy?

Dr Fox: The policy on students is to encourage them to come here, and many do so. For example, we are the No. 1 global destination for Chinese students—ahead of the United States. These students come here because they believe that the quality of education is high. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have no intention of limiting the number of students coming to the UK. Likewise with migration, as my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has said, we look to ensure that the levels of skill required for the UK economy are available to us. In a modern, integrated economy, it makes sense that our migration policy gives priority to ensuring the skills needed for our economic growth.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I was thinking of asking the excellent leave Secretary of State how he managed to maintain such good humour and grace in a remain-dominated Parliament. However, I think what this House wants to know is whether, in the circumstances of no deal—that must be likely, given that the Government’s withdrawal agreement was defeated by the biggest margin in Commons history—his Department will be prepared on 29 March for no deal.

Dr Fox: As I have said, our priority is continuity of trade. We want to ensure that we get the roll-over of as many of those agreements—and as large a proportion—as possible. Where that is not possible for other reasons, we will seek as much mitigation as we can. I make the case again that the best way to achieve full continuity is to leave the European Union with the withdrawal agreement. As for my hon. Friend’s initial point, I take comfort from the fact that although this may be a remain-dominated Parliament, it is a leave-dominated country.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The Secretary of State mentioned Switzerland and the Swiss deal in his response to the urgent question. Could he explain why members of the International Trade Committee had to look on the Swiss Government’s website to understand the detail of the trade agreement, and why members of the Committee were not briefed in advance? What will he do to improve the lack of clarity and the lack of a sense of working together across Parliament to achieve the best for trade?

Dr Fox: I am grateful for the way in which the hon. Lady continues to press the importance of this issue; it is a view that I share. We set out in our legislation that we would publish the text at the point of signature, not at the point of initialling, and that is what this House ultimately voted for. We also said that we would publish the explanatory memorandum, and that we would set out differences between the original agreement and any changes in a statement, given that the original agreement was already scrutinised by this Parliament when it was introduced as an EU agreement. The hon. Lady raises an important point, however, about future trade agreements that were not covered in the Trade Bill; and following the completion of the Government consultation, I will set out the processes by which we will ensure that both Houses of Parliament are able to get active and real-time scrutiny of the future trade agreements.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Is it not the case that, even if we roll agreements over, it is entirely possible to make further enhancements to those agreements in time as an independent trading nation?

Dr Fox: Those of us who have been involved in this process from the beginning will remember that it was initially known as transitional adoption—that is, we would adopt the EU agreement with a view to moving on to a more bespoke agreement later. That is still our aim. For example, in our discussions with the Swiss Government at signature on Monday, we talked about our ambitions to enhance that agreement once Britain has left the EU. Our aim for the moment is continuity; ambition comes later.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The UK Government would probably leave DFS with a full-price sofa. Ministers have already indicated that giving up our protected geographical indicators would be a price worth paying for trade deals, wilfully damaging Scotland’s competitiveness in world markets. What guaranteed protections will the Secretary of State’s trade deals offer Scotland’s precious food and drink sector to compensate?

Dr Fox: That is so fundamentally wrong. The Government have said nothing of the sort about geographical indicators. We regard them as having the highest importance, not least in Scotland. On that point, I congratulate Scotch whisky on reaching almost £5 billion of exports last year—exports that we are very keen to protect.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Ministers have always promised that these trade agreements will mirror the terms that these countries have with the EU and which the UK currently enjoys. Has the Secretary of State achieved this in the provisional agreements with Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein, and how does he propose to achieve it in respect of Turkey’s trade relationship with the EU?

Dr Fox: We have said that we aim to replicate the terms as closely as possible. There are some issues that mean that it is not entirely possible to do so. The hon. Gentleman correctly raises the issue of Turkey, which is in a particular position because of its partial customs union with the European Union. This of course means
that it is difficult to conclude what we are going to do with Turkey until we know the shape of our agreement with the European Union. Again, that simply raises the issues and complications of being in a customs union, rather than being a nation that is able to determine its own independent trade policy.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The fundamental point made by both the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly) and the Father of the House was that the balance of power shifts when we are no longer a member of the EU. This is illustrated by the fact that one of the first agreements that the Secretary of State has achieved is with the Faroe Islands. Will he just tell the House what proportion of UK trade is with the Faroes?

Dr Fox: I will admit that the agreement with the Faroe Islands is a small one, but it is very important for people who work in the fish processing industry in this country because it provides the necessary continuity. Labour Members mock it, but they might want to go to places such as Grimsby and tell people there that the agreement has no value, when it clearly does. Countries that are much smaller than the United Kingdom have been able to get trade agreements. For example, Canada—a smaller economy than the United Kingdom—was able to negotiate a perfectly acceptable trade agreement with the European Union, as it has with many other places. It is the utter lack of ambition, optimism and confidence shown by the hon. Lady that I am happy was defeated by the optimism of the British people in the referendum.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Secretary of State has managed to reach agreement with the Faroe Islands, but not with Japan or Canada. Why has this crucial exercise proved so much harder than he said it would be?

Dr Fox: The process continues, but it is worth pointing out that we have reached agreement with Switzerland, which is by far the biggest of all the agreements under this section of our trade. The trade agreement that we have signed with Switzerland this week is, by value, more than 20% of all 40 of the EU agreements. If it is possible to do it with the biggest one, it should be possible to do it with others.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): In the unlikely event that the Prime Minister’s deal is agreed, the EU is going to write to the countries that it has agreements with and say, “Please could you agree to treat the United Kingdom as a member of the EU for the transition period?” Will the Secretary of State now admit to the House that there is no guarantee that all those third countries will agree to that request?

Dr Fox: All I can say is that I am not aware—nor, as far as I know, is the European Union—of a single country that has said it does not want to continue with the trading arrangements that it currently has with the United Kingdom and the European Union. Why would they?

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Secretary of State, in response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) and for East Ham (Stephen Timms), has indicated that the Japanese trade deal will not be replicated at the level it is now, except that we can join the Trans-Pacific Partnership. How long does he expect us to spend negotiating in order to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership?

Dr Fox: As I said, the Japanese Government have made it clear that in the event that we leave the European Union with the withdrawal agreement, there will be the roll-over. If we want to get continuity with that Japanese agreement, there is one way to do it, and that is to ensure that we back the Prime Minister’s deal. It is also true that the Japan EPA does not come in quickly. A lot of the tariff liberalisation, for example, comes in over a period of years—up to eight years in some cases, which is much longer than I would anticipate it would take for Britain to accede to the CPTPP.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): If the Government fail to replicate existing trade agreements, we may end up finding ourselves having to rely on trading agreements with the USA. Can the Secretary of State reassure my constituents that he will not sacrifice NHS services or workers’ rights to a deal with President Trump?

Dr Fox: This House agreed the agreement with Canada. If the hon. Gentleman goes to the Library and looks at chapters 23 and 24 and annex 2 of that agreement, he will see provisions there that make it against the law for us to water down the workers’ rights or environmental laws we have in order to reach a trade agreement. Annex 2 sets out that we retain our rights to be able to regulate our public services, including the national health service. I would have thought that he would agree with those non-regression clauses. It is therefore sad that he and his party voted against this in the House of Commons.
Northern Ireland: Restoring Devolution

1.41 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on her attempts to restore devolution in Northern Ireland one year on from the collapse of the all-party talks in February 2018.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): As the House is aware, this Government remain steadfastly committed to the Belfast agreement and its successors. I am continuing to work tirelessly towards my absolute priority of restoring fully functioning devolved government in Northern Ireland. This is a very sensitive matter that requires careful handling. I last updated the House at my Department’s oral questions on 30 January. I have no further update at this stage, but as soon as I have anything to add, I will of course come to the House at the earliest opportunity. I hope that will be soon.

Tony Lloyd: It is two years since we saw the collapse of the Stormont Executive and Assembly. It is 12 months since the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach visited Belfast in the hope of seeing restoration of the power-sharing agreements, but sadly—we all regret this—that led to failure.

Since that time, there have been many calls for the Secretary of State to show significant effort in bringing the parties together to restore power-sharing. However, it would be very hard for anyone to claim that we have seen the sustained action that could have prevented the kind of drift that hasienomounced the relationship between the political parties in Northern Ireland and between the communities, or the drift that has seen the failure of political decision making that has led to the consequences in, for example, the health service. We now have a health service that is not delivering the same standards, as it ought to be. We know it needs reform. People are having their health options let down, and ultimately people will die earlier.

As for schools, headteachers have made representations to the Secretary of State and, most certainly, to me about the failure of political decisions, which has an impact on children’s education. In policing and security, we are still upwards of 1,000 police officers short of the Patten recommendations, at a time when Brexit is causing real concerns about security on the Irish border.

But probably the biggest issue, beyond Brexit, is the political drift. There has been no consistent voice across the communities of Northern Ireland that has been reconciliation. Anybody who believes that reconciliation was achieved 20 years ago with the Good Friday agreement is simply wrong. The Good Friday agreement built new institutions that were needed to instil the belief that political change could deliver for the people of Northern Ireland rather than simply relying on the guns and the bomb. In the absence of those institutions, we saw the bomb in Derry. In the absence of those institutions, we see the paramilitaries still with a grip on organised crime in different parts of Northern Ireland. We need to see Stormont back. We need to see the North South Ministerial Council, whose role was central to the operation of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. All those Good Friday institutions are vital and fundamental.

The Secretary of State is now at a crossroads and this country is at a crossroads. We need to put a sustained effort into making sure that we see the restoration of those institutions. Alternatively, this House will have to begin to make those decisions. The Secretary of State does not want that. I do not want that. I make her this offer: the Opposition will work with her consistently to see the restoration of those institutions. If she can begin that process of delivery, we will walk with her. We will do everything we can to support her. In that context, I look forward to a further update, in due course, to this House.

Karen Bradley: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we want to see the restoration of the institutions that were agreed by the people of Northern Ireland, in a very brave way, in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and in subsequent agreements: St Andrews, Stormont House, Fresh Start and so on. We need to see those institutions back. There is nothing that the people of Northern Ireland deserve more than the politicians they elected locally making decisions on their behalf.

But I want to correct the hon. Gentleman on a few points. He talked about health reform. He is quite right: there is a need for reform of health, and that is why this Government put £100 million into the budget last year to ensure that work could start on reforming health services and health provision in Northern Ireland. This work needs to be done whether there is an Executive or not, and that money was put in by this Government.

The hon. Gentleman talked about policing. It is a great credit to the politicians in Northern Ireland that we have devolved policing and justice in Northern Ireland, given the difficulties, fragility and sensitivities in that area. This Government took steps to ensure that we could appoint members to the Policing Board so that there is proper governance of policing in Northern Ireland. We have also put in funding to ensure that the Chief Constable can recruit the police officers needed to deal specifically with concerns around Brexit.

The hon. Gentleman talked about reconciliation. I agree with him that reconciliation needs to continue. That is why this Government have consulted on how we progress the agreement that was reached at Stormont House in 2014 to set up new institutions to deal with the matters regarding legacy, which are of great concern to many Members of this House when they see their constituents directly affected.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. I remind him that that body has met twice in the past 12 months. This Government will continue to observe all our commitments under the Belfast/Good Friday agreement.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the incident in Derry/Londonderry a few weeks ago. I was in the city last week, and I met people who were directly affected, including the police officers. They did incredible work that night, working towards danger when others would run, and I pay great tribute to them. But they were very clear, as have been the Police Service of Northern Ireland and many others, that nobody should attribute anything that happened that evening in Derry/Londonderry to either the absence of institutions or Brexit. The only people responsible for what happened in Derry/ Londonderry that night were the terrorists, and they are the ones we need to condemn.
Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s reply. I think there is complete exasperation in this House—and, in fairness, in Dublin and in Washington, where, for years, the two main parties respectively worked incredibly closely together to get the agreement and to get the institutions established—that for two years now these institutions have not been working. As the shadow Secretary of State quite rightly said, sadly, outcomes are failing now in Northern Ireland. Health outcomes are falling behind. There are ambitious plans to improve health, but they need political direction. There comes a point when we are all responsible for the lives of citizens in Northern Ireland. I ask the Secretary of State, although very reluctantly, whether she has begun to consider taking powers back into this House, for what one would hope would be a brief period, to deliver public benefits. At the moment, we are stuck. We come here time and again. We know that the main party in opposition to this, Sinn Féin, is not co-operating. The lives of people in Northern Ireland are falling behind. This would be a big step, but I wonder, reluctantly, whether she is beginning to consider it.

Karen Bradley: My right hon. Friend has enormous experience of matters in Northern Ireland. He did great work in Northern Ireland as both shadow Secretary of State and Secretary of State, and continues to take a keen interest. I share his exasperation that we have not been able to find a basis on which parties can come together. My priority is finding that basis, because there is no good long-term, sustainable way that decisions can be made for the people of Northern Ireland except locally elected politicians making them.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I do not doubt how difficult the Secretary of State’s job is, but she said that restoring devolution is her top priority, yet the last round of talks was over three months ago. Surely the damaging perception, if not the reality, is that implementing Brexit against the will of the majority of people in Northern Ireland and keeping her government partners, the Democratic Unionist party, is her actual priority. Why has the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference not met more regularly, given the vacuum in Northern Ireland? Twice is not enough.

Appearing before the Brexit Committee this morning, former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern said that he believed Stormont would now be up and running again if it was not for Brexit. Does the Secretary of State accept his experienced analysis? What role has the strained relations between the British and Irish Governments caused by Brexit had on efforts to restore the Executive? Does she believe that her exclusive relationship with a minority party in Northern Ireland has prevented an inclusive process to restore devolution? Lastly, what progress has been made on reform of the petition of concern in the Northern Ireland Assembly—a reform that has the potential to unlock the contentious issues that arose during previous talks?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman made a number of points. Although the last round of formal talks collapsed 12 months ago, I assure him that there are continued discussions with all parties to try to find a basis on which we can get people back in a room. But there is no point in my imposing a solution on the parties in Northern Ireland that they do not want to be part of, and there is no point in my demanding that people come to talks if there are no grounds to believe that they will be successful, because that would do a disservice to the people of Northern Ireland.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. It is worth making the point that the BIIGC was established under strand 3 of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, and it deals exclusively with east-west matters, but of course there are regular bilateral discussions between Ministers from the Irish and UK Governments on a number of matters; they are not exclusively held through the BIIGC. We also have the British-Irish Council, which meets twice a year and which representatives of the Scottish Government attend.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the petition of concern. That needs to be decided by politicians in Northern Ireland. It is a devolved matter. It is not for Westminster to impose solutions on a devolved Administration because Westminster is not happy with the way that matters are being used in the devolved Administration. I am sure that he, as a member of the Scottish National party, would not wish to see this Parliament imposing solutions on Holyrood that we felt were right but with which he disagreed.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman alluded to the Government’s confidence and supply arrangements with the Democratic Unionist party. I gently remind him that the institutions collapsed before the confidence and supply arrangements were in place. We are all working tirelessly to see those institutions restored.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Secretary of State will share my dismay at the stalling of plans for the Tyrone to Cavan interconnector—a huge infrastructure project that will have a direct impact upon lives in Northern Ireland. How does she think the guidance she is able to issue under the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 can be used to resolve that? If it cannot, is she prepared to determine the matter herself, since we cannot continue to kick this can down the road?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend gives an important example of why we need devolved government in Northern Ireland. He alluded to the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act, which allows civil servants to make certain decisions but is no replacement for having Ministers in Stormont making those decisions. That is why I am determined to find a way to bring the parties back together, and I assure him and his Select Committee that I will update the House at the earliest opportunity.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I welcome the Secretary of State’s response to the urgent question. It will be vital that decisions are taken by Ministers in some shape or form once we get Brexit over the line, because we cannot continue in the current scenario after that has happened; the decisions required will be too great. I remind the House that the reason that devolution is not up and running is not that all parties in Northern Ireland cannot agree—four out of the five parties in Northern Ireland would enter devolution tomorrow. Preconditions are being set by one party,
which talks a lot about Brexit being an existential threat and yet boycotts this House, boycotts the Assembly and boycotts the Executive. We all see that as the major challenge. Health, education, police, justice and security are all far more vital than some of the preconditions being laid down by a minority party in Northern Ireland. The reality is that we need to get on with the job without preconditions, and therefore, along with all the other parties, I am up for any measures and discussions that can get that to happen.

Karen Bradley: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman’s comments. I hope we can find a basis on which to get the parties together; talking about and agreeing a basis for government, because he is right; the people of Northern Ireland deserve that.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I know that it may be legally difficult for my right hon. Friend to authorise payments to the victims of historical institutional abuse, but who in the future would object if she were to do so?

Karen Bradley: I think my hon. and gallant Friend is referring to recommendations from the Hart review, which are currently being consulted on as a process that would need to happen irrespective of whether there are Ministers in Stormont. We are ensuring that work is continuing that would need to be done in any event, so that when Ministers are back in Stormont, they can take the decisions necessary to see redress for those victims.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): There is nothing in the Secretary of State’s analysis with which I take issue, but the fact is that we find ourselves in the middle of a quite remarkable period of drift. Surely now is the time for us to take more proactive steps and bring in somebody from outside the political system in Northern Ireland—hopefully one who is respected in the way that Senator Mitchell was—to free up this logjam. It cannot be allowed to drift on like this.

Karen Bradley: I agree that we do not want to see anything drifting on, and I am determined to ensure that it does not. The right hon. Gentleman suggests that an independent mediator or chair may be appropriate. There is not a consensus across the parties in Northern Ireland that that would be helpful, but I am open to exploring whatever the right way to do this is, because I want to see devolution restored and Ministers in Stormont as soon as possible.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): There is a party elected to this House that does not take its seats, and yet this institution does not collapse—it continues—but when the same thing happens in Northern Ireland, we allow the institutions to collapse. To follow on from the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), should we not look at the rules regarding the institutions? Should the Secretary of State not reluctantly set a deadline again for parties in Northern Ireland to take their seats, or perhaps get a group of experienced people in this place to come up with suggestions for how the rules might be changed, so that one party does not have a veto on the running of institutions in Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: I do not think it is any secret that sustainability of the Executive was one of the matters for discussion in the talks 12 months ago, and I am sure it will be a matter for discussion if we are able to find a way to get the parties back together. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee has made proposals for a more sustainable Executive. My hon. Friend has great expertise, as former Chair of that Committee, and if he would like to make any suggestions, I am happy to take them to the parties.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I retain the title of the last direct rule Minister of Northern Ireland, and with respect to the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), I hope I can keep that title in perpetuity. In that role, I took hundreds of decisions every week on behalf of this House and the people of Northern Ireland, and now those decisions are being taken without scrutiny. Can the Secretary of State bring together all the interested parties to look at how we can inject greater local scrutiny, pending—I hope—the restoration of those institutions in due course?

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman speaks with great experience and knowledge of this matter. The Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act allows for transparency in decision making, but there is of course a constitutional issue when it comes to elected politicians scrutinising the decisions taken by unelected officials. Although I understand the desire to see more scrutiny, we must remember that when the institutions are restored—I hope sooner rather than later—those officials are going to have to return to taking direction from political masters, and having political masters who may have scrutinised their previous decisions is probably not a situation in which we want them to find themselves.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): The Secretary of State will know that the duty on her to set an election date for further Assembly elections will shortly become live again. Does she plan to extend that date, or will she set a date for those elections to take place?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend is right that the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act sets aside the requirement on the Secretary of State to call an election. That Act expires on 26 March, and we are considering the options.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Policing Board did not function for many months, as the Secretary of State knows. She recently made political appointments from my party and other parties, including Sinn Féin. Everyone entered without preconditions, and now the Policing Board is functioning. We need to ensure that Stormont and the education and health services do likewise. We have problems. I have issues about fairness, equality and integrity, but I will not put them in front of those services functioning for the education and health of our people. If everyone does likewise, we can get Stormont up and running next week.

Karen Bradley: I very much appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s optimism, and I hope we can deliver.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): May I ask the Secretary of State if she really appreciates the deep sense of anger—continuing anger—among the general
public in Northern Ireland that Members of the Legislative Assembly continue to receive their salaries with only minor reductions? The last time I asked the Secretary of State how much it has cost the taxpayer to pay MLAs their salaries since the collapse of the Assembly two years ago, in January 2017, unfortunately the Secretary of State was not able to tell me. However, I am confident she has done her homework since then, and will be able to tell this House and the public whether £12 million has been paid in salaries to MLAs when they have not been doing their full job.

Karen Bradley: I was able to furnish the hon. Lady with the figure that she requested through a written question, but I would like to make sure that I have the most up-to-date figure before giving her further information. It would perhaps be better for me to write to her, unless such a figure should appear in front of me in the next few moments. I do understand the anger. I do hear that anger every day in Northern Ireland—and I know that people want to see their politicians back doing the job they were elected to do.

Karen Bradley: I am well aware of the frustration and anger that there is in the general public with the situation we have. As Secretary of State, I have ensured that we do what we need to do to ensure good governance continues in Northern Ireland, but there are of course difficulties, constitutionally, with taking new policy decisions in this place that had not previously been agreed by Ministers in Stormont. I have been very clear that the actions that I have taken—setting a budget, or public appointments, such as to the Policing Board, which was mentioned earlier—were on the basis of continuing existing policies and ensuring that public services can continue to be delivered, without creating new policy areas or deciding on new policy areas in the absence of Ministers. The hon. Gentleman made the point at the end of his question: the answer is to get Ministers back into Stormont, and I am determined that we will do that.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Is the Secretary of State aware of the article published on “ConservativeHome” on 28 January by Lord Bew? He indicated that the backstop, which the Secretary of State supports, would undermine the Belfast agreement and that there is a better way out of the paralysis. Has the Secretary of State studied that article and looked at the better way out of the paralysis?

Mr Speaker: As the hon. Gentleman speaks, the noble Lord may of course be in our midst.

Karen Bradley: I have of course read the article, but the hon. Gentleman will know that there are differences of opinion, legally, on that matter. The Attorney General set out the Government’s position—his view on that matter—in this Chamber a few weeks ago.

Karen Bradley: I have done considerable work and at length on this issue. She has brought forward private Members’ Bills and other matters; I know how strongly she feels about this. She will know that the amendment was passed to the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act about the law regarding abortion and same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland. I have already reported to Parliament on that situation, and I continue to monitor the situation.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Sinn Féin MPs attend this place and get their full wages, so will the Secretary of State at some stage look at that issue as well? There are many issues that could and should be processed because they have cross-community support—for example, in health and education. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee is presently doing an inquiry on both those issues. There are indications in the press this week that more power could be devolved to the permanent secretaries of the Departments to enable them to make decisions when it comes to health and education. Has that been considered?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman made two points. First, on the pay and conditions for Members of this House, that is of course a matter for this House, not for the Government. On the decision-making power of civil servants, there is a very difficult balancing act—as I said on the question from the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson)—to ensure that we allow civil servants the political cover to make decisions without actually making them accountable for those decisions to political masters. We believe we have struck that balance in the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act, but we are coming to the end of that period, and I will continue to review the best way in which that can continue to be delivered.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): What consideration has the Secretary of State given to the suggestion made by the Northern Ireland Local Government Association to look at the role and powers of local councillors as a way to address at least some of the democratic deficit that exists while the Assembly is not sitting?

Karen Bradley: Both I and my hon. Friend the Minister of State have met NILGA, and it does have some very interesting ideas. However, the powers it is looking at and that it considers may be appropriate to be devolved to local authorities clearly rest with Stormont. They are Stormont’s powers, not our powers to devolve, and it would be a matter for politicians and Ministers in Stormont to make decisions about that. It is probably
also worth saying that this Government continue to work with the local councils in Northern Ireland. The Chancellor has announced £350 million for a city deal for Belfast region, and we are working with Derry City and Strabane District Council for a Derry/Londonderry city deal, as well as with rural councils.

**Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP):** Due to Sinn Féin’s ongoing boycott of the Northern Ireland Assembly—for two years now—we have lost the significant and important scrutiny and transparency of the budget process. The Secretary of State has indicated that she will set a budget. Will she outline to the House what she is intending to do to get transparency of that process and of both the decisions made by her and the recommendations and decisions taken by the senior civil service in Northern Ireland?

**Karen Bradley:** As I said earlier, it is quite right that, in the absence of Ministers in Stormont, a budget is set and properly set so that money can continue to be spent on public services. I followed a process last year that involved all the main parties and the Opposition to ensure that there was as much transparency as possible. It is a budget process, and without my having full Executive powers, there is clearly a limit to the amount I can do. However, I am determined that we will set the budget, and I will make sure that the hon. Lady’s party and others are involved.

**Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP):** One consequence of not having a functioning Executive is that there has been no political oversight of the scandal of Muckamore Abbey. I have raised this personally with the Secretary of State and written to her. She knows that we had a sanctuary for adults with learning difficulties, and that they were physically abused and assaulted by nursing staff. On Friday, the nurses had their suspensions overturned. Why? Appallingly, the Belfast Trust has not provided the evidence and the CCTV to the Nursing and Midwifery Council.

This is a scandal, but it has not had full consideration here and, without Stormont, it certainly will not receive it at home. The Secretary of State knows that, through the Inquiries Act 2005, she is the only person capable of calling a public inquiry. Without a Minister in Northern Ireland, she is the one person who can do it. I ask her to engage earnestly with the Department of Health in Northern Ireland and with the families and those who need answers on the failure we have seen in caring for those who need such significant care.

**Karen Bradley:** The hon. Gentleman has, indeed, raised this issue with me on a number of occasions. It is truly shocking and the reports that we have all seen from victims are ones that nobody should have to read. He makes the point that Ministers in Stormont would be able to make decisions and deal with this matter. I will continue to consider the points he has made and to review the position.

**Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP):** Secretary of State, the outcome of the historical institutional abuse inquiry—the Hart inquiry—was to be tabled just prior to Sinn Féin pulling the rug out and bringing down the Northern Ireland Assembly. It is inevitable that people will pass away—indeed, people have passed away—in the interim. It is vital that we move ahead and get a decision across the table as to how we will recompense some of these individuals.

**Karen Bradley:** The Hart inquiry was raised by my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). As I said in response, David Sterling, the head of the civil service in Northern Ireland, has commenced a consultation, which is ongoing. That would be needed even if there were Ministers in Stormont. The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the fact that the report was published after the Executive collapsed, and we have therefore had no reaction from Ministers to the recommendations. That makes life very difficult for all of us. We need to see Ministers in Stormont as soon as possible so that they can make the decisions when the consultation ends.
Points of Order

2.12 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This week, 12 Catalan leaders go on trial in Spain’s Supreme Court on charges of rebellion and sedition. If found guilty, they face sentences of up to 25 years in jail. Their supposed crime was organising a democratic referendum on Catalan independence in October 2017. One of their number was the President or Speaker of the Catalan Parliament, Carme Forcadell, whom you graciously welcomed to our House when she visited us as a free woman. Her alleged crime was allowing a debate on Catalan independence in the democratically elected Catalan Parliament.

Mr Speaker, I know that you cannot comment directly on these matters and I wish in no way to put you in a difficult position, but will you confirm that it would be in order for you to allow a debate on Welsh independence in this democratically elected House and for me to take part, and that neither you nor I would be likely to face arrest or long-term imprisonment for so doing?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his courtesy in giving me notice of his intention to raise his point of order. Moreover, I am grateful for its substance, both because he raises an important point, to which I shall respond, and because it gives me the opportunity to say that I well remember welcoming Carme Forcadell when she came to this place—it was a privilege to do so.

On the substance of the matter, it is of course entirely orderly for there to be a debate in this House on Welsh independence. Members enjoy immunity for the words they utter in this Chamber and can come to no grief as a result of their freedom of expression. Moreover, I note in passing that as Speaker, I too enjoy immunity for the manner in which I preside over debates. Other people will fashion, and in many cases have done so, for better or for worse, their own arrangements. While ours are by no means incapable of improvement, and there are many people in this House who believe that there is much by way of parliamentary reform that can be accomplished, I think that on the matter that the hon. Gentleman has raised and the importance of democratic principle, we are very content with our arrangements. They could perhaps, in important respects, be imitated by others who proclaim a commitment to democracy. I hope that that is helpful to the hon. Gentleman.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the first urgent question on EU trade agreements, I stated that the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) had opposed all 40 of the EU trade agreements in the first place. Can I say, for the benefit of the House, that on closer inspection, he actually abstained on one of them: the EU-Japan economic partnership agreement? Nevertheless, his complaint that the agreements, which he himself never voted to make operable in the first place, might no longer be operable after Brexit day still stands?

Mr Speaker: I am sure that I am immensely grateful. It was not a point of order, but I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman feels that he has made an important point. If the right hon. Gentleman goes about his business with an additional glint in his eye and spring in his step, and feels that he has achieved a notable parliamentary victory—well, if that brings a little happiness into the life of the right hon. Gentleman, I must say veritibly, I am pleased for the feller.

BILL PRESENTED

European Union (Withdrawal) (No. 4) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Yvette Cooper, supported by Sir Oliver Letwin, Norman Lamb, Dame Caroline Spelman, Hilary Benn, Nick Boles, Jack Dromey, Mr Dominic Grieve, Stewart Hosie, Ben Lake, Liz Kendall and Clive Efford, presented a Bill to make provision in connection with the period for negotiations for withdrawing from the European Union.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 335).
Bus Drivers (Working Hours on Local Routes)

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

2.17 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to limit bus drivers on local routes to driving for no more than 56 hours in any one week and 90 hours in any two consecutive weeks; and for connected purposes.

The Bill seeks to harmonise UK legislation on bus driving and working hours. It is supported by the road safety pressure group, Brake, and the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, as well as by many Members in this place. Its origins are to be found in the terrible tragedy that was the bus crash in Coventry in 2015, in which two members of the public lost their lives: seven-year-old Rowan Fitzgerald and 76-year-old Dora Hancox. Such a tragedy is unimaginable for any family. May I start by welcoming Rowan’s mother, Natasha, and his grandmother, Barbara, who are here with us today? I thank them for their courage and encouragement, as I know this will be hard for them. The Bill has their absolute support.

I am not a specialist in transport legislation, nor on the working time directive, but avoidable tragedies such as the one that occurred on that fateful day in October 2015 must lead to the review of and changes to legislation. On that day, the bus driver was incapable of stopping his vehicle. His foot was pressed on the accelerator. Ultimately, it was the front of the Sainsbury’s store in Coventry city centre that brought the bus to a standstill. Rowan Fitzgerald, who was a pupil at St Anthony’s school in Sydenham, Leamington, and 76-year-old Dora Hancox of Nuneaton were killed. Rowan was on his way home from watching his beloved Sky Blues—Coventry City. Dora was walking through the city centre on a shopping visit from Nuneaton. Several others, including Rowan’s cousin Paige Wilson, were seriously injured.

It was a busy Saturday afternoon in Coventry city centre. A video that was shown at the inquest revealed the fundamental issue here. The fact that the driver had been driving for many accidents every day. The data shows that there is a significantly, the CCTV shows him repeatedly rubbing his eyes as if tired. At approximately 5 pm, Mr Chander was waiting to take charge of a double-decker bus. The driver told him he looked knackered and that he should say no. Mr Chander ignored that advice and set off, eventually coming to a bus stop on Hales street in Coventry city centre. At no point during the 11-second journey that followed did the driver engage the foot brake, pressing instead only the accelerator. In passing sentence, the judge concluded that the company was “highly culpable” and fined it £2.3 million.

This was a terrible tragedy, but of course there are many accidents every day. The data shows that there is a fundamental issue here. The fact that the driver had been driving so many long hours leading up to the crash was undoubtedly the critical factor that led to the accident. Currently, however, this is entirely legal under British law, as local bus drivers are not subject to the same working hour regulations as long-distance bus drivers or lorry drivers. Nor do the laws equate to those in the EU. Hours are clearly detrimental to passenger safety. British laws regulate bus drivers’ hours on local routes—that is, less than the 50 km limit—to just 10 hours a day, with no weekly or fortnightly limit except that in any two consecutive weeks there must be at least one period of 24 hours off duty. This means that it is entirely legal for a local bus driver to drive 130 hours over a period of two weeks. Under EU law, however, a long-distance bus driver or lorry driver cannot drive more than 56 hours a week or more than 90 hours over two consecutive weeks.

I believe this tragedy could have been avoided if driving hours for local bus drivers were capped at 56 hours a week and no more than 90 hours over any two consecutive weeks, as they are already for long-distance bus drivers and HGV drivers. That is the primary purpose of the Bill. However, the Bill also includes proposals for a move to EU regulations including bus drivers’ mandatory breaks, which would ensure a break of no less than 45 minutes be taken after no more than...
four and a half hours of driving. The break could be divided into two periods, the first at least 15 minutes and the second at least 30 minutes, taken over the four and a half hours. At present, the entitlement to a 30-minute break after five and a half hours behind the wheel often results in drivers taking smaller breaks or none at all due to congestion or other factors beyond their control. Additionally, the changes should be introduced by employers at no detriment to bus drivers’ pay.

The culture of long hours among bus drivers is accompanied by low wage rates, which places a dubious incentive on overtime. Over the past two decades, wages have fallen relative to average incomes. This is causing bus drivers to work nearly six hours a week more than average workers to sustain their incomes at a reasonable level. Regulations must prevent that, but must also ensure that bus drivers are paid properly for the essential public service they provide. This is important at a time when operators are cutting unprofitable routes and local councils are cutting funding to bus services.

There is also the need for regular independent health checks, beyond a driver’s GP, to ensure fitness for work. I am not the first to propose that. Back in 2015, some months before the Coventry crash, my right hon. Friends the Members for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) proposed such changes in an early-day motion. Coincidentally, earlier that same year a report was published by the London Assembly Transport Committee, which looked into the reasons for bus crashes in London. It concluded that Transport for London should commission comprehensive and independent research into bus drivers’ working conditions. There were reports that bus drivers could be doing 16-hour shifts without adequate breaks. This was followed up in its 2017 report, “Driven to Distraction”, which noted high levels of stress reported among bus drivers caused by long shifts, inadequate breaks and irregular shift patterns. There have been up to 25 fatalities a year and thousands injured in bus incidents in London. It is now the time to legislate.

Way back in 2009, the Department for Transport conducted an extensive review of the effectiveness of the British domestic drivers’ hours rules. Following that review, it was decided not to make any changes, concluding that any additional restrictions would risk imposing unreasonable burdens on the industry. Ten years on and the burdens now lie with the drivers, not the operators. A reduction in routes served and buses has led to a reduction of 8,000 bus drivers since 2010. At the same time, their wages have fallen behind their peers, resulting in drivers working longer hours and more days to try to maintain their monthly earnings.

It is clear that this issue affects drivers across the country. I received comments from far and wide about this. By way of example, one convenor reported that about a third of drivers were working more than 50 hours a week. Elsewhere, a bus driver in Cornwall drives on a route which is longer than the 50 km limit, so it should come under strict EU rules for long distance drivers. However, the company splits the route into three, so that the same driver can continue the route and does not have to comply with the EU working hours restrictions.

In Liverpool, a driver who used to work for Stagecoach said that they were regularly forced to work 12-hour shifts day after day, which caused fatigue.

The Bill proposes to limit the working hours of bus drivers and seeks simply to harmonise UK legislation by bringing consistency of working hours and restrictions between drivers on local and long distance bus routes and lorry drivers. It cannot be right that we have different regulation for freight vehicles and passenger vehicles. We must harmonise. We must legislate. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Matt Western, Mr Jim Cunningham, Alan Brown, Grahame Morris, Ian Mearns, Mr Marcus Jones, Mike Amesbury, Jo Platt, Anna McMorrin, Sir Peter Bottomley and Wera Hobhouse present the Bill.

Matt Western accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March, and to be printed (Bill 336).
Mr Speaker: Colleagues, imminently we will come to the motion on the retirement of the Clerk of the House and I will look to the Leader of the House to move the motion of congratulation to Sir David Natzler. Just before I do, I should like to record my own brief tribute.

People across the House will know that David Natzler has served without interruption in this House for over four decades. If memory serves me correctly, he began in our service in 1975. That service has been unstinting, selfless, formidable and, I think and hope all would agree, quite exceptional. Blessed with a brilliant brain, an understated manner, unfailing courtesy, and an absolute and undiluted passion for Parliament, he has given both of his skills and of his endeavours throughout his time here in a manner which I think is universally appreciated. I mention that he has served for over four decades. My own experience of him, I confess, dates back only just over two, but I would like to record a couple of relevant facts.

I got to know David when he served as Clerk of the Trade and Industry Select Committee. I was briefly a member of that Committee, from 1998 to 1999, and was on it with the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), and indeed, the now right hon. Member for Chorley (Sir Lindsay Hoyle), the Senior Deputy Speaker of this House. The now Chairman of Ways and Means and I, and the hon. Gentleman, worked with and hugely benefited from David Natzler’s expertise—his procedural expertise and his ability to get to grips with the brief of the Committee and to offer us informed and invaluable advice on the vast miscellany of different inquiries that the Committee undertook.

As a Committee, we also travelled with David Natzler. Even if you are travelling somewhere very pleasant and staying in moderately salubrious surroundings, the camaraderie of the group, as I think all colleagues can testify, is important, and part of that is the contribution of our professional staff. David Natzler was a brilliant Clerk of the Committee. I am sure that that will be remembered, too, by its Chair for a decade, the former Member of this House and, between 1997 and 2005, the Member of Parliament for Ochil, now a Member of the other place—namely, Lord O’Neill of Clackmannan, known to many of us as Martin O’Neill. David was superb and he made a big and decisive difference to the operation of the Select Committee.

As Speaker, I have been privileged to know David Natzler in four of the roles that he has discharged for the House—as Clerk of Committees, Clerk of Legislation, Clerk Assistant and, since 2015, as Clerk of the House. As he approaches retirement, he will of course mark four years as Clerk of the House, which is a very normal period to serve as our Clerk, in the final role that a member of the Clerks service discharges to Parliament.

There is much that David has contributed, but I have a sense that he will be particularly proud of the work that he did back in 2009-10 on, and in support of, the Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons. Colleagues will recall that that Committee was chaired with great skill, courtesy and even-handedness by the former Member of this place for Cannock Chase, Dr Tony Wright.

I do not think I give much away if I say that David Natzler thirsted to clerk that Committee. He knew that it was the will of the House that reforms should be made to the running of this place—not only to the operation of the Chamber, but to the work, remit and manner of composition of our treasured Select Committees. David felt that he could input invaluably to that work, and I hope that colleagues will agree that he most assuredly did. That work had to be discharged, not least because of the proximity of a general election, with considerable dispatch, but with attention to detail and proper discrimination—I use the word “discrimination” in its best sense—between what was important and could not wait and what might be important but could. I think that if Tony Wright were in this Chamber now, he would agree that David Natzler clerked that Committee, to which I remember giving evidence, among many others, brilliantly.

David has been the most assiduous and dedicated servant of the House. He signalled to me, probably a year, if not 18 months ago, his desire to retire around now. I hope that all colleagues will join me—I very much look forward to what the Leader of the House has to say by way of tribute—in wishing Sir David and his wife, Hilary, a very long, rewarding and happy retirement.
Retirement of the Clerk of the House

2.34 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom):

I beg to move,

That Mr Speaker be requested to convey to Sir David Natzler KCB, on his retirement from the office of Clerk of the House, this House’s gratitude for his long and distinguished service, for his wise contribution to the development of the procedure of the House and to modernising its practices, for his leadership and thoughtfulness in the discharge of his duties as head of the House Service, and for the courteous and helpful advice always given to individual honourable Members.

It is a real pleasure to move this motion in order to give the House the opportunity to pay tribute to Sir David Natzler today. I am sure that I speak on behalf of the whole House when I say that David has given outstanding service to the House of Commons. David began working here in 1975 and has held a variety of senior posts within the Chamber and Committees Team, incorporating the former Department of Chamber and Committee Services and the old Clerks Department. This has included his work as a Clerk to a range of Select Committees, including the Social Services Committee, the Procedure Committee and the Trade and Industry Committee. He was Principal Clerk of Committees, Secretary to the House of Commons Commission, Principal Clerk of the Table Office, Clerk of Legislation and Clerk Assistant.

David served as acting Clerk of the House from September 2014 and was formally appointed as Clerk of the House in March 2015, the 50th person to fill the role. David’s commitment to this place is quite simply unrivalled. When he met his delightful wife, Hilary, at a role. David’s commitment to this place is quite simply the House in March 2015, the 50th person to fill the September 2014 and was formally appointed as Clerk of the Table Office, Clerk of Legislation and Clerk Assistant.

Throughout the highs and lows of the past four years, David has had the best interests of the House at heart, and during that time, he has stacked up a number of important achievements. I know that he was delighted to have secured Richmond House as part of the Northern Estates project, and then, at the start of last year, to see the restoration and renewal programme finally get the approval of both Houses in the form recommended by the Joint Committee. I share his enthusiasm and I am pleased that the Government have worked collaboratively with Parliament in the preparatory work for restoration and renewal and in bringing forward the Bill for pre-legislative scrutiny.

David has also overseen the introduction of the Parliamentary Security Department, as well as the Parliamentary Digital Service. He helped to bring in the governance changes, as recommended by the Straw Committee in 2014, which notably included the recruitment of the Director General.

In recent months, David has led the House service through the immediate aftermath of the Dame Laura Cox report. It was an uncomfortable read for many in the senior House administration and for anyone who cares passionately about this House. However, I want to pay tribute to David for the way in which he and his staff have acted to make swift progress on the Cox recommendations. I know that many staff in the House have appreciated the time that he has taken to get out and talk to them—for example, in town hall meetings—in order to show his personal commitment to getting the House through this challenging period.

Over the years, David has played his part in moving us towards a less antiquated House through a number of changes that have definitely not been without controversy. For example, he oversaw the replacement of vellum with archival paper for the printing of new laws, for which goats around the United Kingdom will be grateful.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con):

I would like to correct one detail, if I may. Sir David was delicate in negotiating between this House and the other place over the matter of vellum and came up with a very nice compromise, which was that laws would be encased in a vellum folder, albeit printed on paper inside. It was a typical David Natzler way of doing things.

Andrea Leadsom: It was a good compromise indeed, but in that case I revoke the gratitude I expressed on behalf of goats everywhere.

Sir David has greatly supported the recent introduction of our new ground-breaking proxy voting scheme and has driven forward the removal of wigs and court dress for Clerks at the Table in the Chamber.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con):

I am one of Sir David’s greatest admirers, but the Leader of the House is beginning to say things that are moving in the other direction. Can we go back to his love of tradition?

Andrea Leadsom: I was actually about to say that some of Sir David’s colleagues rather wish his clothing adjustments had extended to the scruffy white bowtie. David’s own bowtie tends towards the off-white shades more commonly favoured by trendy interior designers. I am sure my hon. Friend has a strong opinion on that.

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It was a different modernising move that was the high point of David’s career. I am reliably informed that his personal high point was working with the Wright Committee on Reform of the House of Commons 10 years ago. This involved twice weekly extended private discussions—bordering on arguments—with a great number of Members about parliamentary politics and procedure. What more could a senior Clerk ask for?

As well as his official duties in the House, David has represented the Lords and Commons cricket team in their regular matches against the Dutch Parliament and played for parliamentary football and tennis teams. In his spare time, he is an ardent Shakespeare enthusiast, a founder member of the Richard Burbage Society and author of a scholarly essay entitled “The Two Gentlemen of Venice”—we can only speculate who they are. David’s intellectual gifts are part of parliamentary folklore—many a Member, myself included, has asked him a question and then struggled to keep up with the sheer subtlety of his arguments—but he is also blessed with a kindly heart and a vivid sense of humour.

I want to say a personal thank you to David both for his service to the House and for the collegiate way he has worked with me and my office in my time as Leader of the House. After 43 years, he should be proud that he leaves the House in a strong position to face the coming challenges of the next few months and years. In particular, I would like to wish him a very restful retirement. Few deserve it more and I imagine he is very much looking forward to it. I commend this motion to the House.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Leader of the House very warmly for what she has said.

2.43 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for her comments and you, Mr Speaker, for your tribute to Sir David Natzler. The Leader of the House rightly paid tribute to his extraordinarily distinguished career in public service and to the range of roles he has occupied with such distinction, and I endorse her words completely.

I want to share with the House more personal reflections on Sir David. It is a slight twist of fate, but my predecessor as Member for Walsall South, Bruce George, was close to Sir David in a number of ways. For a while, David was Clerk of his Committee, and whenever Bruce made a minor comment on a draft report and David said loudly “Oh my God”, while clapping both hands to his forehead, the Chair knew he was getting frank criticism. You do it, too, Mr Speaker, at the Commission, when you say, “David, you are frowning.”

David and Bruce played together in the parliamentary football team. I think they were probably the Laurel and Hardy of the team. I am told that David boasts of being qualified to play for every football team in the former Austro-Hungarian empire. As those who knew him will remember, Bruce played in goal. He was quite large and actually quite a good goalie, but in a recent game they played in together he did not keep a clean sheet. Unlike poor old Gordon Banks—rest in peace—he was having an off day, and David stalked up to him and said, “You’re allowed to use your hands, you know.”

As accounting officer for the House, Sir David has had to have a strong sense of value for money. When he was head of the Table Office, he used to take his staff down to Strangers’ Bar, and there would be quizzical looks on people’s faces, because David’s colleagues would have to whisper code words to the bar staff, such as “Borodino”, “Marengo” and “Leipzig”—he made his Table Office Clerks say the names of Napoleonic battles to bar staff so that no one else could use his tab! I wonder if the tab is still open.

The Leader of the House and you, Mr Speaker, rightly paid tribute to Sir David’s work on the Wright Committee. I managed to speak to Tony Wright, now professor of government and public policy at University College London, and former Member for Cannock Chase, and he said this:

“The fact that David was Clerk of the Select Committee on the Reform of the House of Commons was indispensable to its success. He made sure that what we said was credible and carried authority. At that time the House was in a very bad place, following the expenses scandal, and David shared my belief that one way to restore its reputation was by making changes that would make it count for more, both in terms of elections for select committees and for backbench control of its own business. The fact that these reforms have become embedded in how the House operates is a tribute to the quality of the Reform Committee’s report, and that is tribute to David himself. At a personal level, working with him was one of the most enjoyable periods of my parliamentary life. His combination of impish humour and formidable intellect made working with him a real joy. The House owes him a huge debt.”

As the principal constitutional adviser to the House and adviser on all its procedure and business, David has frequently appeared before Select and Joint Committees, and his evidence has always been highly valued. The Leader of the House mentioned the speed at which proxy voting was introduced. David did a lot of work behind the scenes to ensure that the first vote took place on 29 January. He is responsible—though not for much longer—for the 2,500 members of staff who make up the House service and Parliamentary Digital Service.

As Clerk of the House, Sir David has always striven to be helpful to staff and held several open meetings, including question and answer sessions. As well as going the extra mile himself in his daily duties, he has held tea parties to recognise staff who have gone the extra mile too. The staff have great respect and affection for him. One staff member, Dr Anna Dickson, said:

“David played an important role in setting up ParliREACH, the workplace equality network for Race, Ethnicity and Cultural Heritage in 2013. From the name to championing it at board level over the last five years. From chairing events to opening his official residence to the network and, most importantly, he has been a critical friend of the Committee.”

David was one of the first volunteers to take part in the ParliREACH reverse mentoring programme, which allows junior BAME staff members to mentor a senior manager. The objective was to give senior managers an insight into the organisation and its policies from the perspective of BAME staff. He has had two such mentors, both of whom have now left the House service. He thinks he may be partially responsible.

Coming from an immigrant background himself, Sir David has always been a keen supporter of and speaker at all-staff events hosted by ParliREACH, in particular looking at the implications of Brexit for non-UK EU staff working in Parliament. He has made sure that all staff who currently work here feel confident that they will not lose their jobs. After one such event in 2016, he committed the House to supporting people financially with applying for citizenship—a bold step, as you know, Mr Speaker. David was also a regular
speaker at Parliament's Holocaust Memorial Day events, where he spoke emotionally of the terrible effects of the holocaust on his own family.

Sir David has also been a champion of the House's talent management scheme, which aims to enable women and BAME staff to develop their potential within the organisation, and has never shied away from inconvenient truths, even when they have reflected on him. He would always find a way to help people, and to steer Parliament in the right direction. He has been a passionate, consistent and entirely approachable supporter. Ken Gall, president of the trade union side, has said:

“He is a decent man who has kept his humour and his humanity during some of the most challenging times in recent parliamentary history. I absolutely trust him to tell me the truth.”

Many say that David’s more detached and calm approach can be attributed to the influence of his wife, Hilary. David would be the first to pay tribute in saying that meeting Hilary, at the time a reporter for Handsard, changed him immeasurably for the better. Hilary was a daughter of the manse, and they were married at Greyfriars Kirk in Edinburgh in 1988, with Hilary’s uncle, the Professor of Systematic Theology at Aberdeen university, officiating. Theirs has been a wonderful partnership, and they have three lovely children, Robert, Beatrice and Michael. Hilary has ensured that all David’s latent kindness and decency have fully emerged. No one who encountered him in 1975 would have thought that he would end up as the DJ—sorry, sound engineer—at the Church of Scotland’s Sunday services at St Columba’s Church in Pont Street.

David’s successor, Dr John Benger, said this:

“Very few can match his relentless intellectual curiosity and the breadth and depth of his knowledge. He has made an enormous contribution to public life and we will miss him.”

Let me add, on a personal note, that he has always been supportive of me in my role, and, on constitutional issues and on any other matters, he has always striven to give a constructive answer. I have to say that he never sounded happier than when I spoke to him on the phone. He was overlooking the Bay of Naples, and was about to deliver a lecture to an international audience, but he still had time to deal with the matter that I had to raise with him. I must also say, on behalf of our Chief Whip and Luke and Simon in the office, that they all value his wisdom and advice at Commission meetings and at meetings with Members. He understands the nature of Parliament and the role of Members, balanced with the constitutional duties of the Clerks and the staff of the House. It was especially pleasing to see him at a “reverse mentoring” event: I actually saw him dishing out potatoes in the Adjournment dining room, wearing his pinny, while the chef, Terry, looked on in amazement.

I thank David for his friendship and his advice, and I thank him for devoting himself to the public service of the House. I thank him for serving democracy in our country, and for leaving behind the legacy of a functioning democratic institution and a legacy of investing in people, so that when others come after him, everything will be the same.

So, David Lionel Natzler, this was your life in Parliament. The whole House wishes you and your family a wonderful life outside Parliament.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Both the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader have engagingly captured Sir David’s wisdom, warmth and wit. I too have benefited from all those qualities, and I thank them both for what they have said in leading our debate on this important occasion.

2.53 pm

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): My remarks will be brief, but no less heartfelt for their brevity. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), and, indeed, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House.

I have known Sir David Natzler for 35 of his 43 years in the House, and it has been a privilege to regard him as a friend and colleague. For 21 of those 35 years, I have had the honour to be a member of the Panel of Chairmen. All of us who serve on your Panel, Sir, know how heavily we have come to rely on the advice and the wisdom of all the Clerks with whom we work, and we all know—every single one of us—that without their assistance and guidance, the work would be very much harder, if not impossible. Those of us who have sat alongside Sir David Natzler in Committees and in Westminster Hall—and, on occasion, in Committees of the whole House in the Chamber—have benefited hugely from, yes, his advice and, yes, his wisdom, but also from his friendship and his persistently dry humour at all times.

On behalf of, I hope, all the members of the Panel of Chairmen, I say, “Thank you, Sir David, and we wish you and your wife a long and very happy retirement.”

2.55 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a real pleasure to speak in this debate on behalf of the Scottish National party. My hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) sends apologies for his absence. He, and all of us in the SNP, hold Sir David in the highest regard, and I echo all the tributes that have already been paid to him, particularly those relating to his role in the Cox inquiry and the introduction of proxy voting.

I remember that in the 2015 Parliament, when many SNP Members were first elected, Sir David had just been appointed, and I was described by you, Mr Speaker, as a “distinguished ornament” of the Procedure Committee. It was in that capacity that I had the first chance to interact with the Clerk, who was a regular witness at our evidence sessions, not least as the tortuous process of English votes for English laws was being introduced. I suspect that what you, Mr Speaker, have described as his “scholarly cranium” was put to considerable use throughout the devising of those procedures and, indeed, as they have been implemented with varying success in the months and years since then.

As if EVEL were not of enough constitutional signiﬁcance, Sir David—as the Leader of the House said—also oversaw the reform of the use of vellum and the abandoning of wigs by the Clerks in the Chamber. That was not simply about dusting down stuffy old practices; it had the very practical effect of allowing a far wider range of Clerks to gain experience at the Table of the House, which will encourage the professional development of staff across the Chamber directorate. That, I think, is a testament to the ambition that, as we
heard from the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), Sir David has always held for the service of staff in the House. Let me, on behalf of the SNP, express our thanks and gratitude for the advice and support that we receive from all the Clerks in all the various offices, and, of course, warmly congratulate Dr John Benger on his appointment as the 51st Clerk of the House. He is already a familiar and well-respected figure here in Parliament, and we look forward to working closely with him in the months and years to come. I cannot say for certain whether Dr Benger will end up in the same circumstances in which SNP Members have sometimes led Sir David to find himself—not least during a memorable session of Prime Minister’s Question Time last year when he had to advise you, Mr Speaker, on the application of Standing Order 43 (Disorderly conduct) after my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) had attempted to invoke Standing Order 163 (Motions to sit in private). I think that we saw Sir David’s arched eyebrow in overdrive during that particular session.

Sir David’s long experience in the House meant that, on that day and in similar historic situations throughout these years of Brexit and minority government, he has been a point of calm, stability and neutral perspective. That, I think, has been appreciated by Members of all parties who have sought his advice. So after these turbulent years and his many decades of service, who can deny him the chance of a bit of rest and relaxation? We wish him and Lady Natzler every happiness for the years to come—although I suspect that we may not have seen the very last of him quite yet. All the best, and slàinte mhath.

2.58 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): You, Mr Speaker, and the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader have recited the encyclopaedic list of Sir David’s achievements. I shall not repeat them, but they will appear in Hansard, and they will be worth reading. Many of us did not recognise Sir David when we came into the Chamber, because he was one of the three “wigs” sitting on the bench, until the wigs were removed. As has been mentioned, however, a few of us have had the pleasure of working closely with him, either in Committees or individually. I am thinking particularly of the Commission, the Joint Audit Committee and the other Audit Committees. I, for one, always took Sir David’s advice when I asked for it individually, but not everybody did. He is very exacting. One of my colleagues, to her advice when I asked for it individually, but not everybody did. He is very exacting. One of my colleagues, to her

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to say the least, about expenditure and paying expenses. Gordon Brown always liked to talk about prudence, and I often wondered whether they came out of the same nest. Nevertheless, he often gave me good advice and he will be badly missed in this House; it will probably be a long time before we see his like again.

Mr Carmichael: I am sure that is the case, and the hon. Gentleman tees up my next thought perfectly. I have been moved to consider what makes a good Clerk. I am sure that there are many qualities and influences that one must bring to bear, but when I consider those who served as Clerk in my time in this House, I think of Sir William McKay, Sir Malcolm Jack, the now Lord Lisvane and Sir David himself, and in the lives of two of them, Sir William McKay and Sir David, there have been strong Presbyterian influences. The shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), referred to Sir David’s membership and regular attendance at the Church of Scotland congregation in Pont Street, and it strikes me that to be a Presbyterian often puts one in a place where one has to be close to the establishment and to authority, and to understand it, but not necessarily be part of it. I do not think it would come as a surprise to any of us in these challenging times to think that anyone holding the office of Clerk of the House of Commons might have cause to have recourse to prayer, and I have mused whether in those moments of prayer in the magnificent surroundings of St Columba’s, Pont Street, Sir David was seeking guidance from the Almighty or offering advice. Fortunately and happily, that is known only to Sir David and the Almighty. I venture the thought that of course offering advice to an omnipotent deity should not be undertaken lightly, as one risks incurring the wrath of God. I am sure if that were ever to be the case, Sir David would be able to meet the wrath of God with the good humour, equanimity and aplomb we would all expect from a man of his knowledge and experience.

I had always thought that Sir David had never offered an opinion with which I could disagree, but ahead of today’s debate, I made the mistake of putting his name into Google, and I found an article on the website of the constitution unit of University College London where he is quoted, I hope correctly, as saying, “most members of the UK parliament do not come to Westminster expressly to legislate, but to support their parties.” From that one sentence, it is clear that Sir David’s considerable experience has been gained in the Clerks’ office and never in the Whips Office. Now that perhaps his time might permit it, as Liberal Democrat Chief Whip I would be more than happy to offer him a work experience placement in our Whips Office for him to gain a slightly more rounded experience of how this place works. There is one further interesting sentence in that article: “Natzler concluded with a suggestion for future research on rebellious opposition backbenchers.”

I am not entirely sure why he restricted that to Opposition Back Benchers, but there is clearly a rich vein of future research and discourse to be had here.

Sir David leaves Parliament with an enormous wealth of knowledge and experience acquired over many years of distinguished service. I hope that last sentence from the UCL website is an indication that this is not an end of his engagement with our Parliament and politics. He has had a long and distinguished service in this House, and I am sure all in this House hope he will have a long and distinguished retirement.

Mr Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for what he has said. Not for the first time, he has reminded us that he has served as his party’s Chief Whip, but I hope that he will not take it amiss if I say that he has indeed served as his party’s Chief Whip, and with distinction, but that since then he has been promoted.

3.10 pm

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): I am sorry that I was late in attending the Chamber, Mr Speaker; the Procedure Committee was meeting.

Sir David has been an absolute brick to this rather gauche Chairman of the Procedure Committee. I bounce into his office on a regular basis, demonstrating the clear thinking of the totally uninformed. I am sat down, and he demonstrates the deep thinking of the totally informed. He never says no. He normally says, “Charles, brilliant idea—let’s work together to make it even better.” By the time I leave his office, we have the kernel of a good idea that we can take forward.

Sir David is a truly great man. His ethos of public service and his commitment to excellence and to this place reverberate around the corridors of the House of Commons. This is seen in all the Clerks who work with him and for him, from the most senior Clerks to those who are just starting on their journey—a journey that might take them to the highest office in this place over the next 40 years. I shall miss his wisdom greatly. He has been a fantastic friend. He is always willing to listen and, most importantly, he has always been willing to guide. In a sense, he is a bit like a father figure. Father figures love to hear the voices of their children and, in hearing those voices, they can often moderate them and direct them to great purpose and better things. He has been a huge influence on my time in this place, and as I have said, I shall miss him immensely.

3.11 pm

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): It is a great privilege and honour to follow the Leader of the House, the shadow Leader of the House and all the other hon. and hon. Members who have spoken in this tribute to Sir David Natzler. I rise on behalf of my party colleagues and, I suppose, on behalf of the smaller parties in this House, to put on record our gratitude to Sir David for all the work, help and advice that he has given to us over many years and to Members before us who had occasion to work alongside him but who have now left this place. They will recall with fondness and gratitude his advice to them in times past.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) mentioned Sir David’s Presbyterian background. Coming from the Presbyterian tradition myself, I know what it is—certainly now—to be close to the establishment’s power and to understand it but not to be part of it. I have had to adapt to that. This reminds us that Sir David has had the great privilege, as Clerk Assistant and now as Clerk of the House, to be present in those distinguished positions at a time when we have had a full-blown coalition Government, then a
traditional majority Government and now a Government who are in office through a confidence and supply arrangement. Within eight or nine years, every type of Government possible under the British constitution has been in place here, which is unique in the history of this country. Given those changing circumstances, his advice, experience, wisdom and expertise have been even more vital and invaluable.

The expenses scandal of 2009-10 has already been mentioned. That was a very difficult time for the House and for the Members who were here. Sir David’s wisdom and guidance at that time, and the work that he did on the reform of the House, were absolutely invaluable. His courtesy and his accessibility at all times to individual Members of our party and other parties are well known, and I want briefly but very sincerely to wish him and his wife and family a very happy and blessed retirement. I hope that they can enjoy it for many years to come.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): It is presumptuous of a Back Bencher who has been here for less than nine years to join in paying tributes to a distinguished Clerk of the House, Sir David Natzler, who has been here for 44 years. It also runs contrary to the advice that I understand he used to offer on pieces of paper to junior Clerks in his Committees: “K. Y. M. S.” This stood for “keep your mouth shut”. I am glad that I have joined in this tribute, however, partly because I have learned so much more about David Natzler from the gracious tributes that have already been paid by right hon. and hon. Members, and partly because this has reinforced my belief, as an obscure Back Bencher, that one thing about this House—which, even for the most self-confident, can be a daunting place on arrival—is the ability to benefit from the kindly and wise advice of people who have huge experience here. When I have talked about David Natzler to other MPs, Doormen and other people working in Parliament, the one word—almost the leitmotif—that shines forth time and again is the word “approachable”. That is something that we should all treasure.

Others have mentioned David’s modest lifestyle, his dry wit and his personal kindness, but one thing I had never associated with the Clerk of the House was the concept that he might be a headbanger. In fact, I believe that he did bang his head on the table quite often as a way of communicating his disapproval. In fact, I believe that the Clerk of the House may have inherited that longevity and that he will have many decades ahead. I hope that he will be able to find the time to share some of his experience and wisdom with other Clerks of other Parliaments, not least through the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, so that we may continue to benefit from the wisdom that my hon. Friend and many other Members have referred to today. It is his approachability for which I shall remember him most.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It was with no small amount of trepidation that I, as a new Member of this House and already somewhat daunted by the complexity of parliamentary procedure and protocol, discovered that the most senior Clerk was my constituent. I rise this afternoon to say thank you to Sir David Natzler for his dedicated service to Parliament over four decades, for the kindness and patience that he has shown to me, for his answers to questions from me and members of my team, and for taking the time in the early weeks after the 2015 election to knock on my office door to see how we were settling in. That unfailing kindness and approachability are the hallmarks of David’s service.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): My hon. Friend is describing David Natzler’s character extremely well. Does she agree that one thing about him that is so nice for Members—it has not always been the case—is that he does not treat them like nursery schoolchildren?

Helen Hayes: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I know how much David’s kind, patient and generous approach, as well as his intellect and immense knowledge, will be missed in this place, although I take some comfort from my recent discovery that the new Clerk of the House is also a resident of my constituency.

I am sure that David’s retirement from this place will not be the end of his working life and that there are many spheres in which he will continue to contribute. David has many interests, both in our local community in Dulwich and West Norwood and further afield, that he will pursue after 1 March. They include Dulwich Picture Gallery, local history and, as he mentioned to me recently, a compassionate concern for refugees living in our community. I look forward to seeing him progressing with issues and projects in our local area and further afield; he will make an enormous impact in many different ways. I know how much David’s family, his wife Hilary and their children, will value having him around a bit more, and I wish David and his family all the very best for a long, happy and productive retirement.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): As one of the few people who accepts the fact that wigs are no longer commonly worn in this place with a certain sad nostalgia tinged with tristesse, I can forgive Sir David that because of his unflagging decency, kindness and extraordinary characteristics in so many other ways. I first became aware of the depths of his intellect when I was on a plane journey with him going somewhere interesting—
probably Belfast. I was whiling away the journey by dipping into the Viz annual and he was reading an old annotated copy of “The Dutch Seaborne Empire”. As he sat there, it was almost as if the air around that noble cerebellum was crackling with the intellectual activity pulsing from that great brain, and I soon came to realise the depth, the breadth and the extent of that extraordinary knowledge.

One evening, the House was wrestling with the very tricky question of the illegal parking of skips on the streets of London, and we turned our minds and our collective consciousness—the intellect of the entire House—to working out how one would actually get rid of an illegally parked skip, and Sir David was sitting in his usual place. The next day, as I walked past his then study, where he was enthroned like the Master of Balliol, he beckoned me inside and said, “This morning at breakfast, my family and I were discussing that question, and there are a few things you should be aware of.

Firstly, within the profession, skips are called bins. They are not referred to as skips. To use the expression ‘skips’ immediately identifies you as someone completely unfamiliar with the bulk removal of rubble and refuse. Furthermore, there is a mechanism for the removal of these illegally parked bins, which is well known within the profession. It is a dorsal elevation via lateral lugs.”

He drew for me the mechanism, setting out the dynamics of how it could be done, and I thought, “I am in the presence of greatness, because not only is this a man who knows more about the procedure of this House than almost anyone and not only is this a man who has saved the reputations of many a humble parliamentarian by passing them a note—best not repeated on the Floor of the House—but this is a man who understands bulk waste, rubble and refuse removal and was prepared actually to share that with us.”

These occasions are often times of obituary rather than encomiums to those who are still with us. That makes this occasion all the more joyous and all the more joyful, because Sir David is with us and will be with us for many years to come. For however many years he enjoys his time outside and in Dulwich, with all its numerous pleasures that I may one day visit if I am ever allowed, no one in this House has not benefited from his kindness, his decency, his courtesy, his approachability and his wisdom. I cannot imagine anyone capable of doing that job better than he. That is not to put pressure on his successor; I am simply saying that Sir David Natzler is one of a kind. He is the Natzler of Natzlers, the Clerk of Clerks, and I will always be grateful to him.

Mr Speaker: We have already heard wonderful tributes from all quarters of the House, and it does seem fitting now to call a great parliamentarian. I call Hilary Benn.

3.24 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Thank you very much indeed, Mr Speaker. I join all those who have spoken so eloquently and beautifully in tribute to Sir David in rising to share with the House just two memories of him. It is a great pity that he is not present. I do not know whether it is natural modesty on his part or a tradition of the House that the Clerk is not here in person to hear the tributes. If it is the latter, there is an act of modernisation yet to come, and I hope that those who lead on such things will take due and careful attention.

Reference has been made to Sir David’s wit, and I first encountered it one sunny morning when I arrived off the underground and came across Sir David getting off his bicycle in New Palace Yard. I greeted him and said, “So, how long does it take you to cycle in every day, David?” and he looked at me with a stern face and then his eyes twinkled and he said, “About a minute longer every year.” If my maths is any good, after 40 years that must be a hell of a bicycle journey into the House of Commons.

The second memory is of a much more sombre and sad occasion. It was the day after the murder of PC Keith Palmer. I think I was walking back from 4 Millbank, and I decided to come in through St Stephen’s entrance. There I found two of our wonderful staff who greet the visitors every day, and who else but David, who had come out to ask them, “How are you? How are you feeling?” Imagine being those members of staff; absolutely on the frontline, the day after one of our own had been murdered along with the tourists and others killed on the bridge. At that moment, the visitors who came by were directed, as the conversation was interrupted, and would have had absolutely no idea—we talk about the great and the good—that the man standing there in a raincoat with a slightly skew-whiff white bow tie, talking with care and compassion to our staff, was Sir David Lionel Natzler KCB, the Clerk of the House of Commons.

That is typical of the man to whom today we pay such deep and heartfelt tribute in wishing him and all his family the very best for the future.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): In the absence of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) and the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner), both of whom have served here longer than the Under Clerk, may I, as one who also came here in 1975, say that I think his title of Under Clerk of the Parliaments is one that should be remembered? His first predecessor in 1363 was paid £5 a year. If anyone looks at the 1824 Act about the Clerk of the Parliaments, who is up the other end of the building, they will see that it tends to defend all their emoluments, advantages and other ways of skimming off cash that are not allowed either on this side of the Palace of Westminster or, I hope, up there as well.

We must remember that in paying tribute to Sir David we are saying thank you also to all those who have worked with him. Not every Clerk can become the Under Clerk, but all of them work together seamlessly. That is partly down to leadership, but a lot of it relates to the community and to combined tradition and ethics.

We must also remember that, as the Under Clerk, Sir David is editor of “Erskine May” and if he is appointed to the House of Lords—I am not saying that he necessarily will be—I hope that he will last longer than Erskine May did. Sir Thomas Erskine May was dead seven days after he was appointed to the House of Lords—seven times longer than the shortest barony, which was that of Frederick le Gez, who lasted for only 24 hours—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) looks shocked, so I tell her to watch out if she ever gets sent up to the other place.
We must remember that, in the years leading up to his being Clerk of the House of Commons, Sir David went through many roles. If, like some of his ancestors, he lives to 100, that is another 35 years—rather a short time, given all the things he is capable of doing.

Let us hope that people recruited to the House service will look to those who have been Clerks and Assistant Clerks and say that serving the House, not as a civil servant, is as important as being elected to serve as a Member of Parliament. We look on him as one of ours, and I hope he looks on us as his friends.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved, nemine contradicente.

That Mr Speaker be requested to convey to Sir David Natzler KCB, on his retirement from the office of Clerk of the House, this House's gratitude for his long and distinguished service, for his wise contribution to the development of the procedure of the House and to modernising its practices, for his leadership and thoughtfulness in the discharge of his duties as head of the House Service, and for the courteous and helpful advice always given to individual honourable Members.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered.

That, at this day's sitting, proceedings on the Motion in the name of Jeremy Corbyn relating to Securitisation Regulations 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 1288) may continue, though opposed, for 90 minutes after the commencement of proceedings on the motion for this Order, and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of, and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) will not apply.—(Andrea Leadsom.)

Mr Speaker: I can usefully announce the result of the deferred Division. In respect of the question relating to intellectual property, the Ayes were 308 and the Noes were 267, so the Ayes have it.

[The Division list is published at the end of today's debates.]
special purpose entity to designate one of their number to provide details of the securitisation, either to a repository or on a website. Finally, they provide preferential treatment to so-called simple, transparent and standardised securitisations, enabling them to be discounted for the purpose of allocating credit margins.

A core element of STS securitisation is the retention by originators, sponsors and original lenders of a 5% stake in the securitisation, described colloquially as “skin in the game”. Those involved must also follow certain transparency and due diligence requirements. As such, although the regulation does to an extent consolidate existing legislation, it also significantly loosens the burden of capital retention for banks using STS securitisations compared with the previous situation. Some stakeholders felt that reigniting the use of securitisation through this legislation would help to promote liquidity and boost economic activity, given that it, in effect, allows higher levels of borrowing by the economic actors whose debt is repackaged in the securitisation. However, many others point to the potential dangers this poses for financial stability if unsafe, non-transparent and overly complex securitisations are allowed to fall within the STS bracket. This is especially the case given the reduced capital requirements to balance off the default risk from STS securitisations. I hardly need to remind this House of the problems caused to the sustainability of financial institutions and the subsequent calls made on the taxpayer due to insufficient margin being held by the banks against the risks they held.

Secondly, these provisions amending primary legislation affect the criminal offences that are on the statute book. The legislation permits the use of sanctions for cases of negligence and intentional infringement, for example, fraudulent reporting of STS status. In addition, however, the provisions alter existing offences. The regulations appear to say that section 399 of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, which establishes an offence of misleading the Competition and Markets Authority, does not apply. In addition, paragraph 8 of schedule 1 prevents the Financial Conduct Authority from instituting proceedings for money laundering and insider dealing.

It is not clear why, on the basis of this statutory instrument alone, this needs to follow from the parent legislation. Why, if we are reading this complex statutory instrument right, does it abolish the offence of misleading the CMA and prevent the FCA from instituting proceedings for money laundering and insider dealing? What problem are these provisions addressing? Why are these changes being achieved through this piece of secondary legislation? We hope that we can receive some clarification on these points. If we cannot, these provisions would appear to be troubling. Because of the impact on people’s liberties and the overall balance of offences on the statute book, which surely should be as public and accessible as possible, criminal offences should not be altered by delegated legislation in this manner.

Thirdly, and finally, these regulations transfer significant powers to the FCA to supervise compliance. It might be said that the FCA is the orthodox body to develop financial regulation and to ensure compliance with it, but there is a need for full debate about the allocation of responsibility for supervision and compliance. The original EU regulation provides no obligation for the FCA to be designated as the competent authority, so this is a political choice. It is also not clear, on the basis of this statutory instrument, whether the FCA has sufficient resourcing and capacity to carry out these tasks. It is not optimal or desirable for these powers to be transferred via a statutory instrument.

These powers are, of course, complicated by the interaction of this SI with the no-deal SI related to securitisation, which transfers the responsibility of the European Systemic Risk Board, for assessing and mitigating systemic risk, to the “competent authorities”. The latter are, as I understand it, here designated as the Prudential Regulation Authority, the FCA and the Bank, with systemic risk here identified as “a material risk to the financial stability of a financial institution or to the financial system as a whole”.

Under this approach, the FCA would also be able to permit re-securitisation for specified legitimate purposes, an important exception to the general ban imposed from this legislation on re-securitisation. The general ban prevents the underlying assets of a securitisation from being themselves already securitised assets—this is one of many activities that produced the highly complex and opaque securitisations linked to contagion during the financial crisis. As part of these regulations, the FCA would be responsible for ensuring that those engaged in a securitisation complied with the relevant transparency requirements. It is especially important that these kinds of regulatory developments receive scrutiny, given the contention around elements of the securitisation package and, in particular, whether it is sufficiently stringent. What became known as “skin in the game” was set in the regulation at 5% of risk to be retained across each mode of risk retention, despite calls for a higher level from many quarters. Indeed, many actors within the EU questioned whether securitisation should be encouraged in the first place through the creation of the STS designation. Given that the resultant regulations were a balance between very polarised positions on this subject, it is essential that we properly scrutinise the transposition of these measures into UK law. For that reason, we have prayed against these measures being transferred purely through an SI process.

3.40 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): As part of our obligations while the UK remains a member of the EU, it is our responsibility to ensure that domestic law is compatible with EU legislation. That includes this statutory instrument, which will, as the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) said, ensure that the EU securitisation regulation is effective and enforceable in the UK. It is not an EU-exit statutory instrument through which functions are transferred from an EU authority to domestic authorities. The instrument that does that—the Securitisation (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019—was laid on 23 January and will be debated in due course.

It might be helpful if I gave the House some background information. The securitisation market’s slow recovery after the financial crisis reflects concerns among investors and prudential supervisors about risks associated with the securitisation process itself. The EU responded by proposing in 2015 legislative measures to encourage a transparent and liquid market for securitisation. There were 120 responses to the 2015 consultation that gave rise to the regulations, which evolved over two years of
EU discussions. They were then scrutinised in Parliament and were approved by the House of Lords scrutiny Committees in July 2017 and by the House of Commons European Scrutiny Committee in February 2017.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The Minister mentioned the number of consultation responses; were they from throughout the EU or just from companies and organisations in the UK?

John Glen: I am not certain, but I would imagine they were from the UK. It was an extensive consultation that led to the evolution of the regulations, which were then scrutinised at different intervals by the Lords and Commons Committees before their final approval in 2017.

The UK voted in favour of the package of reforms in 2017 because it ensures high standards of process, legal certainty and comparability through a greater degree of standardisation of products. The new rules bear no relation to the securitisation of sub-prime mortgages created in the US that contributed so significantly to the financial crisis. Along with other legislation, including on the overhaul of the credit ratings agencies and more stringent rules for mortgage and credit granting, the proposals build on the lessons learned from the financial crisis by improving regulation and oversight, and they implement standards introduced by the international supervisory community.

The EU regulation, which the instrument we are debating implements, is derived from the new international standards set by the Basel Committee on Banking Supervision and the International Organisation of Securities Commissions. These two bodies worked to create a new framework of high-quality securitisations to introduce the degree of assurance around the information on securitisation that was necessary in the markets. Their work seeks to restore an important funding channel for the EU economy while making the market less risky and supporting financial stability.

At a time when bank lending is constrained, securitisation can boost credit and growth. It can help to free up banks’ balance sheets so that they can lend to households and businesses. The good functioning of and access to securitisation as a funding tool allows investors to diversify their investments and supports the real economy. It is for that purpose that effectively supervised securitisation is actively supported by the prudential authorities, including the Bank of England, which supported the EU initiative as playing “an essential role in de-stigmatising European securitisation, helping the market to develop on a sustainable track”.

Let me turn now to the securitisation regulations. Although the EU rules themselves were agreed in 2017, the statutory instrument under consideration concerns empowering the regulators to effectively supervise the new securitisation rules that came into force at the start of the year. As the industry has prepared itself for the new regime, the Government are obliged to ensure that the new framework is operable. In essence, this SI gives effect to the directly applicable EU securitisation regulation and ensures that it is effective and enforceable in the UK.

The supervisory, investigative and sanctioning powers that this instrument delegates to the relevant competent authorities give effect to the EU framework. The hon. Lady mentioned the resourcing of the Financial Conduct Authority and the Bank of England. Both have been instrumental in the development of these regulations and are primed and ready to take on responsibility for them. The instrument fulfils the necessary obligations of the EU regulation in designating roles to the domestic regulators and provides them with the powers that they require to effectively supervise the market.

To summarise, the Government believe that this instrument is needed to ensure that the new securitisation regulatory regime works effectively. This will support a sound and transparent securitisation market in the UK, bringing real benefits to investment, jobs and growth while enhancing long-term financial stability. The whole purpose of the EU regulation is to address the challenges of the past and to ensure that mistakes prior to the financial crisis in respect of securitisation are not repeated by keeping the measures simple in form and more transparent. The proposal to revoke the instrument would only endanger that and disrupt the market as supervisors would not be able to enforce infringements to the rules that seek to better regulate the market.

The hon. Lady raised a number of points. I have clarified that this measure is not related to a no-deal situation. A point was made about the amendment to primary legislation and the fact that criminal offences already on the statute book will be affected. Although the EU regulation is directly applicable, the Securitisation Regulations 2018 make changes to UK law to ensure that EU regulations are fully effective and enforceable in the UK. The power under section 2(2) of the European Communities Act 1972 makes it possible to give effect in national law to measures in EU law by secondary or delegated legislation such as statutory instruments. Importantly, such secondary legislation can amend an Act of Parliament—section 2(4)—as the delegated legislative power includes the power to make such provisions as might be made by an Act of Parliament. So the instrument applies and modifies certain provisions of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 and other UK legislation both to create the new supervisory, investigative and sanctioning powers required by the EU regulation and to ensure that UK legislation is compatible with EU regulation, including applying and/or modifying necessary sanctions pursuant to sections 398 and 177 of the 2000 Act. This instrument allows an approach consistent with existing enforcement regimes elsewhere in the sector and with other financial services implementing SIs.

The hon. Lady referred to preferential treatment of capital for banks and risk retention and needing to have skin in the game. These rules are derived directly from international standards, which are set by the Basel Committee on Banking Supervision and by the International Organisation of Securities Commissions. There is no attempt to develop some bespoke UK regime. These measures are completely consistent, which has been acknowledged during the significant scrutiny process to which they have already been subject. The hon. Lady also mentioned the CMA. The CMA was not designated as it does not have a role to play under the EU regulation.

I think that I have dealt with the points that have been raised. These are straightforward regulations that give effect to the directly applicable EU securitisation regulation. When Sub-Committee A of the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee looked at these regulations on 17 December, it cleared them without comment. This is an attempt to update the regulations appropriately to give more confidence in the markets. I hope that the
House will join together in support of the continued application of this instrument, and to oppose the motion to revoke it.

3.50 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): This debate is so well subscribed that I was not sure whether I would be called, so I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak. It is excellent to have the opportunity to talk about a statutory instrument on the Floor of the House, given that we tend to be relegated to the Committee Corridor. It is also delightful to see two Government Ministers on the Front Bench, as we only have the pleasure of one in Delegated Legislation Committees.

The case has been put excellently by the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) who spoke from the Opposition Front Bench. I want to talk about a few concerns that the Scottish National Party has about the regulations as drafted, and the reasons why the Labour party prayed against them. The hon. Member for Oxford East made the case that, although this is not an EU exit statutory instrument, its aims clash with the aims of the EU exit SI on securitisation. It is quite confusing for the House at this time to be dealing with the in-flight regulations coming from the EU, as well as the EU exit ones. The issues around Henry VIII powers are incredibly important and form the core of our concerns.

The Minister mentioned the consultation. I would guess that the 150 submissions were from an EU-wide basis, rather than a UK-wide one. In fact, it seems unusual for there to be that number of submissions on pretty much anything. Given the number of SIs that receive no formal submissions, 150 seems like a significant number. However, if that is the case, I am quite happy to retract those comments.

The Minister’s comments on the consultation and the responses to it were very useful, but it was unfortunate that this information was not included in the explanatory memorandum. The explanatory memoranda that we normally see for SIs, particularly those dealing with EU exit, generally do not say that there has been consultation—and we generally criticise the Government for that—but they do usually say that there has been consultation with the Financial Conduct Authority, the Prudential Regulation Authority, the Bank of England or whichever authorities are relevant. However, the explanatory memorandum for this SI does not even say that that has happened. It is particularly concerning that, even if there were consultation on how the legislation was written, there has not been one on the implementation of the legislation as it is written into UK law and how it will be taken forward in this place.

My other concern is about the authority given to the FCA and the PRA. I have raised this concern recently, particularly in relation to the Bank of England. It seems that the Government are changing the powers that these organisations have, piece by piece, without any kind of overall strategy. It would be sensible for the Government to bring forward a White Paper or some sort of document on how they envisage the powers of the FCA and the Bank of England operating in future years. It seems that the Government are making policy changes by SI when they should actually be coming forward with an overarching position regarding how they see both the policy and the powers of the Bank of England, the FCA and the PRA in the future. When they make these piecemeal changes, we end up with organisational changes that have to deal with powers that are not joined up in any way because there is no joined-up approach.

It seems to me, from conversations that I have had with the Minister, or possibly the Financial Secretary, on the amount of resource that the FCA has that this House has been giving it quite a lot of additional work and obligations in recent times. While I am not saying that that is necessarily a bad thing, the way that it has been done has not been helpful. My understanding, with regard to the FCA’s requirement for resource in terms of spend, is that it will come to this House and request additional money if it has additional duties that it needs to carry out. Given that the Government are increasing the scope of and requirements on the FCA in taking action to monitor things and to have obligations in various places, has the Minister had an overall look at what its budget and powers will look like in future years? If not, it will be very difficult for it to say to this House how much money it is going to require in order to adequately ensure that it is fulfilling all the obligations that have been given to it by this House.

My main concerns were around the issue of consultation, particularly the fact that, as it says in the explanatory memorandum, consultation has not been undertaken on the implementation of this EU law within UK law, as well as the piecemeal nature of the way in which the Government are coming forward with this. It would be helpful if the Minister was able to clarify, or give us some idea of, the Government’s direction of travel and say that there will be some sort of policy paper on these powers. It was particularly concerning that the Bank of England’s powers were just extended without any sort of policy alongside that. We are regularly seeing the FCA’s powers being changed.

It would be really helpful for this House, and we would be much less likely to raise concerns, if we had an idea of where the Government’s decision making was going. We might disagree, but we would be less likely to raise these concerns about every single SI. I am sure that the Minister is absolutely fed up with us raising exactly the same things on these occasions and having to give exactly the same answer, which generally does not help us. I have not generally taken part in SI debates on the Floor of the House, so I am not sure whether the Minister is going to wind up, as is normal. I hope that he does, so that he can answer some of these points.

3.57 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman).

Not everyone appreciates the role that securitisation of loans and debts played in the financial crash of 2008, but it was a substantial role, with devastating consequences. To give some context, in the years prior to 2008, a calamitous decision was taken by executives in large US-based international banks to securitise sub-prime mortgages, which were mortgages given to people who had virtually no way of paying them back. Because of predatory lending, the number of these sub-prime mortgages continued to rise. They were then pooled together with other loans and debts and packaged as a
financial product in the form of mortgage-backed securities that received triple A ratings from the credit rating companies.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is surely arguing that sub-prime lending was mismanaged rather than securitisation itself. Do I understand him correctly, or is he suggesting that securitisation was the problem?

Bambos Charalambous: It was both. It was the sub-prime lending and it was also the packaging of these products into securitisation with other, better products that were then triple A rated.

Mr Jayawardena: But is it not true that securitisation is really helpful in recycling capital, thereby providing investors with a stream of income that is useful to them and allowing responsible financial institutions to direct their capital at new people who want, for example, to borrow money to buy a home?

Bambos Charalambous: If done properly, there is benefit in securitisation, but it was not done properly in the United States, and therefore we need to take extra precautions now to ensure that it is done properly.

Mr Jayawardena: The hon. Gentleman is very kind to give way again. I want to unpick that a little further, because it is helpful. Can he confirm that securitisation is a good way of managing risk across a portfolio of loans, so that those with worse credit ratings can be properly and openly matched up with those with better credit ratings, so that they can draw an income on in the long run and allow institutions to use the capital they have secured from investors to offer new products to new people?

Bambos Charalambous: But if credit rating companies do not give the correct ratings, as happened in the United States, it all falls apart. I am happy to carry on the conversation with the hon. Gentleman in Strangers’ afterwards.

There was a big investment in mortgage-backed securities, with many financial institutions choosing to invest in them because of their promised high rate of return. When people started defaulting on sub-prime mortgages, the mortgage-backed securities lost their value, and the financial institutions that had invested heavily in them became exposed and suffered catastrophic losses. Since that time, steps have been taken to ensure that we never again experience the shockwaves of those failing giant financial institutions and the aftermath. We need a robust system of dealing with the risk of such exposure due to securitisation, and that requires primary legislation.

As the hon. Member for Aberdeen North said, what we have before us are ill-conceived regulations that do not address the whole picture, and these changes are being made without the House having a chance to properly scrutinise them. Let us be clear: these regulations are not required due to the fear of a no-deal Brexit. They have conveniently been slipped in by the Government, under not the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 but other legislation.

The regulations give responsibility to the Financial Conduct Authority to supervise the compliance of people involved in securitisation practices and allow it to impose certain penalties and take other steps to monitor securitisation. Such changes should not be made via secondary legislation. The complexity of these measures needs proper scrutiny. The very fact that the regulations change provisions in criminal law by preventing the FCA from instituting criminal proceedings for money laundering and insider dealing is a serious matter that is worthy of proper debate and scrutiny, which cannot be done via this debate. The regulations are wrong-headed, as schedule 1 amends primary legislation and transfers significant powers to the Treasury, the Financial Conduct Authority, the Prudential Regulation Authority and the Bank of England.

Mr Jayawardena: I am enjoying the hon. Gentleman’s contribution, even if we come from different starting points. Does he support the FCA having such a role but object to the principle of how this is being arrived at, or does he object to the FCA having this role? If not the FCA, who should it be?

Bambos Charalambous: Those are exactly the sort of points that should be made via a debate on primary, not secondary, legislation.

Mr Jayawardena: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Bambos Charalambous: I will not give way again, as I am almost at the end of my contribution.

These are important changes that Parliament needs to get right, due to the dire consequences of what went wrong in the past. These measures are opaque, unconstitutional and lacking in proper scrutiny. I invite the Government to withdraw the regulations and introduce primary legislation, to allow thorough and proper scrutiny to take place. Without such assurances, I will vote for the motion in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and against the Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call Anneliese Dodds.

John Glen rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: I beg your pardon. If the Minister would like to respond, and it is the wish of the House that he should do so, he may.

4.3 pm

John Glen: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I feel it is appropriate for me to respond to the remarks of the hon. Members for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) and for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman).

The Treasury has not undertaken a formal consultation on this SI, as the changes to domestic legislation required are minor, and the enforcement approach taken is in line with existing enforcement regimes in the financial services sector. We have worked closely with the FCA and the PRA throughout.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North made some remarks about the resourcing of the FCA. It has additional resources through the onshoring programme, but this SI has nothing to do with that. This is a business-as-usual SI that would have happened anyway. There was certainly no attempt to slip it in amidst all the others that were taken through Committee. It was a consequence of these regulations being taken through the scrutiny process. I can confirm that there were 120 responses from across
Anneliese Dodds: The Minister—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. A short while ago, this was a very well behaved debate on very specific issues, but since the speech of the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), it seems to have become a very general and exciting debate. I know that Members are anticipating a Division, and they will be trying very hard to make up their minds on which side of the House they are going to vote, but they must listen to the hon. Lady.

Anneliese Dodds: I will not strain the House’s patience, but I fear that the Minister, who is normally very clear in his remarks, is mixing apples and pears. He mentioned credit rating in relation to sub-prime mortgage-related securities in the United States. There was a relationship with the US state in that case, because of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, but there was not a connection between that process and the British state. I fear that there was a little bit of confusion there.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Perhaps we can clear up the mystery of whose fault it was, because the previous Chancellor said that it was not the fault of the Labour Government at all.

Anneliese Dodds: As ever, my hon. Friend makes an important, pertinent and brief point.

Mr Jayawardena: I wonder whether, on reflection, the hon. Lady thinks that the former regulatory structure had an input on very specific issues, but since the speech of the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), building on what my hon. Friend said, there has been a wide-ranging debate. We are talking specifically about the regulation of securitisation. [Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman appears to be suggesting that he was trying to make a point about the lack of stringent regulation at the time of the financial crisis. I remind all Members that it was, of course, the Conservatives who urged the then Government to deregulate further and to remove regulation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) set out the involvement of securitisation in the financial crisis very clearly. To respond briefly to the hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), building on what my hon. Friend said, there has been a wide-ranging debate about whether it is appropriate to encourage additional securitisation, of which he may be aware. Of course, securitisation facilitates additional leverage, beyond what would already be there, because it makes liquid assets that are not already liquid. That may be appropriate in some contexts, but it can lead to inappropriate leveraging, particularly when it is conducted in a complex and
opaque way, as arguably was the case during the financial crisis. It is surely appropriate, therefore, that we question any new regulations that apply to securitisation in this House, as we have done in this debate.

I am grateful to the Minister for his opening remarks. However, I regret that he failed to respond to my detailed comments about the manner in which the EU regulation has been transposed. Our complaint is not necessarily with the overall framework, which, as he rightly intimated, came from the Basel framework through IOSCO and, latterly, the EU. The point is that the process has not been entirely without controversy. As a result, the decisions that the Government make about how to implement the framework are potentially delicate, as was underlined rightly by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman).

The Minister said that the statutory instrument is a simple empowerment of the FCA. However, I referred in my remarks to how the regulations disapply elements of existing legislation, including those relating to offences under the purview of the Competition and Markets Authority and to insider dealing. He did not make it clear why that was necessary. He said that the measures would make our statute book consistent with offences in other countries in respect of complex securitisation and so on. He did not indicate whether they were consistent with existing offences on the UK statute book. That, surely, is what is at issue.

For all those reasons, we will press the motion of revocation to a vote.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 263, Noes 306.

Division No. 330 [4.14 pm]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amess, Mike
Antoniacci, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Black, Mhairi
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brook, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie

Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Fellows, Marion
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Fint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Fridh, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harri, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hendy, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollem, Kate
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kealey, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laid, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Law, Chris
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Linden, David
Lloyd, Tony
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly (Proxy vote cast by Mark Tami)
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Meams, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamaro, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Phillips, Jess
Philpion, Bridget
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reese, Eline
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afotiam, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Arger, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breer, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Connor

Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, rh Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Tigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valérie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Wilson, Phil
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jeff Smith and Bambo Charalambous

Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fyah, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greene, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Glyn, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil

Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kactowski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Mills, Nigel
Milbon, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Morgan, rh Nicky
Moris, Anne Marie
Moris, David
Moris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sherryl
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
communities: charities and volunteers

4.27 pm

the parliamentary under-secretary of state for digital, culture, media and sport (mims davies): i beg to move,

that this house has considered connecting communities by supporting charities and volunteers.

i am delighted that the house has this opportunity to discuss a subject so close to the nation’s heart: charities and volunteers. i am sure that everyone across the house will agree that these incredible people and organisations are the bold, brave, beating heart of our communities. and they are not alone. they work alongside the social enterprises, mutuals, community groups and socially responsible businesses that help to make up our civil society.

this country’s civil society is a force to be reckoned with. it has a proud heritage and is admired across the globe. it is everything from a voice for the voiceless to an incubator for innovation. it provides a space for us to display the very best of ourselves and a desire to help and support others. we all know of superhuman efforts that people have made in our constituencies and communities on behalf of charities—running, skydiving, sponsored swims, sponsored silences, with groups, individuals and children all raising millions, thousands or hundreds of pounds for causes they care about.

only a few years ago, the eyes of the world were on london for the paralympic and olympic games. people were amazed by the athletic achievement, but what also made an impact on millions of people were those who came from our shores: our volunteers, the games makers, others could have a brighter and better future and an enjoyable time.

we will see that again: with birmingham 2022, the commonwealth games, on the horizon, we have a chance to do it all again. our experience, in london 2012 and beyond, has shown that we can create the right opportunities and environment for volunteers. they will come and step up to the challenge. that energy and that sense of momentum are vital if we are to continue to have a happier and healthier society.

what is the government’s vision for civil society? three elements are particularly important to me as we chart this new path. the first is the building of communities that are connected: tackling loneliness, helping people to feel attached to the places where they live and empowering people of all ages to build an even better society. the second is the establishment of a socially responsible business and finance sector that can act as an even greater force for good in our society and tackle, creatively, some of its most entrenched problems.

mims davies: i thank my hon. friend for referring to something that is happening in his community and may be a worry. the charity commission plays an important role in giving us comfort in that respect. it is an independent registrar, and it is the regulator of charities. the government
have recognised the demand for its services by granting it an extra £5 million a year to help our charities to be at their best. If my hon. Friend has any concerns about that specific case, I shall be happy to meet him.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): The Minister has rightly paid tribute to the hundreds of thousands of volunteers—long may they continue, and I pay tribute to the volunteers in my own constituency—but does she think it right that voluntary organisations, including charities such as the Trussell Trust and other food banks, are in effect replacing statutory services, although they are not equipped in the same way as a statutory service?

Mims Davies: Some £2.3 million will go to 10 more places to put community at the heart of tackling local issues, from the Onion Collective in Somerset addressing skills gaps in the county to Lincoln's hometown football club building on cohesion in the community. This investment in communities the length and breadth of the country will help even more people take action on the issues they care about most, including helping more volunteering, giving more money directly to local causes that people feel connected with in their community and supporting even more simple neighbourly acts, which can mean so much.

The Government are also helping connect communities by tackling loneliness. We are the first country in the world to have a Minister for loneliness, and I have had interest from Governments, businesses and charities around the globe—from places such as Canada, the USA, Australia, Sweden to Japan—that want to learn from us. To help tackle loneliness across England, we have secured £20 million of new grant funding for brilliant projects that are directly connecting communities, such as the Rural Coffee Caravan in Bury St Edmunds. The Care Leavers Association is also included; it is helping to develop a digital platform to connect care leavers of all ages so they can share, learn and support one another.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Can the Minister comment on any discussions she has had with the devolved Administrations specifically about loneliness?

Mims Davies: I have had conversations with the devolved Administrations on sport and connecting communities, but I have not directly had any on that issue. I am however very happy to take that up and co-operate with colleagues across the House to work with the devolved Administrations. As a Wales Minister, I was very aware that there are particular communities that we need to make sure Westminster and Whitehall are reaching.

We are breaking down barriers to volunteering for everyone, and we are focussing on those at risk of loneliness and looking to the long term to help those people who might want to get involved and who might need a new direction and feel isolated. I am backing that again today with cash: £250,000 for new funding to do exactly that.

When communities are facing their moment of greatest need, a connected community is what matters most. We saw that in the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower tragedy. Local charities at the heart of the community stepped up, working in partnership with national organisations and emergency services to provide support for those in need. The public responded, too, by raising over £29 million. That was unprecedented, and it highlighted that we are at our very best when we come together and help each other. This community support was invaluable in helping the Government reach the Grenfell victims and their families quickly, and we will continue to support them. We are working with our experienced charity partners to further strengthen the response and be ready for any future emergencies.

How can business help our communities? Society's needs are at the heart of good decision making. The private sector is a great force for good, and this is a chance to address society's most pressing issues by encouraging innovative public services to work alongside private investors, socially responsible businesses and social enterprise. From tackling homelessness to helping young people reach their full potential, business and finance can and must play a crucial role.

Through social impact bonds, we are bringing together investors who want to make a difference with charities who have the expertise to make real change. This successful model is already having a positive impact on people and
communities across the country. Charities such as St Mungo’s and Thames Reach are working with the most vulnerable rough sleepers in London to help them rebuild their lives. This social impact bond gives charities the financial safety net to do this important work, and I was struck by the passion and commitment of the staff I met last week and the results they have achieved. Since the project was launched in 2017, it has helped more than 150 people to find homes. We know that this funding model works, and that is why we are investing £80 million through the life chances fund to give more support to social impact bonds that create people-focused results. People matter, and we are delivering for them.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I worked on social impact bonds prior to entering this place. One of the big barriers that social enterprises face in drawing down social impact bonds is the lack of expertise in unlocking these complex instruments. What support will there be within the fund to ensure that that money can be drawn down by social enterprises?

Mims Davies: In my new role in this Department, I have found nothing but complete expertise to absolutely make this work. If the hon. Gentleman would like to raise a particular issue relating to his experience, I would be happy to hear from him directly.

There is more that we can do to help vulnerable people across the country. We are working with the banks and the building societies to unlock millions of pounds from dormant accounts. Instead of gathering dust, that money is being invested in helping our young people into employment and in tackling problem debt. In 2018 alone, £330 million of dormant assets funding was announced, and by 2020, the total distribution from dormant accounts will reach more than half a billion pounds. We will expand that scheme further to help more vulnerable people to benefit. This funding is changing lives for the better, with £90 million helping the most disadvantaged young people into employment and £55 million tackling problem debt. These initiatives are led by two independent organisations.

The Government want an economy that works for everyone in every part of their life. We are building a strong foundation for social impact investing, which is bringing more capital funding to social enterprises and charities in the UK, alongside traditional forms of funding for these organisations. I am mindful that lots of people want to speak, so I shall try to commute my remarks, but I want to get these key messages out. This works in practice. Since its launch in 2012, Big Society Capital has committed more than £520 million and leveraged more than £1.2 billion of additional co-investment into this space.

The Government are building on these successes and will be using a further £135 million from dormant accounts to help further charities and social enterprises. In addition, the Government have commissioned an advisory group, and the Prime Minister has personally asked for an industry-led implementation taskforce to deliver its recommendations. We also have an inclusive economy partnership, where we work with businesses such as O2, Landsec and Accenture and with social innovators to find practical solutions to unlock issues on the ground. We also have the This is Me programme, an inclusive workplace programme that focuses on mental health issues, and it is working with Landsec. This is an area in which we are working with business and the community to ensure that we can deliver on the ground.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): My hon. Friend is keen to speed on, but I should just like to say that she has already made a great impression on the House and on the sectors for which she is responsible in the time that she has been a Minister. In that spirit, will she take account of the rural areas such as the one I represent with regard to the things that she has said? They sometimes miss out, and it would be great if we found some means by which we could get her to come to places such as Lincolnshire to evangelise the case that she has made so powerfully today.

Mims Davies: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we should not forget our rural communities. We should work on this through the loneliness fund and the building connections fund, and I have more to say on that. I absolutely must speed on, but we need to make sure that we can cater for everyone across the land.

Moving on to youth opportunities, we need to harness the energy of young people and ensure that they have the opportunity to contribute to their local area. Volunteering provides young people with many of the skills that they will need later in life, and we are reaching out to the next generation to give them more opportunities to get involved.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mims Davies: I will give way quickly, but I need to speed on.

Chris Elmore: I am extremely grateful to the Minister. Will she join me in paying tribute to the guide and scout movement, which does an enormous amount of work to try to ensure that young people understand the value of volunteering? It was refreshing to have scouts and guides approaching me as their local Member of Parliament to engage in National Democracy Week last year, so that they could begin to understand the wider process of democracy, which is linked to volunteering.

Mims Davies: The £5 million that the Government invested in creating new places for disadvantaged young people through uniformed youth groups, including Girlguiding and St John Ambulance, shows that we are committed. We also have half a million participants in the National Citizen Service. Working with the National Lottery Community Fund, we are investing another £80 million to help young people be active in their communities. We want our young people to have a voice in decision making, and we are creating two new groups to involve them.

Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): May I share one slight concern with the Minister? The public sector, including the health service, sometimes leans on effective charities a little too heavily. I was at Whitby and District Community Transport on Friday, and its worry is that the criteria for patient transport are changing, which is increasing pressure when it already has trouble getting enough volunteer drivers.
Mims Davies: It is right to work with local authorities and community groups so that we do not stop people volunteering. We should be actively encouraging people and giving them a chance to shine.

Finally, on youth services, the civil society strategy included a commitment to examine the guidance given to local authorities to provide appropriate local youth services. Through such efforts, we will help people to be more active in their communities, and we have promised a review.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mims Davies: I am going to conclude, because I will be in trouble otherwise.

Despite the challenges in our growing and changing communities, as Members will know from their constituencies, civil society represents an opportunity to come together. The British people are the most generous, enterprising, imaginative and downright determined people in the world. As a Member of Parliament and a charity trustee and fundraiser, I know what it takes to be part of that, and I salute people across all constituencies, including Eastleigh, for what they do. I look forward to hearing from people about what is going on in their communities. Civil society is the best tool we have to connect our communities, to boost the economy and to make us happier, and we can work together to connect our communities further.

4.47 pm

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I listened with interest to the Minister’s warm words, but I suspect that we will hear much this afternoon about the gap between the rhetoric and the reality in the Government’s approach to civil society. Ever since they were elected, this Government’s method has been to underfund, undermine and sideline the sector at every opportunity. That is a tragedy, because civil society, including the charities, volunteers and community groups that are part of it, play a critical role in reconnecting the communities that this Government have divided.

There is a real mistrust of politics and politicians in our country, which is not surprising. A decade of austerity has ripped the heart out of communities and seen the destruction of shared community spaces. Good jobs have been lost to automation. Once thriving industrial towns have been left to decline. Inequality has grown wider while the economy has grown bigger, because a few at the top have grown richer at the expense of everyone else.

The politics that did all that needs to change. People want back control over their own lives. It is no longer enough for any group of politicians to stand up and tell people to trust them to have all the answers. Trust cannot be a one-way street. People will not trust politicians until politicians show that they trust people enough to put real power in people’s hands. It once felt like the Conservative party was on to that with its big society agenda, but it withered before our eyes into a crude attempt to replace paid professionals with unpaid volunteers.

Now, the Conservatives do not talk about it at all.

Let us look at how much has vanished under this Government: 428 day centres, 1,000 children’s centres, 600 youth centres, 478 public libraries and countless lunch clubs, befriending services, community centres and voluntary groups. Those places where communities came together to act have all gone.

Rushanara Ali: Does my hon. Friend agree that the cuts in youth services have been particularly devastating? Although the interventions to support the National Citizen Service have been welcomed in many areas, the reality is that the £1 billion or so that has been spent in that arena has not been matched by support in other areas to help young people get on to successor programmes, to meet their needs and to ensure that they have genuine opportunities to take part in positive activities, rather than get caught up in crime and other risks.

Mr Reed: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I said, 600 youth centres have closed, and all the activities that could have gone on in them have been taken away. That is a crying shame.

Sadly, the Government have not finished with that agenda; there is worse to come. Their new so-called fair funding formula will remove deprivation levels from how funding is calculated. It will take even more away from the very poorest and will weaken the very communities in which the need to tackle poverty, youth crime and homelessness is greatest. Communities cannot organise, act or assert their voice if the Government keep ripping away the resources they need to do those very things.

The Government passed a lobbying Act that gags charities and prevents them from campaigning. Ministers individually have put gagging clauses in contracts to silence charities and prevent them from criticising their personal failures as Ministers. The Government have discouraged volunteers in the UK by not recognising their work for national insurance credits. They announced a plan for paid time off work for volunteering, but it fizzled out into absolutely nothing.

We are a month and a half away from Brexit, but the Government have still not told us how they will replace lost EU funding for charities or how the shared prosperity fund will work, despite the fact that the Opposition have been asking about it for months. The Minister trumpets the new funding—she did so this afternoon—but she fails to acknowledge that it is a tiny drop in the ocean, compared with the billions that the Government have cut. They can work out the huge financial value of what they have taken away, but the social value that they have destroyed is incalculable.

Despite the cuts and the Government’s failure to open up power, people are doing amazing things in their communities, and are stepping in to help the victims of Government funding cuts. I pay tribute to the food
banks and homeless shelters which, in such a wealthy country, we should never have needed. There is a wonderful, rich, emerging practice of sharing, co-operating, collaborating and participating in this country. People's ingenuity and the creativity in our communities cannot and will not be beaten back, but it is fragile. It needs support and protection. It is clear that the Conservatives will never offer that, but Labour will.

Alex Sobel: My local council for voluntary service, Voluntary Action Leeds, wrote to me. It said clearly that volunteering is not part of the benefits system, and that people are being sanctioned if they refuse to volunteer. That is not volunteering; it is forced labour. Universal credit is affecting the amount of time that people have to volunteer, so the Government's own welfare policies are decimating the voluntary sector in this country.

Mr Reed: I agree. It is outrageous that the Government are actively penalising people for volunteering when we need to be encouraging volunteering. In particular, it helps people who are looking for work to develop the skills that they need to gain employment. I hope the Minister will take that away and look at it.

People are connecting in neighbourhoods and on social media to collaborate and bring about the change that we desperately need in this country. The digital revolution has opened up data, information and connectivity in the most extraordinary ways. It offers the potential to renew our democracy, making it more open, responsive and participative. This is the new civil society. It is a force for change of the most incredible potential, if only we had a Government with the vision and ambition to support it, like the very best Labour councils already do.

Barking and Dagenham’s Every One Every Day initiative has launched spaces and projects across the borough that bring people together in their neighbourhoods to solve the problems they face. It has dramatically increased participation, with projects as diverse as shared cooking, community composting, play streets and even a listening barber. It is a great example of asset-based community development—a model that is proving its power in communities across the country.

In my borough of Croydon, the Parchmore medical centre in Thornton Heath has spawned a network of more than 100 community-led projects that keep people healthier, and it has dramatically reduced the number of people who need to see a GP. There are sessions on healthy cooking for young families, mobility classes for older people and coffee mornings in the local pub, before it opens for customers, for people isolated in their homes. All of it is free, and all of it is run in and by the community. It has had an extraordinary impact on people’s wellbeing simply by getting neighbours to know each other better and to speak to each other.

Plymouth has set up the country’s biggest network of community energy co-ops to generate energy sustainably and plough the profits back into the local community. Stevenage is pioneering community budgeting, involving local community groups. Preston is leading on community wealth building by focusing council procurement on local community groups. In Lambeth, the council has set up, with the community, Black Thrive, a new social enterprise that gives the black community greater oversight of the mental health services that the community uses. In all these cases, existing or new community groups, charities and social enterprises have shown they have the power to transform lives. They open up decision making to the creativity and innovation that lies untapped in too many of our communities.

Sir John Hayes: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman would consider the dichotomy at the heart of his argument—I used the word “argument” in the most generous spirit. The dichotomy is that he is arguing that this increase in digital communication is beneficial to community, but he must know that online shopping is destroying local shops, online media is destroying local newspapers and the virtual relationships he has described are not comparable with real relationships. Clearly, he is doubtful about his own relationships in Croydon, because he has already told us that people do not like politicians. Perhaps he should get out into the real world and leave the virtual world for a few minutes.

Mr Reed: What is destroying our high streets are the right hon. Gentleman’s Government’s business rate hikes.

The community and voluntary groups that are part of all of this innovation are pointing the way forward, not only to a better society, but to a new politics—not the centralised state or the marketised state, but the collaborative state, enabling an open, participative and hopeful approach. This new people-powered politics will help us find a way to tackle the great social ills of our time, one of which the Minister referred to; loneliness in this country has now reached epidemic proportions. Loneliness is the product of the breakdown of the family, the fragmentation of communities and the cuts that have taken away support services. The Local Government Association now points to an £8 billion funding shortfall in social care services, but we also see long working hours, low pay, investment and jobs deserts and the hollowing out of communities. All of that has contributed to this situation, but, sadly, no single piece of legislation can put a problem that complex right. The answers lie in our communities, in strengthening the bonds between people instead of atomising them, and in building up community assets instead of closing them down as the Government have done. Communities are already doing much, but if we had the courage to open up power and resources to them, they could do so much more.

Our country is at a crossroads. The Brexit debate has crystallised the deep divisions that separate us from each other and the anger that has driven it. We need to come back together, but that will not happen from the top down. We need a new, more open politics, one that is more participative, embracing the collaboration and kindness that all of us, as MPs, see in our constituencies. For that we need a Government who recognise and celebrate the central role of civil society and communities, and are ready to invest in them, not cut them to the bone. That is how we can genuinely let people take back control, so they can build the compassionate country we have the potential to become.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We will be starting with a six-minute limit. Hopefully, I will not have to lower it. Let us aim for that for everybody.
4.59 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): It is a great joy to speak on this subject, to be an MP who has the privilege of visiting charity and voluntary groups whenever I can, and to represent a part of the country where community and voluntary groups are such a rich part of the local fabric of society. Following the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), I shall enjoy talking up the great work these groups do. The last thing they need is for us politicians to get more involved. We should allow them to get on and do the work that they do, while recognising that the state has the responsibility to create the environment that they need.

As I said, one of the joys of being an MP is to meet and support voluntary groups, which I do as much as I can but particularly at the beginning of the year. Since I was elected, I have been putting on Big Thank You events over a few weekends in January and February. They were inspired by the work of the loneliness commission and the sad loss of our colleague Jo Cox. Getting groups together to share their experiences and what they do is so valuable. I wish briefly to name-check a few groups that I met just a couple of weeks ago, to celebrate what they do and their great offer to my constituency. The events took place in the three main towns in my constituency—Penzance, Helston and St Ives—and are examples of how charities are connecting communities and addressing loneliness and isolation.

First, I hosted an event this year at Helston bowling club. When I met members of the club last year, they were so inspired by the opportunity to work with other charities that they started Saturday morning community bowling. They opened bowling up to the community, and now people can do indoor or short-mat bowling and outdoor bowling. Lots of people turn up—they do not always bowl; they drink tea and coffee and eat cake—and they have seen a large growth in members and numbers, just because they are able to offer some sense of community to people who are otherwise on their own.

I had the great joy of going to an event to meet the group that runs Tea Love and Cake, or TLC, which brings together large numbers of mainly older people. A lovely bunch of lady volunteers go around picking people up, bringing them into a community room in Marazion and entertaining them for the afternoon through various—dare I say—lightweight exercises, along with tea and cake. They came to an event and shared a bit about the incredible work they have done to encourage lonely people.

The St Ives community bus was funded by the Department for Transport, as has been the case for several other community organisations in my constituency. The volunteer drivers from the bus service talked about how they pick people up every day of the week, running them to and fro between different organisations and groups so that they can be part of the community in which they live.

I met some young mums who run a breastfeeding support group for mums who struggle in that area. It is a voluntary group that gets together to help other mums.

The Saturday Gang is a group of volunteers who bring together people with learning disabilities on a Saturday. Again, they have tea, cake and coffee. They help people with learning disabilities with some of the challenges they face.

The National Coastwatch Institution started in my constituency, and I was glad to meet its volunteers. There are huge numbers of well-organised volunteers who spend all the daylight hours, all year round, watching our coastline, keeping people safe and reporting it if people are at risk of getting in trouble. It is an amazing organisation that gives people the opportunity not only to have friendship and community but to do the vital job of keeping the people in the waters along our coastline safe.

Around the time of Parliament Week last year, I had the privilege of going to so many different groups over two or three weeks. The guiding and scouting group came along to the events and talked about their fantastic work to support young minds suffering from a bit of anxiety. That is a fantastic piece of work.

We are doing a really interesting piece of work by bringing together some of the groups I have mentioned to take from supermarkets food that is not out of date—it is perfectly okay—but surplus to requirements. They are processing that food into good, healthy, nutritious meals. The plan is to teach parents how to cook using raw materials, which is a skill that many of us have lost—including, I am afraid, myself. They provide vacuum-packed meals—fantastic, healthy food—that can be warmed through quickly. I do not know of anywhere else in the country that is doing this. They slice and freeze-dry bananas. If Members know anything about bananas, they will know that they do not freeze, but when they thaw these ones, they are exactly as they were when they cut them up. It is pretty impressive and I think they should patent the process.

Age Concern, a fantastic organisation across Cornwall, does a great job of connecting communities and providing some sensible ideas about how we can support older people at home and how we can help them avoid going into hospital. It highlights the fact that the state does not have all the answers—it should never have all the answers. The voluntary community does something that we cannot do, and we should encourage it, support it and give it the freedom to do a great job. I am so proud to be an MP of west Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly where many, many people find fulfilment in volunteering, supporting each other and helping some of our most vulnerable people.

5.5 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas), who detailed some of the work that is going on in his community. Let me make a non-pecuniary declaration of interest: I was the national policy adviser for Volunteer Scotland, the national body for volunteering, before I came to this House. I have also worked for West Dunbartonshire Community and Volunteering Services—Members will know it as a CVS and volunteer centre—for over a decade.

I thank the Government for bringing forward this general debate today. I am sure that there are those in the Chamber who have been seeking such a debate for quite a long time. I commend the work of the all-party parliamentary group on charities and volunteering, of which I am a member. I see the redoubtable chair, the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones), in their place. I do hope that, when they sum up, both Front-Bench speakers will pay tribute to the
work both of that all-party group and of the chair who has been a doughty campaigner since coming to this House.

Although much of the policy framework for charities and volunteering is fully devolved to the Parliament of Scotland, there is a range of overlaps that needs to be highlighted so that Members can be aware of the distinct nature of charities in Scotland, the number of which, according to the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator, now stands at 24,466 in total.

Stephen Kerr: The hon. Gentleman is quite right that these issues are devolved and rightly so, but where there are opportunities for co-operation across the United Kingdom, we should surely grasp them. Why, for example, is it not possible for young people in my constituency, because of a decision by the Scottish Government, to participate in the National Citizen Service? There is a demand for that in Scotland.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I will come on to answer that question at the end of my contribution. There is a big discussion to be had about the legislative process of the UK Government and a distinct understanding of what volunteering actually means, but I will come back to the hon. Gentleman’s point further on in the debate because he raises a very important point about the difference between volunteering and being told to do something. Volunteering is a free-will activity.

It is essential to understand that, as in England, Wales and Northern Ireland—although I do not see any Members from Northern Ireland in the Chamber—the vast majority of voluntary organisations are small, with no employees; they are founded, organised and able to connect communities solely through volunteers. As a sector, both charities and the many unincorporated voluntary organisations play a central role in the delivery of people-centred services and in ensuring that communities, through a whole host of avenues, are able to inform and shape our nations. We have already heard about how the sector informs participation and democracy.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a good point about the role of voluntary organisations. In the past year, two new food banks have opened in Inverness to cope with the demand caused by the failures of universal credit. Those volunteers are working not just there, but in initiatives such as the hungry lunches project at Inverness Cathedral and MFR Cash for Kids, which provides help and advice. Does my hon. Friend agree that they are not just providing help for people, but actually saving them?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I could not disagree, and that is replicated not just in Scotland, but across the whole UK.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Like the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), in Coventry we have volunteers who not only collect, but distribute, the food; and a lot of people are very thankful to them. Another issue is loneliness. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will agree that every amount of pressure should be put on the BBC to revoke any plans it has to charge the licence fee to over-75s. Finally, there is another voluntary organisation in Coventry that is totally run by volunteers who help the blind using modern techniques. Has the hon. Gentleman come across anything like that in his constituency?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I could not disagree with the hon. Member on a range of matters, and I do not on the over-75s licence fee issue. It is incomprehensible to me why the BBC would even consider such a thing, given that social isolation is a profound issue across not only older age, but a whole gamut of ages. I may come to that point in a moment.

The right to form voluntary organisations—charities or unincorporated organisations—is a fundamental pillar of a modern, liberal democracy. Such organisations are founded on the lived experiences of communities, on geography, on choice and on need. Nevertheless, charity is no replacement for good government. Maybe that is what many have found with issues around food banks and services having to be replicated by volunteers.

The unincorporated organisations and charities challenge policy makers and Governments in general, campaigning on issues on conscience and locality. I think of the Women’s Aid organisations in my constituency, which—with the new local authority administration—are addressing specific targeted issues such as domestic abuse and violence, and access to services. They are also raising the matter of three-year funding strategies, rather than constantly having to come back to the local authority or Government Department year in, year out for the same type of funding scheme.

These organisations deliver public services in ways that are too numerous to mention, including by supporting people through drug addiction. This includes the Dumbarton Area Council on Alcohol in my constituency. Organisations such as Tullochlan and Y Sort-It in West Dunbartonshire enhance the lives of young people through group activity and individual support. Importantly, the unincorporated organisations across all our constituencies run groups of all shapes and sizes, such as Clydebank’s Morison Memorial lunch club, which offers friendship and wholesome food every Thursday; I can testify—I am sure that Scottish Members will recognise this—that it has the best and finest tablet in Scotland.

Charities and voluntary organisations connect and enhance our communities socially and economically. In Scotland, the investment from the Scottish Government has again increased to £24.9 million, with additional resources and support from a range of other funding bodies and groups, such as local authorities and NHS boards. Indeed, voluntary organisations are seen as an essential part of shaping public service through community planning in each of the 32 councils of Scotland.

From a Scotland-wide perspective, the voluntary sector covers every facet of Scottish society, and I am grateful to the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations for the following figures. There are over 45,000 voluntary organisations—on top of the charitable sector—in Scotland, employing more than 106,000 paid staff. That is 3.5% of Scotland’s workforce. The workforce is dominated by women, who make up 71% of it; this is significantly higher than in the public and private sectors. The sector also employs more people with disabilities than the public and private sectors. Over 1.3 million people in Scotland volunteer, and over 30% of women, people from rural communities and those aged 16 to 24 volunteer. There are over 250,000 charity trustees, many of whom
will never actually see themselves as volunteers; and that is a clear point about many trustees and those involved in the governance process.

**Susan Elan Jones** (Clwyd South) (Lab) indicated assent.

**Mims Davies** indicated assent.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (Salford Central): I see that the chair of the all-party parliamentary group and the Minister agree. It is a fundamental point that we need to reinforce. I believe that the UK shared prosperity fund as a successor fund to replace the ESIF when the UK leaves the European Union. Yet despite repeated promises of a consultation, the launch has been delayed several times. Therefore, charities are yet to have had no clarity on what it will fund, how it will be designed, who can access it, how much it will be, or who will manage it. I hope that the Minister will clarify issues around the consultation and inform the House of what progress will be made in this area.

The Minister referred to the Dormant Assets Commission, which was set up in March 2016, building on the Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Act 2008. It had the expanded objective of looking at a much wider range of financial assets such as life insurance, pension products and so on. The commission published its final report and a series of recommendations in 2017. It identified some £2 billion-worth of dormant assets that could be freed up and distributed to good causes, for want of a better term. This is considered to be a conservative estimate, much as the value of dormant accounts was undervalued. More assets will also fall dormant in the years ahead, meaning that the fund can deliver in perpetuity.

In 2011, the dormant accounts money was made subject to the Barnett formula and devolved nations were able to set their own spending priorities, with the Big Lottery Fund taking responsibility for distributing money through the Young Start programme, which aims to create opportunities for children and young people. I am sure that Members would hope and expect that the new fund will follow a similar model. However, there has been little detail available about how funding will be allocated and distributed. Future consultation will give the sector an opportunity to ensure that this money can be secured for good causes and successfully targeted to produce the best outcomes. Again, I hope that the Minister can clarify the situation.

The essential elements of voluntary organisations in connecting communities are those who, either individually or collectively, volunteer to run charities and voluntary organisations. In Scotland, this is even an essential element of the nation itself. For instance, as I am sure that Members on both sides of the House from Scottish constituencies will know, the national Church, while it has ministers, is a charitable organisation facilitated by volunteers. Like many other faith-based organisations, it is a cornerstone of national life. Its role in the distinct nature of the Scottish nation is volunteer-led. Yet for volunteering to flourish, we must recognise that it requires investment.

In its report “Volunteering, Health and Wellbeing”, Volunteer Scotland—the national body for volunteering—highlighted the substantial evidence to support the contribution of volunteering to policies where health and wellbeing has an important role to play. That includes key policy areas such as health, education, employment, young people, older people, criminal justice and community engagement. The Minister mentioned isolation and loneliness. Last year, the Scottish Government brought forward their first ever draft strategy, “A Connected Scotland: Our strategy for tackling social isolation and loneliness and building stronger social connections”, with an additional £1 million of investment, and that is only for the first two years.

Through those policy areas, we understand that volunteering is essential to healthy behaviours and improved daily life—critically, for those who are isolated due to a range of factors, from income to age—and it has the real benefit of allowing people to cope with illness. It is well evidenced that volunteering has a profound positive impact on all our mental health, and the work of so many local groups across these islands,
including Stepping Stones in my constituency, is a testament to the positive impact of volunteering on our mental health.

Yet we face challenging volunteer geography across western society, with a decreasing number of people volunteering. Even in rural communities, where the number has been traditionally high, we are seeing a marked decrease. There is no simple answer to growing volunteering. Our societies are evolving, and as I said, there may be people who do not even recognise that they volunteer.

The Minister mentioned the London Olympics. There were also the Glasgow Commonwealth games, and in a few years the games will be in Birmingham. While large sporting events see spikes in volunteering, there is yet to be substantial evidence that that investment brings a long-term increase in volunteering.

The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) mentioned the National Citizen Service, an issue on which he and I disagree. For me, my party and the Government of Scotland, the call to have a National Citizen Service only detracts from investment in existing infrastructure in Scotland. There are many national youth organisations; the exact same type of organisation exists and is already funded. Rather than asking for a London-based system, we should look to the systems that already exist in Scotland, as a lot of work is being done by YouthLink Scotland and other organisations.

For me, big society is like Big Brother. It is a threat to individual and collective community action, undermining volunteering in its most basic and fundamental form. It is a society where we have, in the words of Robert Dahl, “an effectively enforced right to form and join autonomous associations”, rather than ones brought about by Government.

5.22 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): My parents were dedicated to voluntary work. Whereas other children played cricket, as you did, Mr Deputy Speaker, or played mummies and daddies or shops, my sisters and I used to play “holding a meeting”, and it was invariably a charity meeting. So it is not a great surprise that, all my adult life, I have tried to work at least one day a week for charity. That has enabled me to move from charity to charity locally, helping to buy a bus for Leonard Cheshire and selling cushions for Fine Cell Work—good golly, that was difficult; nobody likes giving money to prisoners, apart from those involved in the criminal justice system. I also raised money for the urology department—try that, guys; a urology ball, anyone?

There are two things that I am most proud of. First, along with my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), I set up NorPIP, as a founding trustee. Our by-line was “Two is too late”, which is not quite true, but it focused strongly on the attachment issues between parents who are struggling and their very young babies. Secondly, I set up the benefactors’ board for my local hospital trust. We described that as the icing on the cake. What we were adding to the NHS, which we all really supported, were the bits that the NHS could not fund, such as new bits of equipment that it could not take the extra leap to fund, nice duvet covers for the children and equipment for the hospital school. I am proud to have set up that fund and chaired it for many years. I am also proud that my predecessor’s wife took it over when I was elected to this place. She is a great lady, and he is a great man. He has had a knock-back in his charitable experiences today as Age Friendly Banbury has not received the funding it went for, but I know that will not set him back.

I am trying to say that charity work is a great background for someone to be a local MP. It means they know people locally—leant-in people locally—and they know what is going on in their local area. It is of course a great background for everybody. As the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) said, it is really good for everybody’s mental health to volunteer. When our son died, my work for Save the Baby helped me to get back to playing a part in society. We can get positive things, as you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, out of tragedy.

To put it politely, volunteers are so much more powerful and good, at fundraising in particular, than paid charity workers. People give money to people. We know that, and we have proved it time and again.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): May I commend two organisations—the Lions and Rotary—to my hon. Friend? I am lucky in my constituency to have Burton Rotary and Uttoxeter Lions. Both organisations raise tens of thousands for good causes in my constituency and, I am sure, across the country. Does she agree that those organisations play a huge role in our communities?

Victoria Prentis: I do. Those are fabulous local groups, and we are lucky enough to have them in my area too. My hon. Friend is quite right to draw attention to them.

We are not just talking about formal charities today. I would like to tell the Chamber about Tony, my next-door neighbour. He not only takes my children to the bus, reduces the local rat population, uploads new photos on the village website, takes other families’ dogs for walks, and opens and checks the church daily, but he does all this by 8.30 every morning. We all know people like this and, quite frankly, we want to grow into such people. It is great that, as the Minister told us earlier, 30% of adults are doing some volunteering. I would like her to measure not just the money that is given, but the time that is spent by stalwarts of our communities, such as Tony, who do so much for us.

I could not let such an opportunity pass without mentioning Singing for Syrians, which I set up soon after my election in 2015. I heard on the radio that Syrian doctors were working unpaid, and I thought we would have a bit of a whip round. Everybody I asked said yes and tried to help. It is my dream charity. We encourage people to do the work for us and to do their own thing—inspired slightly, I must say, by the Macmillan annual coffee morning. Everybody can get involved in the singing, or in eating at the fabulous Syrian supper clubs. This year, our flagship will be on 10 December in St Margaret’s, and a marvellous cross-party choir of MPs will be taking part. Others do the work; we just receive and distribute the money, and there are events all over the country.

We need the money more than ever. The Hands Up Foundation, which we fund, is one of the very few charities still donating into northern Syria, as the big players have pulled out. Our prosthetic limb clinic was flooded two weeks ago—all the equipment is kept in the
basement to protect it from aerial bombardment—and we are trying to raise £10,000 to re-home the limb clinic, which provides such essential services to those who have lost limbs in the war. We are still about £4,000 short of that target, so if anybody would like to give me a cheque afterwards, it would be gratefully received. I encourage everybody present in the Chamber, perhaps if there is a boring moment later, to google “Singing for Syrians” and watch our very short clip, “Sing like they can hear us!” If they have three minutes and want a good laugh, they can google, “Singing for Syrians Flashmob” in Marylebone station, which is fantastic.

I would like to thank everybody who volunteers for all our local and national charities. I especially want to thank those who volunteer in north Oxfordshire. I am particularly proud that we have national bases locally for the Child Brain Injury Trust and for Adoption UK. I am inspired by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts), who has a “Volunteering Week”, during which it appears that he does a lot of gardening. I am going to do “Victoria Volunteers” from 23 September for a week, when I am looking forward to cooking for Banbury Young Homelessness Project, eating cake at Restore, making tea at the Royal Voluntary Service and reading to children with the indomitable women of ALC—Assisted Reading for Children—which is just a fantastic organisation. If I am allowed to, I will also do some volunteer driving for the people who volunteer out of the citizens advice bureau, but they may not want me and I may not pass the check. It is fantastic what is done by people all around our country, and I cannot praise them highly enough. I thank the Minister for all she does.

5.29 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), who spoke so passionately.

There is much that makes me proud of the communities I represent across Barnsley East, especially our local charities and community groups, many of which I have had the privilege to visit in recent weeks.

Everyone who cares for a loved one with dementia knows of the immense emotional strain the condition imposes on those who live with it and those who care for them. I know that I speak for many people across Barnsley when I thank BIADS—Barnsley Independent Alzheimer's and Dementia Support—and Butterflies, two fantastic community groups that provide outstanding support, help and comfort for those living with dementia in our community.

I cannot deny the sense of shame I feel in telling the House that today, in 21st century Britain, after years of austerity, there are children going hungry and families—many of them in employment—who are unable to put food on the table without resorting to a local food bank. Our community came together 30 years ago to feed the families of men who had no option but to go on strike to defend their industry and their way of life. Again, our community is coming together to feed families who face the most desperate conditions because of universal credit, the low-wage insecure economy and wider austerity. I have nothing but praise for our food banks—for the volunteers who give their time and their heart to run them, and for the generosity of all those who donate.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech. Does she agree that the Trussell Trust provides fantastic leadership with its food banks across the country, and that very often it is people from faith groups, particularly churches and chapels, who do so much to support this really important work?

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point, and one that I was about to touch on.

In the coming school holidays, food banks will again be busy. I cannot help but ask: surely it must be possible to create a society where children do not go hungry.

Just as our food banks battle want, our churches battle the scandal of homelessness. A man died sleeping on our streets last year, simply because he had nowhere to live. The homelessness he experienced is a situation that far too many people face. I praise the Barnsley Churches Drop-In, which provides support to those who are sadly homeless. But again I say: it does not have to be like this.

Every time I visit charities and community groups, I see the amazing work they do and the real difference they make in our community, but there is another side to the story. Many of our brilliant local charities and community groups in Barnsley have been affected by this Government's austerity since 2010. Cuts to public services have forced them to take on extra work and have put them under increasing pressure. Cuts amounting to 40% make Barnsley Council the worst affected in the country and have left it struggling to support those local charities and community groups.

What the Government do not seem to understand is that cuts have consequences. Luminar, a Barnsley charity where volunteers helped children and families affected by domestic violence, has been forced to close. The Barnsley Bereavement Support Service, which supports those struggling with the shock of losing someone close to them, is short of funding and faces closure. That is shameful.

Despite the many difficulties, so many fantastic groups—far more than I can mention here today—continue to support local people. They do so thanks to the efforts of the brilliant volunteers who work for them. They are passionate, determined and dedicated to helping others. They give so much of themselves in supporting our community. It is time that the Government supported them and gave them the proper funding that they need and deserve.

On one visit to a local community group, I saw a sign that, more than anything else, sums up the local volunteers in my constituency. It simply said, “Volunteers are not paid, not because they are worthless, but because they are priceless.” I could not have put it better myself.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Unfortunately, I have to take the time limit down to five minutes to get everybody in.
5.34 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Everybody here has interests to declare, so I shall ratttle quickly through mine. I may mention some of these organisations: I am a recently retired trustee of the Gloucestershire Community Foundation; the current chair of the Gloucester History Trust; a joint patron of the charity HaVinG a Voice in Gloucester, which helps the homeless on to pathways; and a joint patron of the Discover DeCrypt project at St Mary de Crypt church and school. Every year, I volunteer with Gloucestershire Royal Hospital.

Today is a very good time for this debate and I congratulate the Minister on her introduction to it. She is quite right to focus on what is such a big part of such a big society. She is quite right to say that volunteers and charities are at the heart of every community in all our constituencies, and she is inspired to highlight some of the new awards that have been given to projects about deprivation and community. I would have loved to have seen at least one of those come the way of Gloucester, but there may be opportunities for that shortly. The more she is able to do on this front, with the help of the Chancellor, the more difference it will make to local pride, local people and local potential.

Let me share some thoughts from almost 12 years of focus on community and its role in the regeneration of Gloucester.

The first point is that pride matters hugely. England and Britain’s characteristics include an attractive self-deprecation and a not always so attractive approach to not appreciating ourselves, our cities, our towns and villages enough. How do we measure pride and what does it mean? There is no index, but there are various indicators we can use. I often use Centre for Cities’ research as a snapshot of how our city is doing relative to others. The employment rate immediately tells me that Gloucester is working. We have the fourth-best employment rate of any city in the nation. Then there are the less tangible things, such as the amount of volunteering.

Can any of us truly say that we know how many people are volunteering and how many hours they give to our city or our county? It is very hard to tell, but when we look at the different ingredients it is there for us to see. For example, Gloucestershire Royal Hospital has over 400 volunteers, not including the 30-plus in the chaplain’s office. The Gloucester Civic Trust has hundreds of volunteers who play a crucial role on Gloucester Day and on heritage open days, which are one of those wonderful things that have grown and grown.

We then have the community groups themselves. The Redwell Centre in Matson is a fantastic success, with programmes, projects and activities for everybody from the very young to the very old, including the cross-faith and denomination Together in Matson. There are community groups such as Chit Chat within St James’s church in Quedgeley, which involve the community. There are the festivals, which all our communities have. I would like to talk about the Gloucester History Festival, which I started eight years ago and which now has 24,000 visitors.

We have groups who help the homeless and rough sleepers. The George Whitefield Centre incorporates Gloucestershire care services, the Gloucester City Mission and the food bank, which has lots of volunteers. It is not just Christian charities either. Islamic groups in Gloucester are raising funds for good causes. There are immigrants who are giving back to the society that has looked after them since they left their own country. I want to single out Babu Odedra and Ash Chavda. They own the Olympus Theatre, where there is a great project to regenerate culture and drama in the heart of Barton in Gloucester. There are the Rotary Clubs. We now get all the Rotary Clubs in Gloucester together and we have our community awards every year, with some £10,000 going to about 20 different groups. These little things matter and it is a way for charities to highlight what they are doing to a group of people who are very charitably minded. The Barnwood Trust nearby, a mental health-focused charity, now interprets mental health in a much wider way. There are lots of things that help. The Gloucester Pride festival every year attracts many times the numbers it had when it started, as does the Lantern festival, which ends up at the cathedral.

What works? What transforms communities and cities? I think often, as my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) mentioned, out of sadness can come determination to change. Charities are formed from disasters in families, such as: the Hollie Gazzard Trust which is about to celebrate its fifth anniversary; Charlie’s Cancer Support group; and the Nelson Trust, which does great things for women in trouble. All of these things boost pride. Success breeds confidence and success. Buildings help. As Churchill said, we shape buildings and then they shape us. Above all, it is about the potential in our societies and things that are good for mental health. The role of volunteering and charities is absolutely critical.

5.39 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in this debate and to talk about my experience of 23 years both as a volunteer at and manager of a local citizens advice bureau. People volunteer for many different reasons. I volunteered because I was at home with a young baby, and I wanted to get out and do something else other than sing “The Wheels on the Bus” for a while. I was really glad I did, because when I was left alone with that baby, I realised that CAB was in my blood and I wanted to stay there, and I got a paid job there.

Volunteers include young people looking for work or people who are retired. There are many different roles within even one charity, with many different demands—advice, reception, admin, media, specialisms, social policy and trustees—and it is the job of the manager or the volunteer co-ordinator to ensure that everyone is in the right role and that they are trained, supervised and reviewed to check that we meet their aims and that they meet the organisation’s aims. They are perhaps even given targets for improvement and sometimes even brought to recognise that they are perhaps no longer in the right place and could move on. It is obvious that volunteers take considerable management to provide a service within the charity’s aims. Volunteers give their time freely; they are not free.

We had 50 volunteers and 29 paid staff working full time, with a full-time volunteer co-ordinator, as well as the chief executive officer and deputy. Volunteers do a great job. They have a real stake in their organisation, but sometimes, as demands change, they need taking
through the change process. This perhaps needs someone to take them through the process differently than they would with paid staff. I would never have wanted to change to having all paid staff. There is a value in the diversity of volunteers—there are people who are rooted in their communities, who really want to give their time. Sometimes I used to find that people wanted me to give far too much time, wanting me to stay till 7 o’clock every night when my daughter needed putting to bed, but that was my problem.

There have been changes in the charity environment. Many charities now have to be business-focused, particularly those providing public services, and they are moving to having contracts, not grants. I think that is a good thing, as long as the key performance indicators are right and are not just focused on outputs, and the charity looks at its charitable objectives and does not just go for anything. That is where the trustee board comes in. There is a need for a mix of specialist and local skills in accounting, business planning, and grievance and disciplinary procedures. As charities grow, they need to regularly reassert their trustee board, just as much as their management. They need to check that it has the skills to manage the chief executive—I have to say that as a chief exec, that was not always an easy job.

Citizens Advice is a shining example of a charity that uses the experience gained on the ground in local communities to try to affect national change through social policy work. We see the unintended effect of legislation and must be able to speak out. That is not party political—heaven knows, I have criticised every Government since 1986.

I want to move on to my local community and the charities there. Not all charities need to be big; many start from local need. I will mention a couple. Embrace is a user-led charity for people with disabilities. To me, that exemplifies the importance of users being involved and empowering people. It is about asking, “What do they want?” rather than asking them just to take what they are given. There is also the Abram Ward community co-operative, which has projects combating loneliness by bringing young and old together to make items such as go-carts. Wigan Council has a deal whereby it works with charities and community groups and provides small grants and trains volunteers. It has really invigorated the local community so that people feel like a community, not just a collection of individuals who happen to live near one another.

I would not be here today without having volunteered at my local CAB. It led to a career spanning 23 years. That was not my intention when I walked through the door into the manager’s office at Sale CAB. I worked with volunteers and enjoyed and valued their commitment, diversity and humour. I feel that it has really enriched my life, and I hope that it has contributed to improving the lives of those in the local community.

5.44 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): We in this House are all grateful for the dedication of charities and volunteers in our constituencies and impressed by their achievements. As the Government’s civil society strategy states, global Britain is rooted in local Britain, and I am pleased to say that my constituency has many residents groups, community charities and local branches of national charities. I want to place on the record my thanks for the incredible work done by all volunteers in our communities.

Celebrating civil society is a recognition that it is not good enough to expect the state, whether national or local government, to do everything. Far too often in the past, it has fallen to organisations such as city councils to be responsible for everything, when in reality they cannot be, and even if they could, it would disempower communities. Supporting charities and volunteers is a recognition that organisations outside the state are often better able to tackle certain challenges and provide certain social goods. What matters is that these parts, across public, private and civil society, work together to create something greater than their sum.

Over the summer, I was pleased to host funding workshops at Blurton community hub, in my constituency, with the Coalfields Regeneration Trust and the People’s Postcode Lottery. Both events were well attended by community and charitable organisations, and I hope that from them we will see more successful bids and the investment we need in our local communities.

Stoke-on-Trent City Council recently empowered communities by creating a community investment fund focused on investing in equipment and assets with a longer-term impact. Since it started two years ago, £1.7 million has been invested, with a further £1.3 million to be announced soon. The council also recently set up the Potto Lotto, a Potteries-based lottery, where 60% of the ticket price goes to local charities and players can nominate a good cause to fund. This shows the proactive and innovative approach being taken in partnership locally that is empowering communities and charities to deliver great results.

Another excellent local example of joint working is the North Staffordshire Community Rail Partnership, which promotes the north Staffordshire line—for example, by helping to create more welcoming station environments for passengers, including at Longton in my constituency. I have no doubt that its efforts over the past decade have helped to double local rail usage, which I fully expect the new franchisee to reflect with improvements on the line. That highly localised work at Longton has had a knock-on effect in the formation of a local gardening group. Britain in Bloom festival in the first year of its taking part, thanks to the hard work of volunteers at Longton Community Partnership.

All this contributes to much-needed footfall, as do the charity shops that occupy what would otherwise be empty premises on our high streets. Some people complain about the number of charity shops, but it is always better that these shops are occupied, and of course the future high streets fund will help further. Local charities, such as Dougie Mac and Bethel church, are putting funding straight back into the local area. Furthermore, following the successes of Longton and Blurton at Britain in Bloom, it is fantastic to see the local community in Fenton coming forward with a Fenton in Flower competition.

Many local sports clubs rely almost entirely on volunteers. I think of clubs such as Hanford, Meakins Fenton, Longton and Hem Heath cricket clubs, Longton and Trentham rugby clubs, and Foley football club, alongside Stoke City football club, of course, which is involved extensively with local charitable work, especially with young people, through its community trust. Longton...
rugby club, which was visited by the Prime Minister herself, is mainly run by volunteers. Its website stresses that none of what the club does behind the scenes and on the pitch would be possible without the dedicated work and support of volunteers.

In Meir, local partners, including the YMCA, are working to combat some of the challenges we are experiencing with antisocial behaviour and gangs. Critical to this is improving sports facilities for the community to ensure a distraction for those young people. Recent visits to charities in my constituency have shown me the breadth and vitality of the important work being done by these volunteers. The Grocott Centre, for example, which I visited in January, is a local independent charity based in Fenton that promotes the welfare, wellbeing and social inclusion of vulnerable groups. It does incredible work with people with dementia, elderly people and adults with learning or physical disabilities.

I was a delighted that Blurton Farm residents association received the Queen’s award for voluntary service in 2018, owing to the huge commitment and tireless work of volunteers, especially its chair, Christine Pratt. Other charities I have visited recently include Landau Stoke, Father Hudson’s Care, the Gingerbread Centre, Dealfinks and Temple Street Methodist church community café. I am hugely grateful to them all for the excellent work they do in the community. The Donna Louise children’s hospice and the Douglas Macmillan hospice also do phenomenal work to support families at their most harrowing and difficult times, and staff and volunteers—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am sorry but the hon. Gentleman’s time is up.

5.49 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) and the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton). You have presented us with a challenge. Mr Deputy Speaker—to say everything that we want to say about connecting communities by supporting charities and volunteers, and to do it within five minutes—but I will have a go.

The House has been discussing charities for a very long time. The Charitable Uses Act was presented here in 1601. I venture to say that charities seem to be rather more popular than politicians. A recent survey by the Charities Aid Foundation found that 80% of adults in the United Kingdom think that charities play an essential role. Can we imagine a positive rating of 80% for any politician?

Another Member paid tribute to the work of the all-party parliamentary group on charities and volunteering. Let me now pay tribute to my fellow officers in the group: my noble Friend Baroness Pitkeathley, Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbotts, the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) and Lord Shinkwin. I also pay tribute to our secretariat, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, and—most important of the lot—the large number of affiliated members of charities and community groups.

We all have amazing community groups in our constituencies. We can always argue here, as we do, about the pitch of the role of the state and what the role of voluntary groups, but that is not the debate that I want to have today. I want, for instance, to pay tribute to the amazing work of WINGS Wrexham, which works against period poverty in the borough of Wrexham. It deals with the lack of access to female sanitary products by providing collection points and fulfils a vital advocacy role.

I have five main points to make in slightly under three minutes. First, the Minister mentioned sustainable finance. That is important, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield said earlier, volunteering does not come free and should not be done on the cheap. I urge the Minister and, indeed, all decision-makers to look back on some of the good work that resulted from the compact between the Government and voluntary sector. Let us aspire to longer-term funding, strategic planning, and—yes—full cost recovery.

Secondly, we know that volunteers, charities and community groups have a hugely advocacy role. It was said in the Government’s civil society strategy that simply being in receipt of taxpayers’ money should not inhibit charities from making their voices heard on matters of policy and practice, and I welcome those words, but I want to see that always happening in practice. Charities have been, small p, political and have undertaken advocacy since the Royal British Legion campaigned on the rights of soldiers returning home after the first world war. I urge the Government to look again at the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014 and to take on board some of the recommendations of Lord Hodgson on that.

Thirdly, I believe that we need to rethink philanthropy. The Minister mentioned the development of gift aid, which is indeed very positive, and the gift aid small donations scheme, but we should also take account of the new philanthropy whereby people make donations that are backed up by supermarkets and other stores. There is no Treasury support on top of that, but consideration should be given to providing such support as part of the small donations scheme. That could work in much the same way as the donations of furniture to the British Heart Foundation.

Fourthly, the Minister mentioned the revival of deprived areas by means of dormant cash. I hope that she takes on board many of the ideas that have been advanced by voluntary organisations. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations has referred to the need for a revolution in community ownership and participation.

Finally, let me make a point about trustees. The Minister mentioned that she was a trustee. I hope that she will support the ten-minute rule Bill that I will present on 6 March. According to the Charity Commission, at least 100,000 new trustees are appointed every year. I think that it is time to give them a status in law similar to that of school governors, local councillors, magistrates and those in other categories when it comes to time off for their duties—unpaid time off. I should be grateful if the Minister looked into that because it is time that we changed the law.

5.54 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones).

During my time as a fire officer, Strathclyde fire and rescue was, as it still is, supported by volunteer firefighters. Indeed, in many remote and rural areas and islands, these dedicated individuals provide the first, and sometimes
the only, response to emergencies in their own communities. Another public service, the NHS, experiences increasing demand for patient transport, and patients are seeking to minimise their time spent at hospital. Free transport tailored to an individual’s needs is provided by charities such as Ayrshire Cancer Support, and they are to be applauded for their good work. I also want to mention Maxine Allan for the Whiteleys Retreat, which provides rural respite facilities for children living with cancer. Some charities, such as the British Heart Foundation and Ayr’s Seascape, are fortunate to have volunteers with the specialist skill to upcycle furniture and can so PAT—portable appliance testing—on electrical items for use by those given accommodation, particularly those who have been homeless.

A ladies lunch club held in aid of Ayrshire hospice recently helped to fund a new spa room for the patients; that was a remarkable achievement by these ladies, and there are many such groups throughout my constituency. On a visit to Alloway guides, I found them collecting items to pass on to others less fortunate than themselves and the seed of caring and sharing being planted at an early age with the project Citizen Girl. Volunteers also ensure the continuation of many annual events in my constituency, such as the Boswell book festival and the Cumnock tryst. Even Ayr’s famous Gaiety theatre is reliant upon the contributions of a team of volunteers, and the Belleisle conservatory was saved from dereliction to a delight by a group of dedicated volunteers.

However, there does not need to be a material or financial contribution, but simply people giving their time. The Rotary clubs have been mentioned for the good work they do, and I joined the Alloway Rotary just last Saturday for a litter pick in its community; that is most welcome.

By helping others, people might also help themselves get on to the employment ladder. Many life skills acquired while volunteering are transferable and often prove to be impressive on a CV. Many individuals who started out volunteering with the Prince’s Trust and other organisations have succeeded in finding permanent work placements.

Finally, I want to mention the most wonderful volunteer group and charity we have in the British Isles: the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, not just at Girvan but throughout the British Isles, and those who volunteer to serve at sea to save the lives of seafarers or those who are enjoying themselves on our very pleasant beaches, and equally those who are land-based who raise the charitable funds that wholly support the RNLI. As a nation we should be extremely proud of the volunteers who go to sea and those who raise funds on the land.

Although it is important that volunteers are properly vetted on sensitive matters, we must ensure that this valuable resource is neither exploited nor burdened by unnecessary regulation in what is a potentially litigious society. I hope that the Governments will continue to recognise the value of volunteers, and the contribution they make to their fellow citizens and their communities.

5.58 pm

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): It has been said that volunteering is the ultimate exercise in democracy: we vote in elections once a year perhaps, but when we vote every day about the kind of community we want to live in. I am sure I speak on behalf of many Members in saying it is a privilege to see and support the fantastic charitable work taking place in my constituency and across Kirklees and across the country. Volunteers are people who through their actions make a commitment to the kind of community they want to be a part of: a community that is a friend to those facing isolation, that advocates for those without a voice, and that helps to feed families in need at the most difficult times. The dedication and commitment these volunteers and charitable workers have to this vision of a better society is invaluable.

I want to use my time today to thank just a few of the people doing brilliant work in Colne Valley and throughout Kirklees. I recently visited Clare House, a development aimed at tackling homelessness by providing accommodation and supporting residents with complex needs. In addition to providing a safe environment, Clare House offers the time and resources to help people to rebuild their lives. It is supported by Kirklees Council, but many volunteers also support it by donating their work and time.

A number of groups are also working to ensure that those in need have enough food for their families, and I have seen at first hand the wonderful work being done by the Welcome Centre, the Mission, the Women’s Centre, Holmfirth Food Bank and the Fit and Fed programme. The warmth of the Colne Valley people is also seen in the local groups aiming to tackle social isolation, including Clem’s Garden and Friend To Friend. In the true spirit of our local community, people are reaching out to one another to share experiences and to form friendships. Destitute Asylum Seekers Huddersfield, where I was once a volunteer myself, has turned around the lives of many who have experienced displacement and trauma. Ruddi’s Retreat and Waves are both charities supporting vulnerable children and their families. There are too many others to mention, but I am grateful to them all for their hard work and community spirit.

All these charities, and the work they do, help to provide a safety net for vulnerable people. I have seen this need grow and grow in the past eight years as austerity has pushed more and more people into poverty and difficult circumstances, but here’s the thing: I actually do not believe in relying on charity. If the Government are doing their job properly, people should not need to rely on voluntary support. These groups should not be stretched beyond capacity, and workers should not feel pressured to provide support when the Government fall short. Food bank usage should not be at its highest rate on record, homeless people should not be dying on our streets, and over 4 million children should not be living in poverty. A Government should provide access to quality education, healthcare, social care and housing for every citizen; that is their right in a civilised society. That is what I believe in, and it is what I will continue to fight for. In the meantime, I will continue to admire and support those who give up their time and resources to help others.

6.1 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): A week past Monday, the Minister, who spoke so well at the start of this debate, was reported in Hansard as saying, “thank goodness for Stirling!” I hope that she will feel compelled...
to say something similar when she sums up at the end of this debate. Much has been said today about how communities become connected by volunteering, and I cannot let this opportunity pass without saying, with no little pride and a great deal of humility, that Stirling is an epicentre when it comes to volunteering. Stirling was the UK’s sole contender for the European volunteering capital for 2020, and it was shortlisted to the final two.

The latest Scottish household survey shows that 39% of people in Stirling volunteer, compared with the national average for Scotland of 28%. This means that 30,000 people are enlisted as volunteers, working to improve the quality of life in so many aspects of the Stirling constituency. They are young and old, male and female, and people of faith and no faith. They are the people who keep our community centres open, who provide vital care for vulnerable people and who are working to enhance and protect our environment. It is the volunteers who are the backbone of Stirling district citizens advice bureau, and of Start Up Stirling, which runs Stirling’s food bank and mobile food bank. They do so much to support and help people who are in difficulties and distress for any number of reasons, and they do so in a way that is entirely focused on helping people to get back on their feet, whether that involves a short-term or a longer-term commitment. Those organisations have my deep and abiding appreciation and admiration, and I am glad that my office works closely with both of them.

Let us take the Trossachs search and rescue team as another example. They won several prestigious Scottish and UK-wide awards last year and, more importantly, they have won the gratitude of the many communities from Strathblane to Strathyre who were cut off and isolated as a result of the “beast from the east”. The Braeport memory cafe in Dunblane and Town Break in Stirling do a magnificent job in helping and supporting those with dementia and their families. With new initiatives being planned in other parts of my constituency, the work of those volunteers is inspirational. Many of their families have been affected by dementia, as indeed has mine.

The Doune Community Woodland Group has recently completed another successful path project at Doune ponds. It was officially opened just last Saturday, and it is physically connecting communities as well as encouraging health and wellbeing in this historic rural community. Then there is PLUS Forth Valley, which is based in Stirling and works with children with additional support requirements and their families. Its motto is “disabilities are no barrier to fun” and the hard work of its extraordinary volunteers makes that statement come to life. They have my full admiration.

I was recently privileged to attend the annual Killin Drama Club panto. Not only was it a superb production, but it was very funny and brought the whole community together, enriching everybody’s wellbeing. I want specifically to mention Gordon Hibbert, who has written and directed the pantomime for the past 24 years. I look forward to his 25th production this year.

Volunteering is the faster that brings our communities together and then keeps them together. As parliamentarians, when we see a societal need or a social injustice, it is always tempting to reach into taxpayers’ pockets to fund an imposed remedy. However, when we do that, often inadvertently creating governmental agencies and complex bureaucracies, we must be very careful. Communities that work together can not only bring about sustainable change, but be strengthened and uplifted in the process. They provide the service, but they also give love and receive love in return. That is the enduring thing which binds us all together, come what may.

6.6 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I start by declaring an interest, because I will refer to organisations in which I am involved. I am a patron of a charity called Futureversity, co-founder and chair of the Uprising leadership charity, and co-founder of the One Million Mentors initiative.

We need a lively, independent, vibrant and innovative civil society sector, as many Members have said. Volunteering and charitable activity is a critical foundation of our society and the hallmark of a healthy society and economy. The sector must be underpinned by both Government and philanthropic funding and donations encouraged by incentives such as Gift Aid, which was introduced by the Labour Government. I hope that this Government will consider other imaginative ways of encouraging donations.

No society is truly healthy if the high fiscal rewards for entrepreneurship or investment are not matched by a strong sense of social responsibility and bonds of reciprocity. Charities and volunteers work tirelessly, especially in the current climate, to create a fairer society, to address environmental challenges in our communities, to tackle poverty and inequality and to address social justice challenges. The Charities Aid Foundation found that 80% of UK adults think that charities play an essential role in their local community. Britain is a better place thanks to philanthropy, charity and voluntary activity.

My constituency is famous for volunteers, community organisations and old institutions, such as Toynbee Hall, which employed Clement Attlee before his entry into politics. He became mayor of Stepney in my constituency, then a Member of Parliament in the area, and later one of the most successful Prime Ministers of the past century. The east end of London has a great heritage of charitable activity and entrepreneurship, and that has continued. London’s Air Ambulance, which serves people across our capital, is based in my constituency, and many people do not realise that it is a charity. We have the Osmani Trust, the Attlee Foundation, the Young Foundation, City Gateway, Muslim Aid and many others. The ones that I am not mentioning will be offended, but there are hundreds of them, so I am unable to name them all. The fact is that charities should not replace the functions of the state; what they do must be complementary. They should enrich our society, not put plasters on the wounds inflicted by the Government.

This week, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions finally admitted that the Government’s universal credit policy has led to an increase in food bank use. We know that food banks do amazing work, but in a civilised society they should not have to do it. Their funding could be invested elsewhere if the Government addressed those issues. The Government should support charities, but not expect them to substitute for what public services should be doing.
I want to draw on my experience of starting up charities. I had the good fortune of working for the author of the 1945 Labour manifesto, Michael Young, in his later life. It was the best kind of apprenticeship in politics and social entrepreneurship. I saw that we can be imaginative in addressing the big social challenges in our country by using insight, observation and research, but that means that the Government must fund innovation. I appeal to the Minister to do that.

I also appeal to the Minister to address some of the issues relating to unspent or ineffective funding, such as the £10 million provided to the National Citizen Service for unfilled places. We need more effective spending in the charitable sector, which desperately needs support. It was promised that £425 million that was invested in the Olympic village would be returned to the charitable sector. That money could be used immediately by charities that desperately need help to address issues such as youth crime.

I was able to set up charities to help young people. I hope that this Government will continue to support them. If they do, there will be direct benefits to our economy. I am grateful that we are having this debate, and I hope the Government continue to invest in that very important sector.

6.16 pm

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali). I join her in praising the valuable contribution that charities and volunteers make to our local communities.

Modern lifestyles mean that we often do not interact with our closest neighbours as much as we used to. Some people may not even know the name of their elderly neighbours, who are perhaps alone and vulnerable to doorstep crime, such as rogue traders and scams. Although there is no substitute for personal contact with our neighbours, our busy lives sometimes make that difficult so we should look at other ways to keep people connected. Technology in the charitable sector can empower volunteers and enable people to address crime in their community.

In my constituency, people want to see more officers on the beat, and I welcome the Government funding to address that. However, the residents I speak to also highlight the lack of community awareness and cohesion. If we are truly to tackle that and address vulnerability and crime, people need to know how to get to know their neighbours and work with the police and their local authorities.

As part of the coalition Government’s localism agenda, Baroness Helen Newlove was appointed Government champion for active, safer communities. In 2011, she published a report that argued that there is a public appetite for greater involvement with neighbourhood watch and other activities. It said:

“Being actively involved in your community and helping to keep it safe needs to become the norm rather than the exception.”

The Neighbourhood and Home Watch Network has been successful in connecting people. There are 170,000 neighbourhood watch schemes across England and Wales, supported by 173,000 dedicated volunteer co-ordinators, covering 3.8 million member households. It is the UK’s largest voluntary crime prevention movement. Every week, tens of thousands of residents and volunteers share information to keep themselves and their communities safe from crime.

In my borough of Stockport, the neighbourhood watch association is helping the Greater Manchester police’s economic crime unit to tackle scams by providing free training sessions to make residents scam-aware. The borough of Stockport has the highest percentage of residents aged over 65 in Greater Manchester and the highest number of recorded scams in the region. I hosted a similar scam smart event last autumn, which brought together Greater Manchester police and charities such as Age UK and Citizens Advice. Although it was distressing to share stories of criminal fraud, there was a real appetite among the attendees to learn how best to protect themselves. By harnessing technology we can encourage active community engagement, which will have the knock-on effect of helping to address urban crime and strengthen local bonds.

People really are starting to get connected; social media and mobile phone apps have been adopted by some neighbourhoods to distribute and discuss information in an informal way. Sharing information in this way can make people feel that they are part of a wider network, working together to keep their community safe. Mobile phone apps also generate a sense of community, through feelings of collective safety and information sharing.

Indeed, some Cheadle residents have been organising and engaging in neighbourhood groups for some time. The challenge is in connecting such groups with local police forums in order that there can be an exchange of information, but it can be overcome. A national roll-out of a neighbourhood watch app could be an invaluable tool in joining up volunteers spread across different force areas. If successful, it would enable charities and volunteers, working together with residents, police and local authorities, to make a real difference to the wellbeing of the community.

That is why I welcome my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State’s commitment to establish the charity digital skills partnership, to help charities build their digital skills. That fund is investing up to £1 million in upskilling civil society leaders so they are able to embed digital into their organisations. I hope that money will also filter down into organisations such as Neighbourhood Watch. It is essential that those working in the charity sector are equipped with the skills they need to fully embrace the potential of new technologies and empower communities. This debate has enabled us to show our appreciation for the tireless work of volunteers and the third sector, and I look forward to the advancement of new technologies in the charitable sector, too.
Café Solace, in Kilbirnie and in Ardrossan, run by Recovery at Work; the Scottish Centre for Personal Safety, in Ardrossan; the Ayrshire Community Trust; North Ayrshire Cancer Care; the Arran Community and Voluntary Service; CLASP—the Community Led Action and Support Project—in Stevenston; the Opportunities in Retirement groups across North Ayrshire; the Ayrshire Hospice volunteers; the North Ayrshire food banks; the RNLI—Royal National Lifeboat Institution—Largs; and of course the committee that keeps the heart of Whitlees beating by running the Whitlees community centre in Ardrossen. I should also mention all of those who work in each of our towns to provide gala days such as the Saltcoats Sea Queen festival and so many other events. There are far, far too many people and groups to mention, but they all provide a range of services throughout the community, for our young people and not so young people.

We can be proud that 27% of adults in Scotland, more than 1.2 million people, have volunteered formally through an organisation or group in the past year; and this figure has remained relatively stable for the past nine years. Some 30% of adults living in North Ayrshire, an estimated 34,000 people, volunteer formally, which is above the national Scottish figure of 27%. In recent years, it is estimated that volunteers living in North Ayrshire contributed 4.5 million hours of help and £62 million to the local economy—the figure for the whole of Scotland is believed to be £2 billion contributed to our economy by volunteers. The future looks bright, as research on participation and attitudes among young people aged between 11 and 18 found that youth volunteering participation had grown to 52%, which is nearly double the adult figure of 27%. As we have heard, volunteering can lead to enhanced job prospects as well, as new skills are learned and confidence grows for the volunteer.

The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations tells us that the third sector is made up of a variety of organisations, such as registered charities, housing organisations, sports and art clubs, and so on—the list is very long. These organisations do fantastic and important work, such as delivering employability services, supporting people with health challenges, bringing people together through social activities, forming self-help and support groups, and, of course, improving our environment through conservation, heritage groups and regenerating our communities.

If Members speak to volunteers, they will always tell us about the satisfaction and fulfilment that they find in the work they do. Of course, not only does each volunteer often make more of a difference to their community than they may ever even know, but the whole army of volunteers that populates our communities has such a profound effect, and they are so woven into the fabric of our streets and towns, that they are part of our daily lives.

Interestingly, the London School of Economics found a clear relationship between volunteering and happiness: the more people volunteered, the happier they were—and they were much happier than those who did not volunteer at all. Throughout my constituency I have met some wonderful people who selflessly give up their time to help others and to add value to their community in ways that cannot be measured in pounds and pence because their value is much more profound than that. Studies also show that volunteering is an effective tool against depression and anxiety and is an excellent confidence booster, on top of the fact that such volunteers enjoy a wider social circle.

It is the basic, human, fundamental desire to help others that drives our army of volunteers in towns across the UK, Scotland and North Ayrshire and Arran, and throughout our communities. They are the too-often unsung heroes who perform such valuable work in our communities, day in, day out, and upon whom our communities rely and could not well do without. It is right and fitting that today we celebrate and recognise these unsung heroes, which is why I am delighted to have spoken in this debate and why, in common with everybody in the Chamber, I am sure, I want to take this opportunity to say, to each and every one of them, thank you.

6.21 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a great privilege to follow the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who gave a fantastic speech. I have been volunteering all my life—it is truly in my DNA. I started when I was around seven, taking children from inner-city Birmingham to camps in the countryside. I continued at university, doing a stint as a counsellor answering the Nightline service, and then with a long-standing role with the National Childbirth Trust. Finally, I spent 15 years with the scout movement. I have also taken an active role at my local church throughout my life.

In my business life, I have seen the massive value and benefit of volunteering and community activity for my businesses and other businesses that I know about. I was proud to be a founding trustee for the LoveBrum charity, which helps to empower small charities that do not have Government funding—true grassroots charities working across Birmingham, where my business was based—to make a real difference and receive funding. It is fantastic to see those charities now going from strength to strength. I have seen how leaders throughout the business community have embraced volunteering for their employees, because they know that it helps to build stronger employees and a stronger work culture. Ultimately, it makes businesses attractive places to work, so it is truly a win-win.

I have been privileged and fortunate all my life to have taken part in such activities. I have made friends for life, developed new skills and learned more about myself than I could ever have imagined. Such opportunities have truly changed my life. In particular, if someone can stand up in a room full of eight-year-old cub scouts and get them to be quiet and say their prayers, it is just a small step to standing up in this place.

In common with other Members, I wish to pay tribute to some of the fantastic charities in my constituency. I have been blown away by the compassion and commitment of local people in Redditch. I cannot mention them all, but I wish to highlight the Repair Café; Carers Careline; Men in Sheds, the recent recipient of a £10,000 Big Lottery grant; Redditch Nightstop; Boys2Men, a charity that recently won the inspirational mentor award from the Kids Count charity here in Parliament; Your Ideas; the YMCA; Home-Start; Where Next; the Sandycroft Centre; and, of course, the League of Friends of the Alex hospital in my constituency.
[Rachel Maclean]

In the time I have left, I wish to focus on the impact of the National Citizen Service in my constituency, which I have visited and supported. Volunteering is a fantastic opportunity for young people to develop confidence as they go on to tackle the challenges in their lives. In particular, the NCS scheme enables them to get out from behind the technology and screens that so often dominate the lives of young people today. It puts them in situations outside their comfort zone, and they have to work together in groups with young people they would not normally meet in their neighbourhoods or school classrooms. They are learning vital life skills at a really early age. NCS builds their confidence and helps them to develop resilience to tackle some of the problems that they face in this day and age. I really want to congratulate the Minister on the work that the Government are doing in that regard.

I want to highlight the role that social prescribing can play in this really important arena. I have heard Members say that, often, those who volunteer get more out of the process than the people who are the recipients. Surely, this is a fantastic opportunity to harness this power for good to contribute to the health of our nation as a whole. We need to connect our communities—there are people who need help and who need volunteering—in a systematic and widespread way. That would be a massive and encouraging step forward. The Health Secretary has recently outlined such a plan, which, I am pleased to say, will be backed up by Government funding in the future.

I must just mention the Commonwealth games. Redditch is obviously very close to Birmingham where we will be holding our Commonwealth games in 2022. I am the vice-chair of the all-party group for the Commonwealth games. I have been leading a campaign in my local area to ensure that there is legacy and an active contribution from Redditch to this fantastic event. We want to play a part and we are looking forward to the games.

We are a nation of volunteers. I will finish with one quote. The recipe for happiness is very simple. What we need is, “Someone to care for, something to do, and something to look forward to.” Volunteering addresses all three of those things.

6.26 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is really great to get the opportunity to speak in this debate. There are so many charities and organisations that I could mention, but, with just five minutes in which to speak, I clearly do not have the time to do so. I could easily speak for a number of hours about the different organisations that I have seen in my constituency, as I am sure could Members across this House. I echo those who have said thank you to our volunteers, particularly to those who are genuinely involved in charitable organisations and charitable activities across Scotland and across the wider UK. Our communities would be incredibly different without them.

I shall start on a slightly negative note, but I promise that the rest of my speech will be positive. When talking about the number of people volunteering, I have to say that I have a real concern about millennials and their ability to volunteer given that they are working in jobs that are lower paid than in previous generations, given that their housing costs are increased, and that, in some cases, they are having to work more hours than those from previous generations. Finding time to volunteer in that stream of everything that has been going on since the financial crisis is really hard for them. Anything that the Government can do to help, such as increasing the minimum wage, would be great as it would give people that breathing space so that they can have time to go out and volunteer.

I have one more general point in relation to corporate social responsibility. When I sit down and speak to organisations that want to put forward corporate social responsibility, I say to them, “Most people can paint a shed or do something like that, but if you are an IT organisation and you can bring your expertise to help people improve their IT systems or to help people fill in funding applications, that would be absolutely vital for some of our frontline charities.” I encourage companies thinking about corporate social responsibility to go down those routes if they possibly can, especially if they have that expertise within their organisations.

Let me talk about some of the charities in my constituency. There is an organisation called Lighthouse in Tillydrone, which was co-founded by John Merson. This man has had an amazing life. As a prison pastor, he found that there was almost a revolving door for people coming out of prison, and he wanted to help them. His church was in an affluent area of Aberdeen, but he started to work in one of Aberdeen’s more deprived communities. The difference that his project has made to people coming out of prison in that community is absolutely unbelievable. The work was totally taken on by him to begin with, but he now has an army of volunteers and paid workers. He planted the seed of that project, and it could not have been better for that community.

Newhills Parish Church has a Living Well Café and a dementia outreach service. It has a befriending project, which provides support for people who are lonely. The café is linked in with dementia services, and it is a brilliant place to go along to. Music 4 U is another organisation in my constituency. It is a stage school that does shows. People with physical and learning disabilities attend the school. Everyone is supported in that organisation to reach their potential. It is just how I think life should be, with everyone supported to reach their potential and overcome barriers. I could not be more supportive of Music 4 U and Debbie Kirkness, who runs that organisation.

Aberdeen Muslims does excellent work in supporting the local community. For example, the beach in Aberdeen was an absolute mess after flooding a few years ago; there was stuff everywhere, and the Aberdeen Muslim community rallied round and organised much-needed beach cleans.

There are so many more groups in my area. I will briefly mention the uniformed organisations such as the Guides, the Scouts, the Boys’ Brigade and the Girls’ Brigade. I started my journey in the Guides at Rainbows, and my daughter has now started her journey in Rainbows. I was a Rainbow, then a Brownie, then a Guide and then a Young Leader. [Interruption.] How things have changed—not necessarily for the better. I have also helped to run a Rainbows group. The volunteering hours are a brilliant experience. These organisations are so good for bringing people together from all the different
corners of communities, and giving them the opportunity to socialise with people who they might not normally socialise with.

I have said before that I am not religious, but I could not have more respect for the amount of volunteering that our religious and faith communities do. My city would be very different if it were not for people who attend churches of all different types, and who volunteer and try to improve their communities. I thank them all.

6.31 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests regarding my position as a councillor for Thorniewood on North Lanarkshire Council.

In all our communities, charities carry out work on a voluntary basis, from supporting the elderly to assisting families who have fallen on hard times. In many cases, they are only able to do so because of the dedication of volunteers and the generosity of the public. I often ask myself where we would be without volunteers. I look at the work that charities do in my constituency for the good people of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill, and it reaffirms my belief that they are a key part of the very foundations of our society.

I look at the fantastic work and dedication of the volunteers at Coatbridge food bank, which I helped to grow. It exists because of the Tory austerity and welfare reforms like universal credit. Indeed, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions herself now accepts that there is a link between the increasing use of food banks and the botched roll-out of universal credit. Isn’t it a shame that some volunteers are getting sanctioned for helping?

Considering the work of local charities, I am not surprised that the Charities Aid Foundation found that 80% of the public believe that charities play a vital role in the UK. It saddens me that our charities are now facing difficult circumstances because of the actions of this Government; just look at the way they are handling Brexit. The charity sector currently relies on £250 million of funding from the EU—funding that the Government said they would match through the UK shared prosperity fund after Brexit. Just like so many other promises made by this Government, it has been broken, leaving the charity sector in a state of deep uncertainty about its future funding.

Charities find themselves gagged because of the Government’s lobbying Act—the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014. Charities do important work in highlighting issues within our society and across the world. They campaign, build public support for a cause and take their arguments to MPs to seek change. The lobbying Act prevents charities from speaking out and doing this important work. Indeed, the Government have used gagging clauses to prevent charities from speaking out—otherwise they risk losing contracts from Government Departments. The Charities Aid Foundation found that 67% of people felt that charities were best placed to speak for the disadvantaged, yet they are being denied the chance to do so because of the lobbying Act. It should be abolished, and the next Labour Government will ensure that it is consigned to the dustbin of history.

It is worth reflecting on the increasing need for charities in our society. Charities are assuming greater responsibilities in providing support for our elderly, the disadvantaged and others who would once have used services offered by the Government. But the Government’s continued pursuit of austerity has led to a loss of local services and charities having to plug the gaps with decreasing funds at their disposal. In England, we are seeing council cuts of 60%, and Scotland is no different. We have austerity in Scotland. We are losing community centres, volunteer groups, libraries, and other much-needed services. This year, my own council has been asked to find £30 million. It saddens me that the Government have cut vital local services without pausing to think of the consequences or of whether the charity sector would be able to step in to cover the gaps in public service provision.

As I said, I am the councillor for Thorniewood on North Lanarkshire Council. I receive a salary that I donate to local charities, groups, associations, and anyone I can help in their hour of need. In a time of austerity and increasing pressure on charities, I want to do my bit to ensure that their vital work can continue across my constituency for the good people of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill. I have been pleased to help many charities—in particular, Bumblebee Babies, which does so much work to support parents of stillborn children. That group nearly closed and finished because of a lack of funding.

I will continue to support charities whenever I can. I call on this Government to provide the support that our charities need nationally as well. It is time to stop the cuts to their funding. It is time to stop gagging them in their campaign efforts. It is time to stop leaving them in uncertainty about their future after Brexit. It is about time that our charities were properly supported so that they can continue the vital work that they do in all our communities. As I said earlier, where would we be without the volunteers?

6.36 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): There is widespread consensus that charities and volunteering organisations are an integral part of our society. Research from the Charities Aid Foundation has shown that 80% of UK adults think that charities play an essential role in their local communities.

My constituency is an excellent example of why this is the case. The community has an amazing network of voluntary organisations who carry out wonderful work to ensure that support is there for those who desperately need it. Locally, we have a whole range of different groups and organisations that provide information and support, helping people to find what they need to get back on track. Acts of generosity and compassion from local volunteers and charities in my constituency provide lifelines for people in need. These volunteers are critical to the functioning of our communities. They represent the very best of us.

In Britain, we have a proud tradition of generosity and helping those in need. The voluntary sector is a cornerstone of that tradition. But the Government must build on this by supporting initiatives to help people of all ages and backgrounds to volunteer. There is little evidence to suggest that they are committed to doing so. In 2015, the Conservative party announced
plan to introduce volunteering leave for workers. Little effort has been made to follow through on this pledge, and it appears to have been quietly put to one side.

After more than eight years of Tory austerity, there is an over-reliance on the generosity of local people as a substitute for properly funded local services. Volunteers should not be expected to pick up the pieces when swingeing Tory cuts shatter our local communities. Despite their best efforts, voluntary organisations are seriously struggling to step in to replace local services. Cuts to local government have led to the closure of 428 day centres, 1,000 children’s centres, 600 youth centres and 478 public libraries. Make no mistake: cuts to these services are cuts to the very fabric of our society. Without proactive local services and a well-supported voluntary sector, loneliness, isolation and social division will rise. If the Government are serious about connecting communities by supporting charities and volunteers, they will make good on the Prime Minister’s promise last year that “austerity is over”. It is high time the Government put an end to austerity before the damage done is irreparable.

I thank, commend and salute all volunteers and everyone working for charities and community groups. I am proud to be the MP for Warrington South and to represent this country, where we have such people in our society, making a huge difference.

6.39 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op):

This has been an inspiring debate. The world is a cynical place at the moment, and all the Brexit debates highlight just how divided this House can be, but when we talk about the fabric of our communities and what makes them the places they are, there is a real glow from MPs.

I pay tribute to all Members who have spoken today, and in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), who talked about the great work in her constituency to support people with dementia, as well as the human cost of austerity and cuts, with children going hungry. My hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) is a champion for Citizens Advice, and her expertise in that field really adds value to this place.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones), as chair of the APPG on charities and volunteering, lives and breathes the charity sector and goes above and beyond; she shows that every day in this place. My hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker) talked about the real price of austerity, how the cuts feel on the ground and how desperate it is. It has been mentioned a number of times. The charities that do this fantastic work, that go above and beyond, that we all take inspiration from, that we all visit and that we all thank today are, by and large, picking up the pieces where the Government have decided that they are not responsible, walked away, taken the money and left communities to sink or swim.

Many examples have been given today, including food bank activity; the work that communities are doing to self-organise and respond to crime and antisocial behaviour in their area; people taking on the local library because the council money has been taken away, and to keep it open, they have to self-organise; and community volunteers on estates who are stepping up because they recognise that young people do not have the facilities they used to have to keep them out of trouble and give them a positive focus and hope.

We hear all these stories, and they are inspiring, but this is about transferral of responsibility. I remember a former Prime Minister, who I think is in a shed somewhere writing his memoirs, talking about the big society and this big idea of an emboldened civil society where charities are supported. The truth is that charities have just about kept their head above water. In the way that councils, the police service and the fire service have seen cuts, charities have also seen severe cuts.

In my town, we used to have an area-based grant, which was directed to areas of high deprivation, to support the community infrastructure that was so important. When the coalition Government came into power in 2010, they cancelled that with less than a year’s notice. The staff of community groups and charities that were set up to provide that support were just thrown on the scrapheap, as though the work they did in the community did not matter.

Given that it is customary for MPs to mention charities in their area, I want to pay tribute to the fantastic work of a range of charities in mine. There is a danger, when we do this, that we please a handful and really annoy a long list of people who we do not have time to mention. I want to mention Dr Kershaw’s hospice. Whichever community someone comes from in Oldham, they will be connected to that hospice at a time when they are at their most desperate, feeling pain that they never thought they would have to go through and not being sure how to cope when it hits. The hospice has given people who are nearing the end of their life the support, courage and confidence to get through that very painful time, and it is genuinely part of the community.

Like many places, however, we have community groups that, if we are honest, we would wish did not exist. I wish that Oldham did not need a food bank, and I wish it was not a thriving food bank, but it is. I wish that the Andy’s Man Club did not have to support people who feel suicidal, but it does. There are lots of other examples. I could not help but notice that quite a big chunk of money was announced earlier, and we had a taste of some of the areas that are likely to receive some of the funding. Given the Members who have contributed
here today and the work they have highlighted in their communities, I just hope that the funding, when the list is finally published, is fairly distributed by geography. I hope that it absolutely targets areas of need and deprivation, takes into account that some areas have been hit harder by public service reductions than others and really supports places where there is genuine working together across institutions.

This is not about good Government or bad Government, with charities over here and the community over there. When this works well, in the way we have heard about today, it is because everyone comes together. When a council works well, it is the community; when a charity works well, it is the community; and when a next-door neighbour checks up on an elderly relative—collects the post and does all the things we have talked about—that is the community. The fabric of our community is under great strain at the moment, and it really requires us to make sure that we begin to reinvest in it.

The Prime Minister made a promise that austerity was over, recognising that the pain had been very deep, knowing that it was a big factor in the referendum result and wanting to address that. Unfortunately, she was undermined by her Chancellor who had the opportunity in the autumn statement genuinely to end austerity and decided, “Well, to hell with it. Let’s just carry on.” They must have been quite enjoying the journey that they were taking. I would say that most people in this Chamber, if they are honest, are looking at their own local authorities, regardless of political complexion and geography—whether rural or urban, north or south—and wondering how on earth that council will be able to survive over the next couple of years.

Why is council funding so important? Because the council, which is democratically elected and of the community—people themselves elect who they want to be their voice in their town or city—comes together and brings people together, and it is often the first port of call. We cannot have thriving civil society if we have underfunded and starved local government; we cannot have thriving local government if we have not got thriving civil society; and none of that works if we have not got decent people. Whatever our view today, we should all be very proud of the country we live in. We are a mixed, diverse, vibrant country full of wonderful people who, every day, do amazing things.

6.47 pm

Mims Davies: With the leave of the House, I want to respond by picking up on a few points. I thank the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon)—and thank goodness for men’s sheds. I thank the 18 speakers from across the House who have contributed to this really positive debate this afternoon. We have heard about some incredible organisations and incredible individuals and about what we are doing in our communities to support and connect people.

I want to pick up on some of the challenges for and concerns of charities. Charities hold assets of about £260 billion, and their total income has gone up from £52 billion in 2009 to £77 billion today. We have heard about some incredible organisations and incredible individuals and about what we are doing in our communities to support and connect people.

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We have heard about some of the amazing charities, and I completely agree, particularly about the citizens advice bureaux. There are the RNLI and independent lifeboat charities; our hospices; those who volunteer to support the NHS; yes, the men’s clubs; neighbourhood watch; our air ambulances; and Singing for Syrians. There is diversity and resilience in our charities and social enterprises through our trustees, patrons and organisers. I completely agree that they all need support because of the difference that they make. Our civil society is a force to be reckoned with, as we have heard today. This Government are committed to supporting growth in civil society to make sure it continues to have an impact for many years ahead and truly helps us to build a country that works for everyone. As we heard today, we never meet an unhappy volunteer. Volunteers often give because it helps them have great self-esteem.

I will briefly mention some organisations in my patch: the Countess Mountbatten Hospice Charity in West End, the Hamble lifeboat and One Community, which received the Queen’s award for voluntary service. We heard today what that means for those amazing charities that do so much. I could spend quite some time thanking all the charities in my area. People have done well to lever in so many this afternoon.

The hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) spoke about having to pick up the pieces of austerity. I want us to recognise that the sector has shown itself to be strong. There is a growing number of charities, as I said earlier. They are an important part of our community and they have continued to thrive.

On the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014, it is an important role of charities to speak on behalf of their beneficiaries. That is their role. As I said in my first remarks to the NCVO in December—indeed, the Prime Minister has written to Sir Stuart Etherington about this—we want it to be absolutely clear that we are not stopping providers standing up for what is right. It is absolutely right that charities can continue to advocate for the community.

On EU funding, we know that access to future funding is a concern for civil society organisations. My officials are working with colleagues across the Government to inform our plans about future funds, and I will keep the House updated.

I am very keen to mention the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones), as was the Scottish National Party spokesman, the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes). Her APPG does vital work to support charities and volunteering, along with the NCVO, which of course is in its centenary year. I have offered to come to the APPG for social enterprise as well. It is vital that we talk about the challenges for unpaid trustees, and I am happy to meet the hon. Member for Clwyd South to discuss her Bill. We should empower and help trustees. The hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) spoke about the need to support skills such as accountancy and people management among volunteers.

On dormant assets, we will talk further about that issue. We have a group of industry champions who are working on a blueprint. They submitted their report in December, and we are considering the proposals on extending the scheme. We know how much money is there and how much good it can do. There is great news...
for people in the charities sector, because there is so much thriving locally and we can all share the best practice.

I just need to say thank goodness for Stirling. We heard today that it is better than average when it comes to volunteering. That gives everybody else an opportunity to match Stirling. Looking around the Chamber this afternoon, we have heard what it means to our communities when people stand up and get involved.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) how sport can help. Sport is the other side of my portfolio. Some 6.3 million people volunteer in sport. When one person volunteers in sport, eight people benefit. I thank all those who step up.

The hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) raised concerns about school holidays and food banks and about children being fit and fed. StreetGames has launched a campaign on that idea, which incorporates holiday activity sessions for communities that need them, with a nutritious meal every day, free of charge. The national lottery is funding that fantastic initiative through Sport England.

As the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker) said, we need to recognise our volunteers. We have the Points of Light awards, so please nominate people. We can nominate people for an honour. Of course, there is also the Queen’s award for voluntary service.

We heard about the NCS and the challenge of getting youth volunteers. Actually, I think people get so much out of volunteering. I have been to NCS sessions, and if our young people find time to give back to their communities, they feel much more connected as a result.

The Government are very concerned about knife crime, which was mentioned in the debate. Knife crime is devastating for our communities, and we are determined to tackle it. We set out a comprehensive programme in the serious violence strategy, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) how sport can help. Sport is the other side of my portfolio. Some 6.3 million people volunteer in sport. When one person volunteers in sport, eight people benefit. I thank all those who step up.

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The Government are very concerned about knife crime, which was mentioned in the debate. Knife crime is devastating for our communities, and we are determined to tackle it. We set out a comprehensive programme in the serious violence strategy, and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced a youth endowment fund of £200 million to support interventions for our children and young people who are at risk of getting involved in violent crime.

We have had a great afternoon highlighting the bold and bright future that lies ahead for charities, civil society and volunteers. We are living through a difficult period of change, but there is huge potential to do more to connect communities through innovative ideas. We heard how new technology is providing one such opportunity. We are investing close to £4 million to support civil society, through the tech sector, and the Government are coming together to solve social challenges in this way. We know that it can help to tackle loneliness in particular.

We have a vision for the future where charities, social enterprises and good business practice work together, so that we continue to have charities that are well-regulated, independent and self-sustaining, reflecting the communities and the causes they wish to serve. That includes addressing the issue of safeguarding, where again we have an opportunity to be a world leader. It is important that we get the safeguarding and protection part of charities right, so that civil society can continue its important role of supporting our public services and local partnerships. I will be giving an update on that next month, six months on from the civil society strategy.

It is clear from this debate that we should all have the opportunity to support and encourage our wonderful local charities and volunteers and that we should continue to work together to provide opportunities for young people. Charities and social enterprise can connect communities, encouraging further social responsibility and social finance so that together we can build a connected community that improves lives and society. Working together, we can realise that collective ambition to make our country the very best it can be: a country that works for everyone and supports everyone.

*Question put and agreed to.*

That this House has considered connecting communities by supporting charities and volunteers.

**PETITION**

The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and the selling of personal data

6.57 pm

**Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents regarding the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and the selling of personal data. This is quite an interesting issue. Under the 2002 regulations, the DVLA may provide, free of charge, information to the police and local authorities for use in connection with an offence, but it may also make it available for a fee to any person who can show to the satisfaction of the Secretary of State that he has reasonable cause for wanting particulars to be made available to him, and reasonable cause is not defined. This clearly appears to be an anomaly that should be rectified.

The petition states:

The petition of the residents of Linlithgow and Falkirk East.

Declares that the petitioners believe that it is immoral that the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency are allowed to sell personal data to the third parties, irrespective of whether or not the Treasury gains financially; believes that most members of the public will not be aware that this practice is permitted; further believes that the DVLA should only be permitted information to be available for a fee to any person who can show to the satisfaction of the Secretary of State that he has reasonable cause for wanting particulars to be made available to him, and reasonable cause is not defined. This clearly appears to be an anomaly that should be rectified.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to review the existing Data Protection legislation and that consideration be given to prohibiting the DVLA from selling personal data to third parties.
NHS Menopause Services

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

6.59 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I thank the Members who have stayed behind for this important debate.

Every woman will experience the menopause at some stage in her life. When she does, she will embark on a journey that will throw up some of the most pernicious taboos that still exist in our society. The toxic combination of ageism and sexism that exist around the menopause, piled on top of the often debilitating symptoms, can cause mental health problems, relationship difficulties, problems at work, anxiety and depression, and much more. While menopause is a natural stage of life and ought to herald new freedoms and opportunities, for too many, it turns out to be the opposite. I know this from the menopause work that I have been doing in my constituency, including a Menopause Café, where we get together to drink tea and coffee, eat cake and talk about the menopause.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): To speak from my own perspective, I organised a Menopause Café in my constituency in the Stan Ball Centre, and I was delighted to see a number of women from right across the constituency. Quite a broad range of age groups came to that event, so I will be arranging more in future.

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend so much, both for his work locally and for supporting me in this work in the Chamber and the House. He is an absolutely fantastic campaigner for the menopause and for women.

Psychologically, none of us likes to be reminded that we are growing old. For women, however, the menopause provides irrefutable evidence that our biological clock has ticked. While men can, and do, continue to reproduce into their old age, we cannot. With that loss, we face a grieving process. Our species has evolved to reproduce itself, and women’s bodies have evolved to carry out childbirth and child-rearing. Aeons of our cultural norms have been built upon that basic and irrefutable fact. Despite advances in all areas of medicine, I do not see men being able to conceive children or breastfeed any time soon, so the loss of those capabilities comes weighted with deep-seated and unexpected emotions. At the same time that we are attempting to grapple with those emotions, we find ourselves beset with a huge laundry list of symptoms and facing at best, indifference and ignorance, and at worst, downright hostility, mockery and discrimination while we attempt to help ourselves.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. Like the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), I have much interest in this, not only because it involves health issues that I am responsible for, but because sometimes things are pretty close to home. Does the hon. Lady not agree that the support that is needed for women who are going through tremendous changes in their bodies is not readily and sustainably available at GP surgeries, and that funding needs to be allocated to support groups, like the ones that the hon. Lady and the hon. Gentleman referred to, to ensure that the mental and physical health of ladies going through the menopause is readily available? That is very important.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for making that valid point. I will talk about some of those issues, and he makes the really good point that these issues also affects men who are living with women as they go through the menopause.

I became a campaigner for the menopause by accident. For me, the start of the menopause came as I took my seat in this place. I attributed the almost constant migraines, the exhaustion, stress, insomnia, and the more than usual irritation with my ever-stoic husband, down to the new job, and the fact that my parliamentary accommodation was just over the bridge from Big Ben. I was probably the only Member to rejoice when Big Ben ceased to chime all through the night, because believe me, I heard every single bong.

It was only when I started to seek treatment for the unbearable migraines that I discovered the link with the menopause, and I started on a process that led me to understand that, very sadly, I was far from alone. I hesitated before speaking out about this personal issue, because I feared that in this place I would be regarded negatively by some colleagues or gain an unwarranted stigma attached to me as a menopause campaigner. However, when I realised how many women are affected by this issue and how many fail to get the help they need, I realised that it fell to me to speak out—to speak for people who cannot be here. And if I did not do it, who would?

I am pleased to say that this campaign, as we have just seen, has been universally welcomed by Members from across this House, including in particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), who has just left the Chamber, my hon. Friends the Members for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara) and for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams), and the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield).

Outside our four walls, this debate is being followed with keen interest, and I thank everybody—I know that they are watching and that they are heartened to see that this issue is receiving the attention that it deserves, although there is much more to be done. There are too many people for me to mention them all personally, but I particularly thank Dr Louise Newson—the menopause doctor—for her advice and knowledge on this matter. She operates a specialist menopause clinic in Stratford-upon-Avon and is an expert in this field. Her help has been invaluable.

Almost all women will be affected by the menopause at some point in their life. Most will experience symptoms between the ages of 45 and 55, but early menopause can also occur. For one in 100 women, this natural ageing process can begin before the age of 40, and early onset menopause occurs in one in 1,000 women under 30. In other words, it is very common, yet many are told they are too young to be menopausal, which is clearly wrong.

The duration and severity of symptoms vary from woman to woman. Generally, symptoms start a few months or years before periods stop—this is known as the perimenopause—and can persist for some time afterwards. On average, symptoms last for four years after the last period, but about one in 10 women experience them for up to 12 years. About eight in 10 women will experience hot flushes, difficulty sleeping, palpitations, poor concentration, memory problems, low mood, anxiety and depression.
The common symptoms are numerous and varied. Every woman’s experience is unique. For example, I never experienced hot flushes or night sweats, but I certainly did experience other symptoms, and that was a problem for me, because I did not realise I was menopausal. That is the case for many other women. I remember considering whether I could even continue my job, and I know from correspondence I have received that countless other women struggle to manage the menopause however it affects their lives. A survey from West Midlands police showed that 21% of policewomen had given up work due to their menopausal symptoms.

Of course, the menopause does not affect just women. Every man in the country either lives with, works with or is related to a woman, and employers are affected and will continue to be affected.

**Eddie Hughes:** It is vital that men understand the symptoms and the challenges women face during this time of their lives and that they offer support, not just at home but in the workplace.

**Rachel Maclean:** I thank my hon. Friend again for that really good point. In fact, menopausal women are the fastest-growing demographic in the workforce. It is vital, therefore, that employers step up and produce menopause policies to help women going through this process.

There are many ways in which society can better support menopausal women, but we must look also for ways in which menopausal women can better help themselves. Of course, education can help. We can raise awareness of these issues in numerous ways—for example, through sex and relationships education in schools. We teach young girls about reproduction and periods, about contraception and relationships, and we ought at that stage to educate them about what happens in the menopause.

Employers also have an important part to play and can introduce supportive policies in the workplace, and I am pleased that many large employers are starting to lead the way in this respect. The best known local employer I have worked with is the West Midlands police, who are introducing creative and groundbreaking policies. Having spoken to women who have worked with them to introduce those policies, I know they faced considerable barriers when they first started to bring these conversations into the workplace—this very traditional, male-dominated environment—and yet they persisted, and now they find that their events and support groups are oversubscribed and that men really want to help and get involved to support their female colleagues.

**Jim Shannon:** I mentioned in my earlier intervention the importance of access to GP surgeries. Every lady who has this problem goes to her doctor. That is a fact. At that stage, there is an opportunity to address the issue. I hope that the Minister will respond to this point—she always does respond very positively—because there needs to be some extra assistance in GP surgeries to help the ladies whenever they present with these problems.

**Rachel Maclean:** I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I have heard that point from so many women who have written to me, and I know that many of the women watching right now will have had the experience going to their GP and not getting the necessary support.

I will now talk about what I think the Government, the NHS and GPs can do to better support women experiencing, and sometimes struggling to cope with, the menopause. Central to the treatment available is hormone replacement therapy—or HRT, as it is commonly known. In essence, by addressing the hormonal imbalance resulting from the ageing process, HRT can address a wide variety of different symptoms experienced by menopausal women, and this is explicitly confirmed in National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines on the menopause. It is recommended to treat vasomotor, psychological and urogenital symptoms, as well as altered sexual function resulting from ageing.

Despite these guidelines having been published in November 2015—three years ago—only 10% of women are actually taking HRT. Time and again, I hear about women who have been turned away from their GPs—as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned a moment ago—and not given this, effective medicine, on spurious grounds. They are told, for example, that because their periods have not stopped they are not menopausal. However, it is suitable to prescribe the medicine at that point. It is not expensive, it is safe, and it has a transformative effect.

Back in 2015, when these guidelines were introduced, they were heralded as a great step forward, but that, sadly, has not materialised. Many attribute the problem to a 2002 study which found some causation between HRT and breast cancer, but the 2015 NICE guidelines are crystal clear: for the vast majority of women, the benefits of HRT greatly outweigh any risks. The guidelines state explicitly that it does not increase the risk of developing cardiovascular disease, that there is no association between developing type 2 diabetes and taking HRT; and that there is no evidence to suggest an increased risk of developing dementia. In fact, evidence suggests the contrary.

Even in individual cases in which cardiovascular concerns may discourage the prescription of HRT, oestrogen in the form of a skin patch or gel is available, and carries no risk of clots. That is the form of HRT that I am taking, and, combined with migraine treatment, it is helping me enormously. In fact, evidence shows that HRT lowers the risk of heart attacks by 50% and the risk of osteoporosis by 50%, and that the risk of depression is also reduced. Moreover, women on HRT are less likely to put on weight, because weight increases during the menopause. It is therefore clear that HRT brings public health benefits.

HRT with oestrogen alone is associated with no change in the risk of developing breast cancer. Body-identical progesterone does not carry a risk of breast cancer for the first five years, and even after that point the risk is very low. The risk of developing breast cancer is much higher in women who drink just a couple of glasses of wine every day, or who are overweight.

Sadly, despite all that evidence, the media have misreported and whipped up fear about HRT for a number of years, and many people, including women and healthcare professionals, are still misinformed as a result. The issue is further augmented by the fact that
very few GPs and nurses receive enough training, undergraduate or postgraduate education about the menopause. That has led to a general lack of awareness and misinformation in the medical community. It is clear that many GPs are not following the NICE guidelines.

That negligence is a problem, because many women are being sent away with no support, or are being mistakenly treated for misdiagnosed conditions such as depression and anxiety. Research that Dr Louise Newson has undertaken and shared with me shows that it is common for GPs to prescribe, for example, risperidone or diazepam rather than HRT. Of the thousands of menopausal women whom she surveyed, some 66%—a truly staggering figure—had been given antidepressants rather than HRT. Those expensive and addictive medicines are, of course, effective in treating certain conditions, but in menopause cases there is no evidence that they improve low mood or anxiety. Both types of HRT, oestrogen and progesterone, cost the NHS about £4 a month, so they are low-cost in comparison with antidepressants. They are highly effective, and pose a very low risk.

The benefits of HRT are clear, the size of the issue is unavoidable, and the action that needs to be taken is simple. The health service must give better training to GPs and other health workers, and must increase their awareness of the benefits of HRT in treating the menopause. The myths must be dispelled, and I hope that many millions more women will then see the benefit. Society, including men and employers, will also see the benefit, and the health service should benefit as well. Women who take HRT are less likely to attend GP surgeries, and effective HRT treatment removes the need for unnecessary referrals to specialists such as cardiologists or psychologists. That would undoubtedly relieve pressure on those already burdened specialisms. Medicine and diagnostic costs would be also reduced.

A few weeks ago, I held a productive roundtable discussion about this issue with the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price). I am pleased that the Department will be considering what more it can do to support menopausal women. I was encouraged by my hon. Friend’s commitment and her pledge to engage in further work with us. However, I implore the Department to prioritise that work, because it affects every woman.

I am keen to hear the Minister’s remarks, and I look forward to working closely with her. Women across the UK, including in my constituency, are struggling and being denied help. That is so wrong when there is a cheap, effective and low-risk treatment already available. I am glad we have started to break the stigma in this place and I thank all who have supported me in this campaign.

7.15 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) on securing this debate on health services and the menopause, and I want to start by celebrating the fact that we are discussing this subject. For too long the things that only affect women have been taboo; they have been brushed under the carpet—they have not been discussed in this place. One of the most magnificent of the many great side-effects of having a more gender-equal place is that we begin to discuss these subjects and those last taboos get addressed properly. It is wonderful to hear and see the men present in this Chamber who also care passionately about this subject; that must be celebrated too.

My hon. Friend has been a passionate and highly effective campaigner for improved awareness of the menopause and better support for women who are dealing with some of the difficult symptoms. I am very grateful and supportive of her work on this issue; in my eyes she is an absolute hero. I believe it is vital that we provide effective support and treatment for women with menopausal symptoms. It is of the utmost importance that we continue to work to improve that and to tackle the misconceptions attached to the menopause.

My hon. Friend raised the issue of HRT and expressed her concern that some GPs are not prescribing or recommending it to women who need it. No two menopauses are exactly alike and GPs play an important role in ensuring patients are given treatment that is appropriate to them. It is worth bearing in mind that the menopause is a natural stage in a woman’s life, and that many women will experience the menopause without troublesome symptoms or the need for treatment. Where symptoms do arise, HRT can be very effective in relieving them, and GPs should give menopausal women information about HRT as a treatment option, highlighting its risks, if they see that there are any, and its benefits. However, every patient is different and HRT might not be suitable for everyone. It is not the only treatment for menopausal symptoms, and GPs should also, where appropriate, talk women through all the non-hormonal and non-pharmaceutical treatments that are available.

My hon. Friend is right to say that there has been real confusion in the past about the safety of HRT. Concerns were raised in the early 2000s, as she mentioned, when a study said it was associated with an increased risk of breast cancer and heart disease. As a result, many women were advised by their doctors to come off HRT and the number of HRT users in the UK fell significantly. I cannot stress strongly enough that, as my hon. Friend has noted, the evidence base has since become clearer and the NICE guidance on the menopause is clear that HRT is a perfectly safe treatment in the majority of cases, and in most cases there is a far lower health risk in taking HRT than in drinking a cup of glasses of wine every day or in obesity, as my hon. Friend said.

The NICE guidance on the menopause also provides GPs with advice on how to recognise symptoms of the menopause. This guidance has helped prevent misdiagnosis, and my hon. Friend spoke very powerfully about how sometimes menopause can be mistaken for depression, which is incredibly worrying. Improving treatment of the symptoms of the menopause is also important.

We are also taking a range of other actions to improve support for women experiencing menopausal symptoms. This includes the work of the royal colleges, which of course play an important role in the education, training and professional development of healthcare professionals who treat women with menopausal symptoms. The Royal College of General Practitioners has produced a toolkit that includes learning resources for GPs on diagnosis and management of symptoms of the menopause. In addition, the Royal College of Nursing, in collaboration with the British Menopause Society, has produced a guide providing information for nurses who wish to
become specialists in the menopause. That is very important, too. The Royal College is also aiming to develop a GP specialty that focuses on women's health, which will be warmly welcomed.

Correct diagnosis and treatment of symptoms of the menopause are important, but we also have to focus on improving wider awareness of the menopause. An important part of this will be to have more open conversations around the menopause, so that we can start tackling the taboos that are attached to it. Taking this wider, bigger-picture approach is vital, given the huge impact that the menopause can have on all parts of a woman's life.

In raising awareness and tackling taboos, we need to ensure that we reach out to all demographics, including boys and men. I cannot help thinking that if a similar hormonal transition affected men for an average of four years in the second half of their life, we would never hear the end of it—[Interruption.] Present company excepted, of course. As it is, the menopause has become something of a taboo, and we have to get over that. That is why it is so incredibly faith-restoring to see these incredibly liberated and forward-thinking gentlemen in their right, including my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), who has talked about the menopause café that he runs. He should be championed for that. I was also pleased to see that the debate that was held on world menopause day last October was called by a male MP. These men are champions, in my eyes, and they deserve to be celebrated.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch mentioned, education is absolutely key to promoting awareness and understanding of the menopause. The Government are making relationships education compulsory in primary schools and relationships and sex education compulsory in secondary schools. The underpinning focus in these subjects is to equip young people to develop positive attitudes to health, relationships and wellbeing. Schools will then have a really good opportunity to improve pupils' understanding and awareness of the menopause.

Hon. Members will be aware that women represent 51% of the UK population and 44% of our workforce. They play a vital role in the nation's health, but they do not always receive the most timely or appropriate healthcare. My hon. Friend mentioned the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), who is the Minister with responsibility for mental health, inequalities, and suicide prevention. She is doing sterling work on this issue, and she has set up a women's health taskforce. This taskforce will work to ensure that women receive timely and appropriate care in relation to a whole range of issues, and as part of its upcoming early work, it will consider the menopause.

This work will be informed by a collaborative discussion that will be led by the brilliant chief medical officer and include the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, a number of academics who work in menopause research and GPs who specialise in the menopause. These discussions will feed into the taskforce's wider objectives: to empower women to speak more confidently; to raise awareness and break taboos around women's health problems; and to improve the access, quality and experience of care for women. I hope that that will help to address some of the important issues that my hon. Friend has raised today, and I am sure that my ministerial colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care will be absolutely delighted to work closely with her on the taskforce's developing work around the menopause, because she has done such sterling work in this area so far.

We need to ensure that workplaces provide the necessary and appropriate support for women. A recent study found that 41% of women aged 50 to 60 said that the menopause had affected their job, but that 70% did not tell their employer about their symptoms. This demonstrates the work that needs to be done to move beyond shame and silence to an open conversation about the menopause, because half the population will go through it. Giving better support to those women in work is not only right but fundamentally good for the economy. Women over 50 are now one of the fastest growing groups of employees. They have invaluable skills and experience, which means that they are incredibly difficult to replace. We should be looking to support them to stay in work whenever we can.

I am particularly proud to be responding to this debate tonight not only because I am hurtling very fast towards the menopause myself but because, when I was Minister for Women and Equalities, I chaired the very first parliamentary roundtable on awareness and taboos around the menopause in the workplace. This was the first ever meeting in Parliament that brought together important stakeholders and interested parties to discuss this important issue. We heard some incredible evidence. I remember one lady telling us that she had had to leave her workplace because all she wanted was a desktop fan to help her deal with the hot flushes, but the company would not let her have one and so lost an employee with incredible experience and huge amounts of skill, which just makes no sense at all.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for her positive response. There is an old proverb that a problem shared is a problem halved, and the Minister has clearly indicated a method of doing that. I encourage her to get that message out across GP surgeries, education and all the relevant bodies.

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Gentleman is an enlightened man. The work that we did at the very first roundtable led to an evidence review that was published in 2017, which talked about raising awareness and about the effects on women's economic participation. The review led to the Women's Business Council developing a toolkit to enable employers to support their employees more effectively, and I think we can all agree that that can be nothing but a good thing.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the Minister both for the measures she is outlining and for the work that she did originally. Is she aware that the menopause used to be called the silent passage? The work that she and the others in the Chamber tonight are doing is helping to bring some sound to this passage, which can only be a benefit for every member of society.

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend is right. I had not heard that description before, but it sums up what we are talking about.

The toolkit that the Women's Business Council produced when I was in the Government Equalities Office sets out positive action that employers can take around flexible
working and improving awareness and understanding around the menopause. It also provides practical and often simple adjustments that employers can make. We also support actions taken by individual organisations to raise awareness. My hon. Friend mentioned some wonderful examples of such work, including at West Midlands police and the Bank of England. I pay tribute to them and encourage more employers to think about what more they can do to support women through the menopause.

I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. The menopause is about valuing people, equality and rights. We have shown we can make progress on such issues elsewhere, and we must and will do the same here.

Question put and agreed to.

7.27 pm

House adjourned.
Recall of MPs Act 2015: Member for Peterborough

CORRECTION

Letter from Registrar of Criminal Appeals:
“In accordance with s.4(4) of the Recall of MPs Act 2015, I write to inform you Fiona Onasanya has submitted an appeal against conviction, which I have referred to the full court and which is listed for hearing on 5th March. I also confirm that we have received no appeal against sentence nor any Attorney General referral, but the time limit for such a referral does not expire until 26 February 2019.”

Deferred Division

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY)

That the draft Intellectual Property (Copyright and Related Rights) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 19 December 2018, be approved.

Division No. 329]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Barclay, rh Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carrington, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleaverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davies, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dockerty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyles-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunn, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evan, Mr Nigel
Evannert, rh Sir David
Fabricanti, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
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Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Haffern, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
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Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
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Heaton-Jones, Peter
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Herbert, rh Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
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Hollobone, rh Mr Philip
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Hughes, Eddie
Hurday, rh Mr Nick
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Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
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Jenrick, Robert
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Johnson, Joseph
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Jones, rh Mr David
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Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
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Kwarteng, Kwasi
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Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
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Lewish, rh Dr Julian
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Liddington, rh Mr David
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Philp, Chris
Pinner, rh Christopher
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Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, rh Mark
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Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
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Ross, Douglas
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Rutley, David
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Simpson, rh Mr Keith
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Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Rhos
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Souby, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Ian
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alderman, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonja
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Olive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brae, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brook, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Wright, rh Sir John
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

NOES

Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowen, Ronnie
Crausby, Sir David
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nick
Davie, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tammanjeet Singh
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Elliott, Olive
Elliott, Julie
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrell, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
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Gane, Mike
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Linden, David
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly (Proxy vote cast by Mark Tami)
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mcl Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
Mcnnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Milliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Savile Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip (Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft)
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streetlng, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, rh Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Yasir, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Question accordingly agreed to.
House of Commons

Thursday 14 February 2019

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Rolling Stock

1. Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): What progress he has made on the (a) removal of old and (b) delivery and deployment of new rolling stock. [909215]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): With permission, I will answer this question together with Question 16.

A total of 7,800 new carriages have been ordered since 2010. More than 3,000 have been delivered, with more than 4,700 due by the end of 2022. Those trains will help to transform the passenger experience, offering greater capacity, more pleasant carriages, air-conditioning, and wi-fi, and they will enable operators to remove old and unpopular rolling stock from service.

Fiona Bruce: Middlewich is a growing town, with jobs being created and a positive future. The people of Middlewich appreciate the Government’s recognition of that, with almost £50 million of funding being provided for a new bypass, but their aspiration does not stop there, and rail connectivity is poor. What support can the Government give on that?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend has campaigned continually over many years for the reopening of Middlewich railway station, and I know that she has very strong support within the town for this. I know as well that it is a top priority now that the Middlewich bypass has been delivered. We welcome the work being undertaken by the Cheshire and Warrington local economic partnership, including the proposals to reopen the freight line through Middlewich, in Cheshire, for passenger services and to reopen Middlewich station. Findings are due at the end of this month, and I look forward to hearing the recommendations from that work.

Mr Speaker: I call Tom Tugendhat. Not here—where is the fella? I hope that he is not indisposed, as he is the Chair of a very important Committee of the House. Perhaps he is preoccupied elsewhere; I know not. What I do know is that the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) is here. I call Mr David Davis.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): The Minister will be aware that he could replace and upgrade every piece of rolling stock in the country for less than half the price of High Speed 2. Why do we not just cancel this white elephant and give the public something that they want?

Andrew Jones: I say to my right hon. Friend that we are doing both. We are replacing the rolling stock in our country and delivering HS2, which is what we need to deliver more capacity in our rail market.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): If we believed Ministers’ promises back in 2012, passengers on the midland main line would be travelling on new electric trains this year. Instead, they are on old British Rail stock, the toilets empty straight onto the track, and they have to lean out of the window to open the door when the train arrives in the station. That is not great for anyone, and it is certainly not disabled friendly. The Government’s inclusive transport strategy, published last year, does not contain any commitment that all rolling stock on the rail network will meet the accessibility deadline of 1 January 2020—a deadline that this industry has known about for 20 years. The strategy does give that commitment for buses and coaches; why not rail?

Mr Speaker: If the hon. Lady experiences some of what she has described, I can say only that it must be a most undignified experience for the Chair of the Transport Committee of the House of Commons.

Andrew Jones: We are making sure that we are dealing with the disability issue. We want to make sure that the rail network offers smooth, easy journeys for people with disabilities. With regard to the rolling stock coming on to the midland main line, of course, we will deliver it as soon as possible.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I wish to follow the line of argument of the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis). I do not know whether the Minister has read the very authoritative transport study produced for the previous Government by the British Airways chief, Rod Eddington, which clearly made the case against grand projects and advocated widespread incremental improvement. Would we not be better served if the Government funded not only rolling stock but many other transport improvements by scrapping the ever more expensive, budget-busting HS2?

Andrew Jones: Again, I give the answer that I gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis): we are doing both. It is not a question of one or the other. We are delivering HS2, which is required to add capacity into our rail network, and, at the same time, we are also delivering, in control period 6, maintenance and enhancements worth £48 billion across our classic rail network. So we are doing both, not one or the other.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Will my hon. Friend tell us what progress is being made on replacing the Pacer trains, which the previous Government continually failed to do? When will that train be off the tracks and replaced by new rolling stock?
Andrew Jones: My right hon. Friend has a very distinguished record in bringing new rolling stock forward into our rail network. The Pacers will be gone by the end of this year; they are being replaced by a new fleet of 281 air-conditioned carriages, which is more than double the minimum tender required by the Government. The first of those new trains are already in the UK and going through testing. The remainder of the Northern fleet are being refurbished to as good as new, and the first of them are already in service. That is a very positive piece of news, and I can confirm that the unpopular Pacers will be gone by the end of the year.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): New rolling stock will of course be welcome, but is the Minister aware that there will be no stock rolling at all north of Preston over the busy Easter weekend because Network Rail is closing the line for maintenance? Does he not know that the Lake district is Britain’s biggest visitor destination outside London and that Easter weekend is our busiest time of year? Will he tell Network Rail to change its plans?

Andrew Jones: I am of course aware of the importance of the Lake district to our national tourist economy, and of tourism to the Lake district’s economy. It is not possible to upgrade the lines without closing them on occasions, and the work clearly has to be done to minimise disruption for the travelling public. I will pass the hon. Gentleman’s point through to Network Rail, but these things take a considerable amount of time and it is probably not possible to make changes at the very last minute.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I hope that the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) enjoyed either his breakfast or the rare benefit of a lie-in—I know not which. No doubt we will hear from him in due course.

A35 at Redbridge

2. Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What plans has he to repair the A35 at Redbridge.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): As my right hon. Friend will know, the A35 is a local road. As such, it falls to Hampshire County Council as the local highway authority.

Sir Desmond Swayne: It is a strategic route and, at £25 million, this is too much to expect of a county council, isn’t it?

Jesse Norman: I can only admire my right hon. Friend for the extreme brevity of his question. Hampshire County Council did receive an entirely unexpected £11.9 million as a result of the budget settlement of £420 million for local roads, but I take his point. The incident in his constituency was indeed a tragic one. We look closely at the issue and will discuss the issue?

Mr Cunningham: Yesterday, I had the privilege to support my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) in his application to bring in a Bill to limit working hours for bus drivers, in response to the tragic bus crash in my constituency in October 2015. Will the Minister commit to backing that Bill and allocating proper parliamentary time for us to discuss the issue?

Jesse Norman: I absolutely recognise the hon. Gentleman’s point. The incident in his constituency was indeed a tragic one. We look closely at the issue and will continue to do so.

20. [909235] Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): The A30, which runs down to Penzance, is a main route in and out of Cornwall. It is not a safe stretch of road, as countless accidents and incidents have been happening along it for some time. Will the Minister commit to improving this road and dualling it, as local people want?

Jesse Norman: As my hon. Friend will know, the Government are already transforming connectivity through the south-west by creating a continuous dual carriageway along the A30, from the M5 through to Camborne. In due course, we aim to extend this to Penzance. My hon. Friend has been a strong campaigner on this issue and I recognise his concerns, particularly for his constituents in Crowlas.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): My constituent Frances Molloy lost her 19-year-old son Michael in a coach crash caused by a 20-year-old tyre bursting on the coach that he was travelling on. Two other people lost their lives and others suffered life-changing injuries. Will the Minister now commit to allowing my Bill—the Tyres (Buses and Coaches) Bill—to pass through this House, instead of getting his Whip to shout “Object” at every opportunity?

Jesse Norman: I am very glad that the hon. Lady has raised this question because if she has paid close attention, she will know that we issued a written statement last June that reported very good progress on the actions from the road safety statement. Those actions included £100 million for our safer roads fund to improve 50 of the most dangerous stretches of A roads in England, a refreshed road safety statement and a two-year action plan to address priority groups including young people, rural road users, cyclists and older vulnerable users.

Road Safety

3. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What recent steps his Department has taken to improve road safety.

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hon. Lady. There really can be no question but that we have to make policy based on evidence; when that evidence is in, we will make the policy.

**Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con):** In the area I represent, Dover, Deal and east Kent, illegal lorry parking is a major road safety problem—[Interruption]—unsurprisingly. Does the Minister agree that councils should have more powers to tackle illegal lorry parking so that the police are more able to go and fight serious crime such as county lines drugs gangs?

**Jesse Norman:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question on an issue that we have met on and discussed on many occasions. He will know that the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency already has powers in Kent, on a trial basis, to take action on this. Those are proving effective, and we continue to look at whether such powers can or should be extended to local authorities.

**Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab):** In the last debate on road safety, I raised with the Minister the concerns of many horse riders across my constituency, including the very large number of riders who are killed on the roads because of drivers’ poor awareness of how to deal with horse riders. Will he set out what steps he has taken since that debate, perhaps saying that all the changes that I, and many other Members, asked for will be added to the highway code to protect horse riders and horses?

**Jesse Norman:** As the hon. Gentleman will know, the highway code already mentions horse riders in several of its provisions. At the end of last year, as he will recall, we published a safety review aimed at all vulnerable road users, including horse riders. It included, specifically, work on close passing, on which, as he will be aware, West Midlands police have taken a lead. That review contained 50 actions to be undertaken over a two-year period, and we are still in the middle of that, but I absolutely recognise the concern that he has.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** Far too many road traffic collisions are caused by uninsured drivers, and there are far too many uninsured drivers on our roads. What is the Minister doing to tackle this issue?

**Jesse Norman:** Of course, that is a serious question. As my hon. Friend will be aware, we have very vigorous enforcement action being undertaken not only by the police but by the DVSA and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency to try to crack down on this problem.

**Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op):** Is the Minister aware that only seven people were killed in the St Valentine’s Day massacre? Yet in this country, we will shrug our shoulders when 1,700 people die on our roads this year, as they do most years. When is he going to do something about investigating every death on the roads thoroughly, with a good centrally directed and well-funded unit, and when is he going to do something about the 1.4 million people a year who are being killed on the roads worldwide?

**Jesse Norman:** The hon. Gentleman regularly raises this issue, but I have rarely had a Valentine’s Day present as generous as that one. As he will know, contrary to his imputation, we take every road death and injury with great seriousness. As he also knows, since he will have done his homework, this country has the second-best record in the EU for road fatalities, and we stand by that record.

**Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab):** In his statement last week, the Minister again delayed taking effective action on dangerous old tyres on public service vehicles. I pay tribute to Frances Molloy and Tyred, who have campaigned vigorously on this very important issue. The Government’s record on road safety, I am afraid to say, has been disappointing. So will the Minister now do the right thing and support the private Member’s Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), which is due back here on 15 March and which would rid our roads of dangerous tyres on buses?

**Jesse Norman:** I am afraid that my answer to the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) still stands. The fact remains that we will take action, and vigorous action, when we have evidence on this. Actions we have already taken have reduced rates of infraction to very, very low levels, although we take seriously everything that has happened. The hon. Gentleman does not seem to realise that action taken—[Interruption.] This may be a signal of the behaviour of a future Labour Government, or the previous one, but we act on the basis of evidence—and, if we did not, we would be subject to legal challenge from those who were adversely affected.

**Karl Turner:** Rubbish.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I must say to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) that only last week I informed an audience, prospectively, of 30 million American radio listeners of his penchant for shouting noisily from a sedentary position most days of the week, so he may have a new fan base in the United States.

**Repair of Local Roads**

4. **James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con):** What funds he has made available for the repair of local roads.  [909218]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman):** My hon. Friend is a great campaigner on this issue. He will be aware that the Department is spending more than £6.6 billion to improve local roads through local highway authority work, including £420 million most recently, much of which is available to be spent in his constituency.

**James Cleverly:** I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. He knows, because I have lobbied him relentlessly, that we are bidding for funding from the second road investment strategy for the A120 in my constituency, but there are other roads in my constituency, including the A131 and a number of local roads. I welcome the announcement of the money. What advice can he give me on how to ensure that I grab some of it for my lovely constituency?
Jesse Norman: I am not sure that “relentless” begins to describe the energy and vigour with which my hon. Friend pursues his campaign. As he recognises, we have already provided £4 million to Essex County Council for the A120. I understand that the council is currently undertaking a series of phased improvements to both the A131 and the A130, to enhance network capacity, but we remain interested in whatever it does on those roads in future.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I am sure the Minister is aware that, because of other pressures, councils are increasingly unable to address priorities that they would have addressed many years ago. The National Audit Office has shown that spending on road safety and traffic management across the country has fallen by 60% since 2010. Will the Minister accept that one of the most important things he can do is argue for increased funding from the Treasury for local authorities in the next spending round?

Jesse Norman: I certainly accept that one of the most valuable things we can do is argue for increased funding for local roads in the next settlement, and as the hon. Gentleman will know, we plan to do so.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): If HS2 is built, the inevitable heavy traffic will add to the damage to our roads in Buckinghamshire, many of which are already congested and suffer from pollution, including popular routes such as the A413. What additional funds will the Minister make available to Buckinghamshire County Council to repair the inevitable extra damage to our rural roads, so that the cost does not fall disproportionately on Buckinghamshire taxpayers?

Jesse Norman: I am not sure I recognise that problem, but my right hon. Friend is welcome to write to me. There is every reason to think that HS2 might in fact relieve some of the traffic, because people will be making journeys that are not merely local.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I welcome the Minister’s comments. Is he basically saying that North Lincolnshire Council has no excuse for the potholes in the pavements and roads around our area?

Jesse Norman: It is hard for me to comment on whether the council has any excuse, since I do not know the circumstances it is under. All I can say is that it has a share in £420 million more than was expected at the end of last year.

Leaving the EU: Travel Disruption

5. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What steps is he taking to reduce potential disruption to travel in the event of the UK leaving the EU without a deal.

6. **Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): What steps he is taking to reduce potential disruption to travel in the event of the UK leaving the EU without a deal.

18. **John McNally** (Falkirk) (SNP): What steps he is taking to reduce potential disruption to travel in the event of the UK leaving the EU without a deal.

19. **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What steps he is taking to reduce potential disruption to travel in the event of the UK leaving the EU without a deal.

21. **Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): What steps he is taking to reduce potential disruption to travel in the event of the UK leaving the EU without a deal.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): My Department is undertaking a comprehensive and wide-ranging programme of work to ensure that we are prepared for a scenario in which the UK leaves without a deal. We continue to work to ensure that the UK does not leave without a deal.

Gavin Newlands: I am grateful for that answer, which I am not sure even those on the Government Benches will buy. The Secretary of State told the House on Monday that Arklow had confirmed its backing for Seaborne Freight “from the outset”. Yesterday the permanent secretary to the DFT told the Public Accounts Committee that the DFT had awarded Seaborne Freight the contract before Arklow confirmed its backing. Those two statements are entirely contradictory, so who is telling the truth—his permanent secretary or him?

Chris Grayling: It is very simple: the contract was conditional on Seaborne Freight producing a reference from Arklow, which it did.

Angela Crawley: The director general for the Department for Transport said yesterday that it was no longer possible to complete procurement and operation for any large amount of further capacity across the channel by either sea or rail before the end of March. The Secretary of State’s handling of this issue means that there are now no plans in place for an alternative and a 10% shortfall in capacity. How does he plan to resolve this latest disaster?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Lady clearly was not listening on Monday, when I indicated that we had options in contracts to provide additional capacity on longer sea routes to replace any that we might have had on the short sea routes.

John McNally: I can assure the Secretary of State that I was absolutely listening intently on Monday. From that position over there, the Secretary of State said on Monday, in relation to Seaborne Freight, that “we have not spent any money on this contract.”—[Official Report, 11 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 619.]

We now know that that is not the case and that his Department spent approximately £800,000 on external consultants for Seaborne. Will he now take the opportunity to set the record straight and apologise to taxpayers for what has amounted to a monumental waste of taxpayers’ money?

Chris Grayling: I am afraid that, once again, SNP Members have their facts completely wrong. Interestingly, we have heard complaints from the other side that we did not do enough due diligence. Actually, as with all
major Government contracts—Mr Speaker, you will recall that £90 million of contracts are going to Brittany Ferries and DFDS—we contract professional support when we let contracts of that size.

Marion Fellows: The Secretary of State may wish to argue that he got his £800,000-worth since the consultancy did come back with concrete findings, including that Seaborne presented “significant execution risks” and that a “basic blush test” was the most that could be carried out on the company’s financials. Which of those two findings did the Secretary of State find most reassuring when deciding to proceed with the Seaborne ferry contract?

Chris Grayling: The bit I found reassuring is that we let a contract where there was absolutely no upfront commitment from the taxpayer at all, and we paid nothing until the service was delivered.

Carol Monaghan: The Secretary of State said on Monday, “I believe in competition”, so why, after realising back in September that a no-deal Brexit would require increased freight capacity, did he embark on what has been called a “secretive and flawed procurement process”, tipping off some companies in private while leaving established companies, such as Eurotunnel, out of the loop altogether?

Chris Grayling: We carried out a proper procurement process in discussion with all the leading ferry operators.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): A major contributor to travel disruption over many years has of course been Govia Thameslink Railway. Its incompetence was recently underlined when a disgruntled constituent wrote to GTR, asking whom he should complain to and whether he should write to Chris Grayling. He received the reply from GTR:

“Chris Grayling no longer works for the company”.

Can the Secretary of State tell us whether a no-deal Brexit will make it easier to withdraw the franchise from GTR at long last and end this nightmare?

Chris Grayling: Happily, I have never worked for GTR. I would say to my hon. Friend that, if there are specific concerns he wants to raise about the franchise, he is very welcome to write to me. However, I am sure he is pleased that, over the last few months, the performance on that network has become significantly better.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure the Secretary of State, like me, will reflect that it is always interesting to hear those who complain about the potential impact of a no deal then complaining about efforts to mitigate it. Will he confirm that he believes, the same as me, that the biggest potential for disruption to travel would be to put an international border across the east and west coast main lines, as the separatists opposite want to do?

Chris Grayling: Absolutely. Of course SNP Members fail to understand that their policies, if you follow European Union laws to the letter, require a hard border between Scotland and England. I have to say that I personally value the Union of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I value our friends in Scotland, of whom we have many on the Government Benches, and I think SNP policies would be deeply damaging to Scotland.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): No matter what the outcome in terms of the delivery of the democratic decision of the British people, will my right hon. Friend confirm that the electrification project between Preston and Manchester, going through the heart of my constituency, will continue to deliver more electric coaches for my constituents?

Chris Grayling: I was very pleased to learn this week that the electric trains have now started running between Blackpool and Manchester through my hon. Friend’s constituency. Of course, it is worth remembering that that single electrification project represents a level of electrification many times greater than the Labour party managed across the entire country in its years in office—13 years: 10 miles, which is fewer, by far, than that single electrification project alone.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): If I understand this right, the Secretary of State is claiming a triumph for having signed a contract with a company that had no ferries to provide no ferries and, because it cost the taxpayer no money whatsoever, that is okay. Is that where the Secretary of State is? We are still facing the south-east of England being turned into a huge car park if we were to leave with no deal, and what has he done about it? Absolutely nothing.

Chris Grayling: As I set out, we have substantial contracts with two major operators to provide additional capacity, and we have put in place contingency measures in Kent, in case they are needed because of delays caused not in this country but on the French side. When I see what is happening in Calais and the preparations being made, I am increasingly confident that the flow of traffic through the channel ports will continue pretty normally. It is in everybody’s interest on both sides of the channel for that to happen, and it will certainly happen if we leave the European Union with a deal. It is disappointing, however, that the Labour party seems to want to stymie us leaving the EU with a deal.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Secretary of State’s handling of Seaborne Freight, and the way he is answering questions, proves that he lives in a parallel universe. The reality is that, with Eurotunnel taking the Government to court, his actions will cost the taxpayer at least £1.8 million and the costs are rising. Will he confirm how many representations have been made by other providers and whether there are likely to be further court challenges? Will he do the right thing and at least publish the legal evidence that the Government had, so that they can perhaps save some money in the long run?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman is trying hard, but the simple reality is that we approached the market and the market brought forward proposals. We have two substantial contracts to provide additional capacity. We took on a third smaller contract, where there was no upfront exposure to the taxpayer at all. Unfortunately
that was not delivered because even though the company had ships lined up and agreements lined up, its principal backer decided not to continue with the contract.

Alan Brown: The Secretary of State did not approach the market—it was all done in secret; that is not approaching the market. He is baffled by the criticism of his handling of this, which is incredible. Let us look at his handling of the mock exercise for lorries in a no-deal scenario, with 89 lorries mimicking 10,000. Under his watch, we have had the east coast main line bail-out, the Northern rail fiasco, the Thameslink fiasco, delays to High Speed 2, issues with drone legislation and contracts awarded to Carillion when it was obviously going bust. What does it take for him to do the right thing and go?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman continues to produce in the House statements that I am afraid are simply inaccurate. The trial in Kent, managed by Kent County Council, worked very smoothly to illustrate the nature of movements in and out of the port of Manston. He keeps talking about Carillion. Carillion had no contracts with HS2. It was part of a consortium that was jointly and severally liable and that work has continued.

Leaving the EU: Ports

7. Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with port operators on preparations for the UK leaving the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Good morning, Mr Speaker. It is my pleasure to share the day of love with my colleagues under your watchful gaze this morning.

I have met port operators and their representatives on a number of occasions to discuss matters of current concern, including preparations for the UK leaving the EU.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Jessica Morden: Welsh ports, including Newport, have experienced strong growth and investment in recent years, contributing £1.4 billion to the UK economy. In a week in which we have witnessed Government mishandling and the Seaborne Freight fiasco, and just weeks away from the Brexit date, what confidence can we have that transport Ministers are taking serious steps to avoid jeopardising our Welsh ports?

Ms Ghani: We are in constant communication with port operators, including Associated British Ports, which I believe has invested heavily in the port to prepare for Brexit and all the extra opportunities that will arise. We must not forget that our ports and maritime sector was great before we joined the EU and it will continue to be great after Brexit. Most of our ports are well used to dealing with traffic from both inside and outside the European Union and we will do everything we can to ensure that that continues.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The port of Immingham is open for business and looking to increase that business as a result of Brexit. Can the Minister confirm that she has had discussions with ABP about the further use of Immingham?

Ms Ghani: I can. My hon. Friend is a great champion of the port of Immingham and I know I have an open invitation from him to visit it. I have indeed discussed that port with ABP and it has confirmed that ports across the country are looking forward to the extra business and trade that will come their way post Brexit.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): On 8 January, the Secretary of State told the House that no public money was used in the Seaborne Freight contract, yet the National Audit Office says that £800,000 of taxpayers’ money was spent on consultants. The Prime Minister says that things are hunky-dory, but it has been revealed that the Department bypassed its own procurement rules to award a high-risk contract to Seaborne. Will the Minister acknowledge that the Secretary of State has, however inadvertently, misled the House and has not followed his Department’s procurement processes?

Ms Ghani: That is such a ridiculous statement to make. It is just inaccurate. There are complaints when due diligence is not done and complaints when due diligence is done. When funding is allocated and spent within the Department, due diligence is carried out for a variety of reasons. What is interesting is that the Labour party is against business, against us helping our port sector and against Brexit. It would be interesting to know what it actually stands for.

Andy McDonald: Poor, very poor. The Secretary of State is, presumably, simply never wrong, but what about the timetabling mess on the trains, the east coast bail out, multiple transport and justice contracts to Carillion, the book ban on prisoners, court fees that push the innocent to plead guilty, and the catastrophic privatisation of probation and prisons? His ongoing presence in the Government makes an international laughing stock of us all. Quite simply, the country cannot afford him. So I ask in all sincerity: will he please step down before he does any further damage?

Ms Ghani: I am not quite sure what show we are on, but this is Transport questions and the hon. Gentleman attacking an individual because he has nothing left to say is absolutely embarrassing. We have record investment in our infrastructure. I believe that under the Labour Government infrastructure investment in our country dropped from seventh to 33rd. Labour is not a party for our country. May I just reflect on ports? Our ports are doing a fantastic job trading, they do the majority of trade outside the EU and they will continue to do really good trade post Brexit.

West Anglia Main Line

8. Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): What progress has been made on four-tracking of the West Anglia main line.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): Work is nearing completion on the delivery of a third track on the West Anglia main line between Tottenham Hale and a new station at Meridian Water, enabling two additional trains per hour. Additional tracking is also being considered as part of proposals for Crossrail 2. I understand that the Greater London Authority has submitted a bid to the housing infrastructure fund for a fourth track from Tottenham Hale to Meridian Water.
Joan Ryan: On Saturday last, some 90 constituents turned up at my community meeting to complain, most loudly, about the cancellations, delays and poor service on the line. Frankly, they deserve better and have done for a very long time. Early delivery of four-tracking by 2026, in advance of Crossrail 2, would provide additional stopping services, up to 3,800 extra seats between Cambridge and Liverpool Street in the morning, faster journeys, improved reliability, accelerated delivery of up to 25,000 homes and 10,000 new job starts along the corridor. Why are the Secretary of State and the Government not getting on board with this proposal more quickly? I urge the Government to support it and to do so now.

Andrew Jones: To suggest that the Government are not investing in our rail network is clearly ridiculous. The Government are investing more than any other Government in British history. On the specifics of the scheme, on the West Anglia main line the right hon. Lady can look forward to seeing new trains and all the benefits that will flow from them. The investment work that has taken place, which I outlined in my earlier answer, is already starting to see benefits for the constituents she serves.

Rural Roads: HGV Traffic

9. Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce HGV traffic on rural roads.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): I thank my hon. Friend for raising the very important issue of HGV traffic on rural roads, which has all kinds of negative effects, including congestion, air quality and noise. She will be aware that local authorities are best placed to address the issue. They have powers under the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 to make traffic regulation orders that prohibit the use of HGVs on any given local road.

Maria Caulfield: I thank the Minister for that answer, but will he look at introducing mandatory commercial sat-navs to all HGVs, so they avoid using rural roads and stick to the A roads they should be on? That would also help with the enforcement of existing restrictions in villages such as Ditchling in my constituency.

Jesse Norman: I understand the problem. Some existing sat-navs are configured specifically for HGVs. Mandating them would be a major step that would undoubtedly have negative as well as positive consequences. This is primarily and mainly a market function, but protections are in place for local authorities to enforce against abuse of roads by HGVs.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): HGV traffic can be dangerous, and the road safety charity Brake says that school crossing patrols are vital, so does the Minister have an estimate of the number of lollipop women and men who have been cut and whether or not that has led to an increase in accidents for children walking to school?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Gentleman is of course absolutely right about the concerns of children walking to school, which was a major theme in our recent work on cycling and walking safety. Part of the work that we are doing over the next two years precisely addresses areas around schools.

Nick Smith: And the numbers?

Jesse Norman: I do not have the numbers to hand, but the hon. Gentleman is welcome to write to me if he has them and we can discuss them.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): There is an important industrial estate in my constituency called the Leyland, which is served from urban Wellingborough. Unfortunately, the road bridge has been demolished and HGVs are now having to travel on rural roads. I understand that instead of the bridge being replaced, it is going to be left down, and that is causing a great deal of concern. Will the Minister be able to look into the matter and perhaps meet me to discuss it?

Jesse Norman: I am very happy to look into the matter and also for my hon. Friend to write to me. If he does that, we can consider whether to meet.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): The A637 runs through the lovely village of Flockton in my constituency. It is a narrow road and is increasingly used by rat runners and HGVs, despite a prohibition order. There have been many instances of reckless driving and some near misses. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can make life safer for the people who live in Flockton?

Jesse Norman: If it is a purely local road, I am of course happy to look into the matter but it really falls to the local authority. If there is scope for the road to be part of the major roads network, which, as the hon. Lady will know, is precisely designed to relieve some of the pressures on local communities and the strategic road network, we can have that conversation as well.

Leaving the EU: Haulage Sector

10. Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect on the haulage sector of the UK leaving the EU.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): The Government continue to work towards a deal and we are confident of securing a relationship with the EU that maintains the current liberalised access we enjoy. Of all goods moved by UK-registered heavy goods vehicles in 2017, 1% were moved internationally. We do not expect that there will be significant impacts on international trade movements, or on the haulage sector overall. If we leave without a deal, there might be some short-term disruption, and we have undertaken extensive contingency plans to mitigate this.

Alex Cunningham: Short-term disruption— that’s a good one.

Haulage companies such as Scott Bros. and Devereux in my Stockton North constituency are extremely anxious about their future when we leave the EU. They are not helped much by the road haulage permits legislation, which in effect highlights the potential damage that Brexit will do to the industry, and certainly does not show a Government standing up for the industry. What is the Secretary of State going to do about it?
Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman and, indeed, his constituents will welcome the fact that the European Union has been clear that the current arrangements will continue after April and is moving forward with plans to do that. In addition, we have bilateral agreements with other countries that will ensure that international trade continues to flow, and we are of course also continuing members of the common transit convention.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Seafood processing businesses in Banff and Buchan have expressed concerns to me about the possible requirement for European Conference of Ministers of Transport permits in the event that we leave the EU without a deal. Will my right hon. Friend meet me and representatives of the sector to discuss their concerns?

Chris Grayling: I am always happy to meet my hon. Friend, and I meet people from the sector quite regularly. His constituents will be assured—indeed, we have written to all applicants for the permits to indicate this to them—that the European Union’s position is that it intends to continue with the current arrangements. We put through measures to make sure that we had a contingency plan, which was supported across the House, but I do not expect it to be needed because, according to the EU itself, we will carry on with the current arrangements.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): We know that the contract with Seaborne was, in the words of the Secretary of State’s own permanent secretary, a “novel and exceptional” proposition, but she revealed yesterday to the Public Accounts Committee that the only confirmation that the Department had about the arrangements with Arklow were from Seaborne itself. There was no paper document and no contract was signed. The Secretary of State talks about due diligence, but we know it failed on due diligence, and we now know that there was no comfort document for the Department about the contract with Arklow, so will he tell us what due diligence he thinks did take place, because what we have seen shows that it did not?

Chris Grayling: At Christmastime, Arklow confirmed in writing, and we have copies of that—[HON. MEMBERS: “In January.”] At Christmastime, Arklow confirmed in writing that it was backing the proposition. [INTERUPTION] At Christmastime, Mr Speaker. I hear the sedentary comments but I am absolutely clear: at Christmastime.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady does not look satisfied, but I hope that she is nevertheless enjoying her birthday, upon which I congratulate her.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Despite Labour’s warnings throughout the passage of the Haulage Permits and Trailer Registration Bill, just 984 licences have been made available following 11,392 applications. Despite the short-term agreement with the EU, if companies cannot move their goods, they will have no choice but to move their businesses, so why is the Secretary of State running down British jobs and British business?

Chris Grayling: What a load of absolute hokum! We are working very carefully, on a bilateral basis, to make sure that there are contingency plans in place, but the European Union—we have to bear in mind that 80% of the trucks that come through our ports delivering goods to the United Kingdom are run by continental hauliers—is being very clear that it wants that to continue, and it will.

Rachael Maskell: It gets worse: crashing out of the EU in just 43 days’ time will mean that we are a third country, like the Ukraine or China—as indeed, would Irish companies who use the UK as a bridge to the continent. Haulage firms would have to fill out a 38-point document for every single consignment—that is not for each lorry, but for each consignment on each lorry—just hours before each transit, causing catastrophic delays. So who now is the enemy of business? It is this Government, who are running down the clock to create real chaos at our borders. It is surely not this Opposition, who are insistent on a permanent customs union.

Chris Grayling: Of course, what the hon. Lady does not understand is that she talks about a permanent customs union, but a permanent customs union requires border checks. The Labour party simply does not understand the arguments that it is making. It is trying to disrupt Brexit. It is trying to put forward policy ideas that do not work. We are working to secure a deal that will work, and we will carry on doing it.

Horse Riders: Public Highways

11. Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): What assessment has he made of the safety needs of horse riders on the public highway.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the question of the safety needs of horse riders. They were an important part, alongside other vulnerable road users, of the cycling and walking safety review. We are reviewing the highway code, and our work on that will be done in connection with a whole range of interested stakeholders, including the British Horse Society.

Simon Hoare: The rise of electric vehicles is, of course, environmentally welcome. However, their silence often presents a huge problem for riders, horses and, indeed, other road users as a result of the nervousness that is often caused in horses by these silent vehicles either going past or accelerating from a stop. Will my hon. Friend take this issue up with the car manufacturers to see what can be done to ensure that there is safety and environmentalism on our rural roads?

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend will recall that I have already discussed the recognition of horse riders within the highway code and the importance that we place on the avoidance of close passing. He will also be aware that electric cars make a noise above a certain speed because of vehicle tyre slap. At low speeds, vehicle type approval regulations will mandate sound generators on new electric and hybrid electric vehicles from July this year.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answer. Horses and HGV lorries do not mix, so what consideration has been given to enhanced regulations with reference to horse safety, particularly to providing adequate guidance and protection for horse riders?
Chris Grayling: I regard Southern rail access as extremely important. We are now looking in detail at what we believe the specification of the scheme should be. It will clearly require some degree of public support, and that is the next stage, which I expect to pursue in the coming months, albeit relatively soon.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his support for the new Heathrow connection to Cornwall Airport Newquay, which is due to come into place on 1 April. However, with the proposed acquisition of Flybe by Virgin Atlantic, can he reassure the House that Government support for the new route will continue even if the operator changes?

Chris Grayling: Absolutely. My hon. Friend knows my commitment to making sure that we continue those links to Newquay. They are an extremely important part of Cornwall’s economy, and I will be working to ensure that nothing happens to interrupt those services.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: We are running late, but we have got to hear the sound of Shipley.

Shipley Eastern Bypass

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): What recent discussions has he had with Bradford Council on a Shipley eastern bypass.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): Art Garfunkel himself could not have asked for anything better, Mr Speaker. I can only thank my hon. Friend. He will know that we have contributed several hundred thousand pounds to the scheme, and discussions are continuing. Indeed, both sides will be meeting later this month.

Philip Davies: I am extremely grateful to the Government and in particular the Secretary of State for their commitment to the Shipley eastern bypass, which is much needed in my constituency. Can the Minister tell me when the feasibility study, which the Government have kindly paid for, will be finalised and therefore when the next step forward for this project can be taken?

Jesse Norman: I can only congratulate my hon. Friend on his astonishing timing, because the Department will be discussing this matter—both the timetable and the scope of the study—with council officials on 21 February.

Bus Journeys

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the number of journeys taken by bus in England.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Buses remain the most commonly used mode of public transport, with local bus travel accounting for around 59% of all public transport journeys. The number of local bus passenger journeys has been falling since the 1950s. By contrast, the number of people owning their own cars has obviously been increasing.

Helen Goodman: It is now cheaper to fly to Alicante than to take a bus from Barnard Castle to Spennymoor in my constituency. Many of my constituents say that the buses are just far too expensive. Does the Minister not understand that her cuts to the bus grant are the problem?

Ms Ghani: I would not want anybody not to be flying to Alicante, but it is important to note that, when Labour was in control, bus fares went up three times as fast every year than under the Conservative Government. Anybody who wants to be out of pocket should vote in a Labour Government, because they will put up bus fares three times as fast.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is clear that buses are a lifeline for many elderly people, particularly those living in rural areas, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) has hinted at. They are also the main means of travel for commuters, yet as we have heard, this vital public service is in crisis. I should correct the Minister: bus passenger numbers have been falling every year since 2014, under her watch. The cross-party Local Government Association now says that half of all bus routes are in danger of closing due to a lack of Government funding. Surely it is now time for the Government to admit that they have made a serious mistake and for them finally to agree to properly fund our bus services.

Ms Ghani: Buses are indeed incredibly important. Not only do they help people to get to work, but they tackle wider issues such as loneliness. The Government provide more than £1 billion for concessionary fares, and a substantial amount of that—including the bus service operating grant—goes directly to local authorities to fund bus journeys.

It concerns me that Labour Members are desperately trying to turn buses into a political football. It is important to note that Wales, where Labour is in charge, has seen a bigger drop in bus miles than anywhere else in the United Kingdom.

Topical Questions

Mr Speaker: I remind colleagues that questions should be short and should preferably consist of a single sentence.

T1. Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): A moment ago, I talked about the importance of the Union—the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—and we also talked about regional air links. I am pleased to announce that I have agreed to extend the current public service obligation on flights from Londonderry to Stansted for a further two years from May. I believe that that will provide a boost for business in Northern Ireland and, rather importantly, allow spectators to attend the 148th open championship at Royal Portrush this summer.

Andrea Jenkyns: The fantastic pupils at Outwood Primary Academy Ledger Lane in my constituency have organised a petition calling for Wakefield Metropolitan District Council to improve road safety and have persuaded 430 parents and teachers to sign it. The signatories want to see a speed indication device, or other speed restrictions, outside the school. What is the Secretary of State doing to improve road safety outside schools?

Chris Grayling: The Government are combining a range of measures including our cycling and walking safety two-year action plan, which addresses that issue specifically. However, I hope that Wakefield Council, which holds the power to install speed indication devices, will look carefully at the petition, and will respond positively to my hon. Friend’s young constituents.

T2. Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Scotland’s premier food and drink exports could deteriorate while stuck in traffic jams in the south-east of England. If the Secretary of State is so keen on new routes to Europe, would it not make sense for him to support ferry links in areas much farther north, such as Rosyth?

Chris Grayling: We have, of course, supported ferry links farther north, but I think that the additional capacity from east coast ports may, in many circumstances, provide a realistic alternative—indeed, a real alternative—for manufacturers and producers in Scotland.

T3. Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Cornwall Council has made the Camelford bypass its No. 1 priority in the context of the major road network. Will the Minister update us on the progress of the network?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): I can confirm that the A39 meets the necessary criteria for the scheme. As far as I am aware, it has not yet been approved and prioritised by the sub-national transport body, but we expect that to happen by the middle of the year, and once it has happened, we will be happy to look at it.

T4. Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): May I invite the Secretary of State to visit Croydon? More trains pass through Croydon than pass through King’s Cross, Euston and Paddington combined. The Secretary of State is aware that just outside east Croydon there is a bottleneck that threatens to bring the whole thing to a grinding halt as passenger numbers increase. I wonder whether he would like to come and have a look.

Chris Grayling: I do not need to come and have a look, because I travel through Croydon via the west Croydon route, quite regularly. I know that there is a need for significant improvement in the area of the Windmill Bridge junction. My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) has been vociferous in
telling me that that needs to happen, and the Department and Network Rail have already started work on what we believe will be an important project for the future.

T6. [909244] Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): The expansion of the Metrolink network is a key part of Greater Manchester’s transport strategy. In the light of proposals to increase the amount of housing stock in Gatley, Cheadle Hulme and Heald Green as part of the Greater Manchester spatial framework, improvements in our local transport capacity are a priority for my constituents. What steps has the Department taken to support tram-train technology, with a view to expanding the tram-train Metrolink to my constituency?

Chris Grayling: As my hon. Friend will know, the Mayor of Manchester and I recently agreed to work together on the potential expansion of the Metrolink network with the use of tram-train technology. The Government have already funded a tram-train system in Sheffield, which is making a difference there, and I am keen to see how we can extend that to Greater Manchester.

T5. [909243] Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the Minister agree that one of the best ways to improve air quality in urban areas is through the use of tram schemes? May I commend to him the Sutton tram scheme and encourage him to work closely with the Mayor of London to try to ensure that such schemes are viable and are rolled out?

Jesse Norman: Not only do I agree with the right hon. Gentleman, but we published a light rail call for evidence only last week, specifically highlighting all the concerns he mentions of air quality, congestion relief and so on.

T7. [909245] Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Motorists in Harlow driving down Edinburgh Way have faced shocking congestion since 2017, because of delays from the utility companies, costing Essex County Council about £2 million. Will my hon. Friend urge these utility companies to get their acts together and free traffic in Harlow for motorists?

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising the issue. He will be aware that the local authority has the capacity to charge up to £10,000 a day for works overruns. We are working on a new programme called Street Manager to enable local authorities to track these works more effectively.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): Leigh has recently been ranked one of the worst constituencies for social mobility. We are also the fifth largest town in the country without a rail station. Connectivity matters: to connect constituencies and constituents with more opportunities to succeed, will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can help to bring rail connectivity back to the people of Leigh?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The hon. Lady raises the important point that transport is not just about a single journey but is also about social mobility. I am proud that this Department supports our economy and communities and society in a way that enhances mobility. We have invested over £61 billion in transport infrastructure in the five years to 2020-21, and I am more than happy to meet the hon. Lady.

T8. [909246] Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): When will we see the end of short formation trains on the Southern rail network? On the Lewes to Eastbourne stretch, we are on four-carriage trains every day. When will this misery end?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): Officials in my Department monitor the number of short formations on Govia Thameslink Railway services as one of its performance benchmarks. There are a number of actions we can take when performance falls below agreed levels, and I am pleased that we are now seeing the lowest number of short formations on GTR since the start of the franchise. I hope that this positive trajectory continues, and I will continue to monitor it.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): People in Stockton cannot get a bus back home after an afternoon doctor appointment, while the Tees Valley Mayor has spent £15,000 on Facebook advertising after almost two years but still has not come up with a plan to improve buses. When will my constituents get better bus services?

Ms Ghani: Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council receives almost £89,000 of bus service operators grant to support local bus services, and £75.5 million from the Government’s transforming cities fund has also been secured to improve local connectivity to Tees valley. We have not heard from Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council or the Tees Valley Combined Authority about using the extra powers available to them under the Bus Services Act 2017 to improve services and work more closely with local bus companies. If they were to get in touch, we could also let them know about the world of improvements they could deliver for the hon. Gentleman’s constituents.

T9. [909247] Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Who is controlling the money in the Department for Transport? In a written answer this week, the Minister tells me that in the last six months of 2018, HS2 spent £5,663,422 on 89 agency staff per month. That equates to just in excess of £120,000 in an annual salary. What on earth is going on in HS2? Who is making the taxpayer pay these amazingly overpaid prices for personnel on HS2? It is a waste of money; cancel it.

Ms Ghani: I am well aware that my right hon. Friend has been a doyenne and particularly inquisitive Member of Parliament on behalf of her constituents on HS2. She knows that there is a set budget to deliver HS2, and we must not forget the benefits it will bring across our country, demolishing the north-south divide and building a fairer country. This is more than a transport project; it is a transformative project linking eight of our 10 cities and investing in the midlands and the north of our country.

Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab): Does the Minister recognise that while all that she has just said gives some reassurance, these continued rumours about HS2 raise concerns for companies like Bombardier in
my constituency, which has a joint bid with Hitachi for the rolling stock? Can she say anything further to reassure such companies?

Ms Ghani: The right hon. Lady makes a valid point. So often, we lament that parliamentarians do not deliver long-term projects and that we do not invest in our country or our skills base, but that is what HS2 is doing. I ask Members to desist from undermining one of the largest European infrastructure projects, which will transform our country, and to think about the extra benefits this will bring to the midlands and the north. We are continuing to work with the HS2 programme. That was in our manifesto and that of the Labour party, and it is important to note that every time the Bill has come to the Floor of the House it has gone through.

T10. [909248] Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Minister of State for our meeting this week allowing me to reiterate the case for much-needed improvements to the A5 in my constituency that would significantly improve the commute for thousands of my constituents every day. Does he agree that effective partnerships between stakeholders such as Highways England, local authorities and the Government are key to delivering these transformative projects?

Jesse Norman: Yes.

Mr Speaker: Splendid.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): At the last Transport questions, I asked the Minister for help in persuading First Group to lend Hull Trains a new train six months early. Does he agree that the fact that I have not had a direct response is disrespectful and indicates First Group’s dismissive attitude to Hull? Instead, I had to read the response in the Hull Daily Mail. Will he press on First Group the need to meet urgently to secure the continuing success of Hull Trains?

Andrew Jones: Following the last Transport questions, I asked First Group to take the issue forward. I am sorry if it has not actually contacted the hon. Lady, and I will pick this up with it, but I have already taken action as we discussed at the last Transport questions.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): May we have consideration of the Oyster ticketing system being extended south to Crawley stations such as Three Bridges?

Andrew Jones: We have launched a consultation on extending the very popular pay-as-you-go Oyster system to other parts of the south-east, and we are looking at the underlying principles for the rest of the country, too. As the public consultation document sets out, we are considering different options, and I would encourage anyone who believes their local station should be included in a pay-as-you-go zone to respond to the consultation, saying what they want and why. I will make sure that my hon. Friend’s views are part of that consultation.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I do not mind taking a few more questions if people will guarantee that it will be a short sentence each.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Heathrow logistics hub process is coming to a conclusion, and there are a number of bids from Northern Ireland, including one from my constituency. Without prejudicing the outcome, will the Minister ensure that he co-operates closely to ensure that there are regional variations to benefit thousands of jobs in Northern Ireland?

Chris Grayling: I have already told Heathrow airport that, while the detail of the decisions is a matter for them, I would certainly want to see a proper spread across all parts of the United Kingdom.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con) rose—

Hon. Members: Ah!

Tom Tugendhat: While we are thinking about unfortunate absences, will you join me, Mr Speaker, in thanking the Tonbridge line’s commuters for highlighting the problem of ghost trains on the Tonbridge to Redhill line? On 30 December, 36 trains were advertised but only 12 ran. Could the Minister possibly do something to ensure that the train operating companies actually run the trains that they advertise?

Andrew Jones: The Department monitors performance on a daily basis, and there is a range of actions that we can take when performance falls below agreed levels. I understand that performance on the Redhill to Tonbridge line has been impacted by various things, including speed restrictions, but I am able to tell my hon. Friend that performance on the line has been much improved since the start of the year, with 90% of services now arriving within five minutes of schedule.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): After awarding the contract to Seaborne Freight, the Secretary of State boasted to the House that he was backing a British start-up. I tabled a written question to his Department asking whether it was his working assumption that any ships operated by Seaborne would operate under the British flag. Why were his Ministers, in the answer I received on 14 January, unable to give a straight yes or no answer?

Chris Grayling: Because these are matters for a commercial company. I think that it is still the right thing for a British Government to do to support British start-up businesses, but these are commercial matters for those businesses.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Hashtag Speakerdate!

Anna Soubry (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): You’ll be lucky, Mr Speaker. [Laughter.] And—blatant creeping—happy Valentine’s day.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Hashtag Speakerdate!

Anna Soubry: Speakerdate—hashtag! I should like to thank the Minister for her excellent visit to my constituency last week and for the HS2 meeting that she convened. On Sunday, I attended the AGM of the Toton, Chilwell Meadows and Chetwynd neighbourhood forum and saw its bold, realistic and exciting plans for the area,
based in part on HS2 coming to Toton sidings. Do she and the Secretary of State agree that it is vital that, when the development body is formed for HS2 at Toton, the neighbourhood forum is fully involved in all its workings?

Ms Ghani: Absolutely. I was delighted to visit Nottingham and to have a meeting with all the east midlands business and council representatives. It is absolutely right to say that HS2 is a local and national project, and community groups such as the one my right hon. Friend has mentioned are indeed involved. I am also delighted to have visited her station.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): As well as announcing funding for the resilience work at Dawlish, will the Government also secure Dawlish-proof trains by moving the HSTs on to the CrossCountry franchise?

Andrew Jones: We are currently working to add more capacity into the CrossCountry franchise, and Network Rail is looking at how to tackle some of the engineering challenges posed by the impact of salt water on trains. That is work in progress.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): My constituents and I have been campaigning for many years to secure a flyover on the A1 by Wittering. Will the Minister agree to meet me and my constituents with a view to progressing matters?

Jesse Norman: That sounds like a local transport matter, but I am of course happy to meet my hon. Friend and any local councillors whom he may wish to bring.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): On Monday, the Secretary of State justified the non-competitive tendering process for Seaborne Freight by referring to a “change in the assumptions”. Would he care to elaborate on exactly what he meant by that? Does he think that that defence will stand up in court?

Chris Grayling: I recall explaining on Monday precisely what the circumstances were, and I do not want to detain the House any longer by repeating an answer that I gave to the hon. and learned Lady three days ago.
Business of the House

10.41 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for next week is as follows:

Monday 18 February—A motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Armed Forces Act (Continuation) Order 2019, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Public Record, Disclosure of Information and Co-Operation (Financial Services) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Money Market Funds (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Cross-Border Mediation (EU Directive) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, followed by a general debate on serious violence.

Tuesday 19 February—A motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft European Structural and Investment Funds Common Provisions and Common Provision Rules etc. (Amendment) (EU exit) Regulations 2019, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft National Minimum Wage (Amendment) Regulations 2019, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Medicines for Human Use (Clinical Trials) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, followed by a general debate on the NHS 10-year plan.

Wednesday 20 February—A motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Motor Vehicles (Compulsory Insurance) (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Aquatic Animal Health and Alien Species in Aquaculture (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Fertilisers and Ammonium Nitrate Material (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, followed by a general debate on antisemitism in modern society.

Thursday 21 February—A general debate on potential future free trade agreements—Australia, New Zealand and US—and on a comprehensive and progressive agreement for a trans-Pacific partnership.

Friday 22 February—The House will not be sitting.

It has been a great week for British artistic talent, with “The Favourite” taking home seven BAFTA—British Academy of Film and Television Arts—awards, and recognition for the excellent work of the cast and crew who support our thriving British film industry. At the Grammys, Dua Lipa won best new artist and Ella Mai won best R&B song. We congratulate all the nominees and winners, and look forward to more success as awards season continues.

It is Valentine’s day, so I thought a little poem might be order:

Labour is red, the Tories are blue,
Our future is bright,
With a good deal in sight,
For the UK and our friends in the EU.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for next week’s business, but I am afraid that I do not find any of it very funny—this is really serious.

Last week, I asked for an Opposition day debate, and the Leader of the House did not respond. Can we have an Opposition day debate? The last one was on 13 November, which is as long ago as when we were first promised the meaningful vote.

The Leader of the House read out a list of statutory instruments for debate next week; perhaps she will consider a debate on the Non-Contentious Probate (Fees) Order 2018. There is a possibility that the order may be ultra vires:

“The government can call it a service charge or a graduated fee but asking those who have larger estates to pay more is in effect a tax hike through the back door.”

Those are the words of the vice-president of the Law Society, Simon Davis. [Interruption.] I will, but I am just waiting for some silence. Will the Government say whether they are inappropriately introducing a tax through a statutory instrument? It cannot be a service charge, because it is graduated, depending on the size of the estate. The Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments has raised concerns, so can we have a debate on the Floor of the House to give the measure proper scrutiny?

The Leader of the House has allocated time for a debate on serious violence. My hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) and for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) both welcome the debate, particularly the latter. He passionately asked the Leader of the House for the debate, but unfortunately he will be away in the Falklands, so I hope he gets another opportunity to debate this important issue.

Can we have a debate on due diligence, or perhaps a written statement setting out the tests for awarding contracts? We also need a statement on the definition of taxpayers’ money. The Secretary of State for Transport said that no taxpayers’ money was used in the Seaborne Freight contract, yet the National Audit Office said it was. Can we have clarification?

Every week there is chaos, which is an appallingly bad way to govern a country. Employment and support allowance assessors said Jeff Hayward was fit to work. He then won an appeal—seven months after he died. When that happens, something has to change. I have already raised the matter of delays to appeals. What are the Government going to do to stop these assessments that do not work?

Students are having to pay off their loans at 6.3% interest, while vice-chancellors earn up to half a million pounds. Is the Leader of the House aware of the joint letter from the House of Commons Treasury Committee and the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee calling on the UK Statistics Authority to seek consent from the Chancellor to fix the retail prices index? The lower-rate consumer prices index applies to incomes, but the higher-rate RPI applies to outgoings such as student loans and rail fares. The UK Statistics Authority says that the Treasury will say no to fixing RPI, so it has not been asked; and the Treasury says that it has not even been asked. Lord Forsyth called it a “ridiculous merry-go-round.” Can we please have a statement on when this will be fixed?

This week, the Leader of the House told the media—not the House—about when we will have a meaningful vote. There would not be loose talk in a Brussels bar from
any civil servant of the stature of the one reported to have made the remarks unless they wanted the information out there, so he was clearly kite-flying. It is upsetting for the House that the Leader of the House has not come here to announce the date of the meaningful vote, instead announcing it on the radio. The vote is clearly not today. We have a vote, but all we get is a meaningless motion. How can the motion be passed? It states that the House notes that the discussions between the UK and the EU on the Northern Ireland backstop are ongoing, but Donald Tusk, the president of the European Council, said yesterday:

“No news is not always good news. EU27 still waiting for concrete, realistic proposals from London on how to break Brexit impasse.”

More than 40 former ambassadors and high commissioners have written to the Prime Minister warning about this national crisis, so who is she actually talking to? When will the Leader of the House announce the timetable for the meaningful vote? She could do it today.

I was going to mention my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner).

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Don’t.

Valerie Vaz: My hon. Friend is doing a lot of chuntering, but I want to wish him well. He had an important day earlier this week, and my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, also hits a milestone today.

We paid tribute to the Clerk of the House of Commons yesterday, but bizarrely he was not in his place. While he is sitting here, I want to say that he will be missed. I hope he read the important tributes to him.

Finally, Eve Griffith-Okai has been in the Speaker’s Office for 33 years, and we wish her a happy retirement.

Mr Speaker: I thank the shadow Leader of the House for what she has just said. Many Members from across the House will know Eve Griffith-Okai. I think I am right in saying that she has served under, with and in support of no fewer than four Speakers; she served Speaker Weatherill, Speaker Boothroyd and Speaker Martin, and she has brilliantly served me. She is much loved across the House and has an outstanding track record of public service, which I am glad to say has not gone unnoticed or unappreciated in the Chamber.

Andrea Leadsom: As Jane Austen said,

“Is not general incivility the very essence of love?”

I shall therefore take the slightly unhumorous remarks of the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) to be the beginning of a real friendship between us. I am grateful to her for asking some important questions. She asks about Opposition days. I hope she will accept that I have been able to find time for some of the important business that she has requested of me in recent weeks. I was pleased that, as she requested, we were able to debate the Securitisation Regulations 2018 yesterday. I hope that she will also make it through the usual channels, as is the convention. The Government will of course respond, as we have done in the past, taking her requests very seriously and delivering on almost all of them.

The hon. Lady asks again about the awarding of contracts by the Department for Transport. She will be aware that we have just had DfT oral questions, where this issue was very much dealt with by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. He also answered an urgent question earlier in the week on the same subject. Just to be clear—all hon. Members who have been involved in any kind of business procurement will understand this—a process is undertaken that seeks to assess who is suitable for a contract. That does have a cost associated with it, but as my right hon. Friend made very clear, no taxpayers’ money was actually awarded to the supplier involved, because it failed to meet the requirements of the contract.

The hon. Lady asks for a statement on a call for changes to use of the consumer prices index and the retail prices index. I will of course take that away and consider what can be done. She asks when we will bring back a meaningful vote. As the Prime Minister explained to this House just this week in a statement last Tuesday 26 February, and will table an amendable motion relating to the statement. A Minister will move that motion on Wednesday 27 February, thereby enabling the House to vote on it, and on any amendments to it, on that day.

Obviously, I will make a business statement in the usual way next week, setting out the details of the business for the week commencing 25 February. The hon. Member for Walsall South asks, “Where is the negotiation?” She will appreciate that there is a negotiation; it is on the final element—resolving the issues associated with the backstop—that the Prime Minister, the Attorney General, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union are firmly committed to achieving in order to bring a motion to this House that it can support, thereby giving certainty to businesses, and citizens across this country and the EU.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the falling number of children being vaccinated against preventable illnesses? For whatever reason, there seems to be a loss of confidence among parents in some of these vaccinations. It is certainly a matter that needs addressing.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a very important point, as he always does. After clean water, vaccination is the most effective public health measure, protecting children and adults against diseases that can cause serious harm. Confidence in the vaccine programme remains high, and parents routinely have their children vaccinated. However, my hon. Friend is right that there
[Andrea Leadsom]

has been a small decline, and we are working to address that, as outlined in the NHS long-term plan. There is absolutely no complacency, and we will continue to work to ensure that children get the vaccinations they need.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the very curious business for next week. This is what we have cancelled the mid-term recess for: statutory instruments and general debates. Members will be missing their skiing holidays and time in their villas for that! In the past few weeks, this House has regularly been rising early because there has not been enough to do. It is not as though we do not have any big decisions to make; there are only 43 days until we are supposed to leave the EU, yet there is nothing in this business statement that indicates when we will have the meaningful vote to determine on what basis we will leave—if we leave on a basis at all.

This is getting beyond a joke, and this Government are taking us all for mugs. We know that it is their intention to run down the clock, and to present the binary choice of their appalling deal or no deal at all, and they are doing everything possible to string this House along. We must stop them. Thank goodness we have you, Mr Speaker, in the Chair to ensure that this House will have its say, as it will.

When is a neutral motion not a neutral motion? When the European Research Group tells you that it is not. All we had to do today was have a form of words on which everybody could hang their favourite amendments, and the Government could not even do that. That has infuriated ERG members, and given that they are the de facto leadership of the Tory party, you would not want to do that. Here is a question for my colleagues: at what time today do the Government cravenly cave in to the ERG and amend their motion? We should have a sweepstake. I will have first go: 2.30 pm. That is when I say that the Government will cave in.

Finally, can we have a debate on what happens in Brussels bars? The first rule of Brussels bars is that what happens in Brussels bars stays in Brussels bars—unless you are Olly Robbins. Even with all the Stella Artois, we would not need Hercule Poirot to figure out what was going on. If this House wants to find out what is going on in this chaotic, clueless Brexit, perhaps we should all up sticks and head off to the “Voulez-vous Parlez Avec Moi?” bar in Brussels.

Given that it is Valentine’s Day, I shall say: Labour is red,
Tories are blue,
The message from Scotland is
We’re staying in the EU.

Andrea Leadsom: I think the hon. Gentleman means the UK, according to the people of Scotland—but that does not rhyme; I grant him that. I am grateful to him for his contribution today; there were no surprises there. I say to him, in the immortal words of Shakespeare, that “his unkindness may defeat my life, but never taint my love.”
need for a debate 20 years after the death of Stephen Lawrence, which is the subject of the Macpherson report, and I will continue to seek Government time for that debate.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): May we have a debate in Government time to establish the roles and rights of Parliament versus the courts in a policy on returning foreign fighters and so-called jihadi brides, the threats that they pose to national security and the economic consequences to the British taxpayer? And while we are at it, now that 10% of the prison population in the United Kingdom is made up of foreign national offenders, will the Government keep the House updated on how the process of returning these offenders to their countries of origin is going?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises a vital issue. I am sure that many right hon. and hon. Members will have seen the news today of a jihadi fighter looking to return to the United Kingdom. It is a very serious issue indeed, and it is vital that we continue to do everything possible to keep UK citizens safe. My right hon. Friend will be aware that Home Office questions are on Monday 25 February, and I encourage him to raise the matter directly with Ministers then.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Some of us did not get the chance to say anything about the Clerk of the House yesterday. May I just say that the staff in my constituency were amazed and pleased when he took the trouble to visit my constituency and see how they worked? I thank him for that.

On a different note, I am wearing my Looney Tunes tie today because it seemed very appropriate for the Brexit debate. The whole of our debate in this country seems to be dominated by older people.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Sit down! [Laughter.]

Mr Sheerman: Would Hansard record that I said “Ouch”? Is it not time that we had a series of debates about young people, their opportunities, their futures, the loss of youth services and the fact that children are dying unnecessarily in our country? Let us concentrate on youth in this Parliament in the coming year.

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, the hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. I think he is hearing across the Chamber that there is support for his view that we need a debate on the issues for young people. He will be aware that there are very often opportunities to raise particular issues for young people. He will also be aware that I have the great privilege of chairing a cross-departmental committee on behalf of the Prime Minister looking at how we can provide more support at the very earliest stage for all babies and their families. These are very important issues. I would encourage him perhaps to go to the Backbench Business Committee on this, because I am sure that he will get a lot of support from right across the House.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): As we approach the agony of yet another Brexit debate with nothing new to say and nothing new to hear, can I distract the Leader of the House on to something that is really very important—

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Hear, hear!

Mr Walker: I have always thought the hon. Gentleman was a very great and observant man. That thing that is really important is private Members’ Bills continuing to bring this House into disrepute. I know that this concerns the Leader of the House, the shadow Leader of the House, and all Members. Will the Leader of the House meet the Chairman of the Procedure Committee—namely myself—so that we can discuss how we can ensure that Fridays sell this place, not bring it down?

Andrea Leadsom: As Jane Austen said, “There is nothing I would not do for those who are really my friends”, so of course I will be delighted to meet my hon. Friend. He raises a very important point. I know that all of us were incredibly disappointed and enraged by the decision of one Member to block a very important private Member’s Bill on female genital mutilation. I am delighted to tell the House that I have tabled a motion to allow the Bill to be debated in a Second Reading Committee in order that it can make progress. But of course I will be happy to meet my hon. Friend.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): New Ferry in my constituency is not the only town in the country that needs regeneration, so can I implore the Leader of the House to allow a debate in Government time about town centres? New Ferry suffered the most devastating explosion and has still not recovered. We need to talk more about towns and how we rebuild them.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that our town centres are vital to the sense of community and to all the issues that we worry about, such as loneliness, isolation, keeping a thriving economy and so on. I would suggest that she might like to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can discuss the particular issues for her town. Britain’s retailers, from high street shops to independent traders, are a crucial part of our economy, supporting over 3 million jobs and contributing over £90 billion to our economy. This Government are determined to continue supporting that.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): In our infancies at our mothers’ knees, we were told that little boys were made of slugs and snails and puppy-dogs’ tails, but the fantasy of the nursery is a world away from the modern reality of puppy smuggling. Earlier this week, many Members met the Dogs Trust, which told us that wicked traders from foreign climes, oblivious to the cruelty that they impose on small dogs brought into this country, are facing woefully inadequate penalties for doing so. So will the Leader of the House bring a Minister here—perhaps our splendid Secretary of State for the Environment—to say what plans the Government have to increase those penalties, perhaps by some punitive fixed penalty notice? This heartless trade in tiny creatures that brings despair, disease and death must be brought to an end.

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure that all hon. and right hon. Members would agree with my right hon. Friend that puppy smuggling is an appalling trade. The UK is rightly proud of our high animal welfare standards. We
Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Can we have a debate on house building companies? Recently, based on inside information, a route going from Taunton down to Ilminster. Persimmon paid £16 million for a speculative development. That has been in conjunction, I suspect, with the local council and a well-known estate agent who was caught price-fixing. We need to ensure that when organisations have privileged information, it is not used for other means. The Secretary of State for Transport is being dragged into this tomorrow. It is not a happy situation. Can we have time to debate it?

Andrea Leadsom: I have chatted to our hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), who has been pleased to tell me about some of the excellent infrastructure projects that she has campaigned for in her wonderful constituency, including the upgrade of the Tone way at Creech Castle, the upgrade of the A358, the Staplegrove spine road and the upgrade of Taunton rail station, on which work is beginning now. Our hon. Friend is delighted with the efforts that she and others are making to improve Taunton Deane. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) has given you, Mr Speaker, and my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane prior notice of his intention to raise her constituency in this place.

Mr Speaker: Well, I am not aware that that is so today, though I speak with care. The Leader of the House is quite right to say that if a Member intends to refer to another Member’s constituency, especially if he or she intends to do so in what might be called disobliging terms, it is a courtesy so to notify. The hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) has, on a number of occasions, notified me of his intention to refer to the Taunton Deane constituency, but—I express myself with care—I am not aware that he did so on this occasion, and that should have happened. [Interruption.] He is signalling that he either has written or will write; I think it is the latter—could do better.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): The Government have supported the concept of an international fund for Israel-Palestine to promote the values of co-existence, reconciliation and peace. The evidence is robust that these projects bring together people, build resilience and build constituencies for peace. May we have an early debate on how the Government can make progress on the support they have given to this idea so far?

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Lady raises the very valuable work that is being done to try to resolve some of the issues on the ground between Israel and Palestine, and it is absolutely vital that we continue to do all we in the UK can to promote peace and justice in that area. She will be aware that we have Foreign Office questions on Tuesday 26 February, when I would encourage her to discuss it with Ministers.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Given the comments of Sir Terry Morgan, the former chairman of HS2, to the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee last month—he said, “Nobody knows” the number, when asked what he thought the final cost of the HS2 project would be—and reports in the media that senior Government sources have said that the “costs are spiralling so much that we’ve been actively considering other scenarios, including scrapping the entire project”,
may we please have a debate on the value for money of HS2 and on alternative proposals that would deliver more benefits to more people at less cost?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an issue that is of interest to a number of right hon. and hon. Members right across the country, including you, Mr Speaker, and me. Certainly, if my hon. Friend wants to seek a Backbench debate or a Westminster Hall debate, I am sure many on all sides of the argument would want to take part in it.

Mr Speaker: I cannot speak for the Backbench Business Committee, but I can assure the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) that if he wants a debate on the matter in Westminster Hall, he will get it all right.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Tomorrow, thousands of young people will show their deep concern about the growing climate crisis by taking part in a climate strike. Since, shockingly, there was only one person who registered to take part in the UK climate strike. Since, shockingly, there was only one place that actively encouraged and supported it, the UK is fully committed to doing everything possible to tackle the threat of climate change. She may be aware that our climate change record at home speaks for itself. Between 2010 and 2017, we reduced the UK’s domestic greenhouse gas emissions by 23%, and according to PwC, the UK leads the G20 for decarbonising its economy since 2000. There is a lot more to be done, but the UK Government remain committed to doing it.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an incredibly important point. I think the UK can be proud of our contribution to securing the first truly global, legally binding agreement to tackle climate change, which was the Paris agreement. She will be aware that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth is fully committed to doing everything possible to tackle the threat of climate change. She may be aware that our climate change record at home speaks for itself. Between 2010 and 2017, we reduced the UK’s domestic greenhouse gas emissions by 23%, and according to PwC, the UK leads the G20 for decarbonising its economy since 2000. There is a lot more to be done, but the UK Government remain committed to doing it.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): A week ago today, my constituent Geoff Whaley—a very brave man—travelled to Switzerland to end his life before the ravages of motor neurone disease made his suffering, and that of his family, unbearable. He wrote to all MPs to impress on us that a change needs to be made for others.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises a truly heartbreaking case, and I commend her for doing so. I am sure the thoughts of the whole House are with the family of Geoff Whaley at this very difficult time. I can say to her that it remains the Government’s view that any change to the law in this area is an issue of individual conscience and a matter for Parliament to decide, rather than one for Government policy. Parliament has debated this issue on several occasions, the most recent being a debate in the House of Commons on 11 September 2015, when the Assisted Dying (No. 2) Bill had its Second Reading. As things stand, the will of Parliament is that there should be no change to the law, but it is a thought-provoking matter, and I encourage her to raise it directly with Justice Ministers.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): May we have a debate in Government time on how long is an acceptable length of time for a Department to respond to a Member’s inquiry? I wrote to the Minister for Employment 225 days ago on behalf of my constituent, Mr Scott, who received conflicting and incorrect advice from the Department for Work and Pensions. To date, he and I are still in the dark about the Department’s answer.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that Departments have guidelines for the length of time they should take to respond to inquiries, and in the case she raises it sounds as if something has gone wrong or a letter has gone astray. I encourage her to write again to the Department, or if she would like to write to me I will take up the matter on her behalf.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Last Friday, four private Member’s Bills were debated and made progress, but unfortunately three of my Bills, including one that would have stopped people voting more than once in a general election, one that would have abolished car parking charges at hospitals, and another that would have placed restrictions on drones at airports and protected aircraft, were objected to by one person sitting in front of me. I think that the Leader of the House referred to that person in her previous remarks, so why are the Government not making time for my Bills, as they are doing for others?

Andrea Leadsom: The Government have an excellent record of supporting private Member’s Bills to get into statute, and since 2010 more than 50 have received Royal Assent. The Government maintain the view that they provide an invaluable opportunity for Members to promote legislation on the causes they support. Changes to the law are possible through private Members’ Bills, but it is an important principle that they should make progress only when Members are able to win sufficient support from across the House. The default position remains, in accordance with the rules of the House, that private Members’ Bills ought to make progress on Fridays. I am sure hon. Members will understand that the Children Act 1989 (Amendment) (Female Genital Mutilation) Bill is an exceptional case, and that they will welcome the Government’s decision to bring it forward.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I know we had a debate on sport fairly recently, but may we have another one very soon to allow me to pay tribute to Newport County, who for the first time in 70 years have reached the fifth round of the FA cup and will play
Manchester City this weekend? That has generated huge pride in our city and proved that the magic of the FA cup is alive and well.

Andrea Leadsom: I am glad that the hon. Lady got the chance to mention Newport County's achievements in the Chamber, and I commend her for doing so. She is right to say that the debate on sport was well subscribed, and I gather that the time limit on speeches went down to three minutes by the end of the debate. It was right that we had the opportunity to speak about some of the amazing sporting achievements across the United Kingdom, and I will certainly bear in mind her request for a further debate.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I, too, pay tribute to Newport County, although I note that when they travelled to Cleethorpes a few weeks ago they suffered a heavy defeat to Grimsby Town. Let us hope they are right to say that the debate on sport was well subscribed, in the Chamber, and I commend her for doing so. She is the chief executive of the Community Security Trust and saw a record number of antisemitic allegations, which the chief executive of the Community Security Trust has blamed on antisemitic politics and the deliberate exclusion of Jews from anti-racist norms. May I therefore thank the Leader of the House for granting a debate on antisemitism in the Labour party so that we can see what the Government are doing to address the problem of antisemitism and how we can remove this scourge from our party politics?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman, who was persistent in requesting a Government debate on serious violence. I am pleased that we have been able to provide that. He raises a very serious issue about the provision of support to families who have children with disabilities. He may be aware that spending on the most vulnerable children has increased by over £1.5 billion since 2010. In the Budget, we announced an extra £410 million for social care, including for children, alongside £84 million over the next five years to keep more children safely at home with their families. He is absolutely right, however, that the decisions taken by local councils must take into account the needs of their local communities. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise this particular point about Nottinghamshire's children.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing next week's business. I, for one, am very pleased with its contents. Last year saw a record number of antisemitic allegations, which the chief executive of the Community Security Trust has blamed on antisemitic politics and the deliberate exclusion of Jews from anti-racist norms. May I therefore thank the Leader of the House for granting a debate in Government time, so that we can see what the Government are doing to address the problem of antisemitism and how we can remove this scourge from our party politics?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to have been able to announce a debate on antisemitism for next week. It is incredibly distressing to see cases of antisemitism on the rise in this country, and it must stop. Antisemitism is despicable and it has no place in society. What I can say to my hon. Friend is that the Leader of the Opposition's despicable and it has no place in society. What I can say to my hon. Friend is that the Leader of the Opposition's own MPs tabled and unanimously passed a motion last week calling on the party leadership to adequately tackle cases of antisemitism, as a failure to do so seriously risks antisemitism in the Labour party appearing normalised and the party seeming to be institutionally antisemitic.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): This week, Bradford starts to celebrate its 10th anniversary as the world's first UNESCO city of film. In those 10 years, numerous films and TV shows have been shot in Bradford, including “Victoria”, “The ABC Murders”, “Peaky Blinders”, “Miss You Already”, “The Limehouse Golem” and “God's Own Country”. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating all those involved in Bradford City of Film? May we have a debate on what the Government are doing to support the creative sector and in particular Bradford’s pioneering film industry?

Andrea Leadsom: That is a fantastic line-up. I certainly join the hon. Lady in congratulating Bradford on its excellent work on some very well known films and programmes. I wish it every success in the future. I know that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is always keen to consider, with Members across the House, what more can be done. I will take that point away and see whether Government time can be found for such a debate.
Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): May we have a statement on the achievements of the former MP for Harlow and Epping between 1924 and 1945? Far from being a villain, Winston Churchill was not only our greatest Prime Minister but a wonderful social reformer and the man who defeated Nazi tyranny.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out that someone calling Sir Winston Churchill a “villain” is, in effect, denigrating the achievements of a man who led this country to potentially its greatest ever contribution to global peace. It is a great shame that he was described in that way.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I have spoken before about the almost nine-year and counting review of the redundancy modification order, which affects my constituents and many others across the UK. This Government’s dilatory—indeed, atrocious—handling of the review may cost current and former local authority employees thousands of pounds. May we have a debate in Government time to hold this failing Government to account?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very specific issue, and she is absolutely right to do so. It is of course important that we do everything we can to ensure fairness in the area of redundancy. I am not familiar with the exact concerns that she has. She may wish to seek an Adjournment debate, or if she wants to write to me more fully, I can take the issue up with the relevant Department on her behalf.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Last week, I held a packed meeting for residents in my constituency to question the police about the spike in aggravated burglaries. No less a newspaper than The Times carried the story yesterday of a tragic case of a young married couple who were killed in a head-on car crash—except that that young married couple, together with another passenger, were fleeing the scene of an aggravated burglary. Where they had attempted to break in. Could we have a statement in Government time on what action is being taken to combat aggravated burglaries across this country?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has raised this issue a number of times in business questions, and he is absolutely right to do so. He will be aware that the Government are taking strong action to try to clamp down on the recent increase in some violent crimes. The Government have published our serious violence strategy and established a serious violence taskforce. In addition, our funding for the police includes an increase for next year of up to £970 million compared with 2018-19. However, my hon. Friend may wish to raise this question directly with Home Office Ministers on Monday 25 February.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. In reiterating my plea for brevity, I gently point out to colleagues that if they now ask long questions, they do so in the full knowledge that they will be stopping other colleagues taking part.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary be there for the debate on serious violence?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will realise that that is way above my pay grade. I do not determine which Ministers come to the House, but of course the appropriate Minister will be here to answer that debate.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): It is curious that, given how much debate there has been outside this place on the issue of non-disclosure agreements this week—agreements that silence people who have been bullied or even assaulted at work—there has not been an opportunity here for MPs to scrutinise the Government on their response to the court decision on the Philip Green case. Will the Leader of the House ensure that time is given for the Government to set out their plan on how they are going to regulate non-disclosure agreements?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises a very serious issue, and I commend her for all the work she has done in this area. It is very concerning that non-disclosure agreements are clearly being used to hide workplace harassment and to intimidate victims into silence. It is clearly unacceptable. NDAs cannot stop a worker whistleblowing. It is very important that people are aware of that, especially some of the most vulnerable people in our workplaces. I can assure her that we will shortly be consulting on measures to improve the regulation of NDAs.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): On Monday, the Secretary of State for Defence made a number of announcements to the press. They included first, a proposal to have large squadrons of highly skilled killer drones, and secondly—and more oddly—the proposal to convert a number of old car ferries into frontline warships, including, according to The Times, the Empress of Margate. Is it not the case that the Secretary of State should come to the House to make a statement regarding these proposals, and that we should also have a wider debate on them?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we have Defence questions on Monday 18 February, which will be a good opportunity for him to ask the Secretary of State directly.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): The Oxfordshire Cotswolds Garden Village will be a major development for West Oxfordshire and particularly for the neighbouring village of Eynsham. Will the Government make a statement on the ways in which local communities can be assured that the necessary infrastructure—schools, hospitals, and Cotswold line and A40 upgrades—can come before and not after developments, and that such developments can bring benefits and not detriment to their local areas?

Andrea Leadsom: All of us want to see proper infrastructure in our constituencies before there is new housing. The Government have committed to ensuring that that is the case. My hon. Friend may wish to take up his specific issues directly with Ministers in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, perhaps through an Adjournment debate.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Five wasted years after the launch of the northern powerhouse, Whitehall this week killed off Yorkshire
devolution. Is it not now time for plan B, and for the Humber docklands to be given the same priority as the London docklands have been given the last 40 years, for devolution to the Humber area to be real, for the regeneration of the Humber region to be allowed to continue, and for transport devolution?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is a powerful voice for her constituency and her area, and she is absolutely right to be so. She will be aware that the Government remain fully committed to the northern powerhouse and to the devolution projects that we have implemented in recent years. She will also be aware that we have seen over a quarter of a trillion pounds of infrastructure investments since 2010 and that public investment as a percentage of GDP has been 14% higher on average since 2010 than under Labour. The Government remain fully committed to doing everything we can to improve investment, but I would encourage her to seek answers on her area directly, perhaps through an Adjournment debate.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Cheap synthetic drugs such as Spice and Mamba are increasingly becoming a problem in our towns, especially among the homeless and the vulnerable. With users posing a perceived threat to the public and putting immense stress on our public services, will my right hon. Friend consider granting a debate in Government time to discuss the effects of these destructive substances on our communities and what more can be done to ensure that the dealers and users face the full force of the law?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a very serious issue. She will be aware that the Government have put in place strong measures to consult on a new legal duty to underpin a public health approach to tackling serious violence, which would of course look at the problem of drug misuse. The Government want to see law enforcement agencies and policy targeting and preventing the drug-related causes of violent crime effectively. I would encourage her to contribute to the debate on serious violence that I have announced for next week.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): We heard this morning in the news that there is a study that suggests that street cannabis may be linked to depression in young people. If the study is correct, it emphasises how important it is that we protect young people from 10 to 14 getting involved in these sorts of activities.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): Poor mobile phone reception and the lack of 4G coverage has a huge impact on rural communities and is restricting the productivity of rural businesses. May we have a debate on how operators and the Government can work together to end this digital divide?

Andrea Leadsom: As an MP who represents a semi-rural constituency, I am extremely sympathetic to my hon. Friend. As he will know, we have committed more than £1 billion to next-generation digital infrastructure, and we are committed to full-fibre connections for the majority of homes and businesses by 2025, with a nationwide full-fibre network by 2033. There is a huge amount more to be done and I am sure that, if my hon. Friend sought a Westminster Hall debate, many Members would be interested in taking part.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Betty Higgins, the former leader of Nottingham City Council, died this week aged 92. She will be remembered as one of the great Nottinghamians: our publicly owned bus company, our council houses that she built and our schools that she refreshed provide a lasting memory. She was tough but kind, idealistic but pragmatic. She was also my friend and had a profound influence on my career from university to where I am today. May we have a debate in Government time about the impact of our great local government leaders and how to celebrate them?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has paid a touching tribute to the former leader of his local council. I join him in paying tribute to her for her lifetime of commitment to the area. So many people in public life contribute to their areas but go largely unnoticed and unrewarded. It is right that we pay tribute to them from time to time, and I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can do just that.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Earlier this week my mere mention of Bolton FM brought delight to some Members. May we have a debate about how the Government can support local radio stations through, for instance, the relocation of masts, so that my constituents—especially those in Hunger Hill and Chew Moor—can benefit from better reception for Bolton FM?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a keen advocate for his constituency, and I am sure that we would all love access to Bolton FM. He is right to raise the issue of local radio stations, which are often valuable sources of information as well as entertainment for local communities, and I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Tomorrow I will visit the Angel of the North in my constituency as it celebrates its 21st birthday. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Gateshead Council on its vision in
commissioning this magnificent work, and may we have a debate in Government time on the importance of culture to local economies?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady has joined a number of Members in calling for a debate to celebrate culture and she is absolutely right to do so. I am delighted to join her in celebrating the 21st birthday of the Angel of the North, which is an iconic sight for those who travel from the south to the north of the United Kingdom.

**Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con) rose—

**Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con) rose—

**Mr Speaker:** Ah! The Cornish competitors. Scott Mann.

**Scott Mann:** Will the Leader of the House congratulate the Polzeath marine conservation group on the installation of two water fountains on two of our most prolific beaches in north Cornwall? Given the increased use of reusable bottles, would it be possible to have a debate about the need for more water fountains around the UK?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I commend my hon. Friend for raising such an important matter on behalf of his constituents. It is vital to make drinking water more readily available if we are to reduce the use of single-use plastic bottles. The water industry supports the Refill campaign, and Refill points will be installed in every major city and town in England, but Water UK is also exploring options for rural communities, and the Government continue to work closely with it. My hon. Friend might like to seek an Adjournment debate to raise the matter further and allow other Members to contribute.

**Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): More than 50,000 British-born children whose parents are legally in the UK are being denied any help under the Home Office’s pernicious “no recourse to public funds” rules. That is forcing councils to provide what are supposed to be emergency social services at very high cost. When will the Government provide time for a debate on this extension of the hostile environment, the damage that it does to communities such as mine, and the additional costs that councils suffer as a result?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman will be aware that Home Office questions will take place on Monday 25 February. If he has specific concerns about a particular issue, he will be able to raise them directly with Ministers then.

**Steve Double:** Last week I had the privilege of attending the Plastic Free Cornwall summit, which brought organisations from across Cornwall together to discuss how to rid Cornwall of plastic pollution. Many of them raised the issue of released balloons which end up littering our beaches and polluting our seas. Under current legislation, balloon releases are not classed as littering. That position was last reviewed five years ago. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a Minister from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to make a statement about a further review of whether balloon releases should be classed as littering?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend is to be commended for his campaigning against plastics getting into marine areas. He will be aware that the Government have a strong track record on this. For example, we have introduced a world-leading ban on plastics getting into marine areas. We will be calling on Wandsworth Council to end its two-tier pay and conditions system, under which outsourced workers are paid poverty wages and have worse terms and conditions than directly employed staff. So may we have a debate in which we can discuss the meaning of a real living wage for people and the workers of Wandsworth?

**Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): On 9 March, robot day will take place at Coventry transport museum as part of British science week. This major science and technology event, which is free to enter, aims to entertain and inspire people of all generations. Given the skills shortage in the STEM field, does the Leader of the House agree that robot day is a creative way to inspire young people to consider a STEM career path, and will she arrange for a debate in Government time on how we can bring STEM careers to life for people of all ages?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I totally agree that robot day will be a fantastic way to engage with young people and perhaps get them more interested in taking up STEM subjects. I read just yesterday that maths is now one of the most popular A-level subjects to study in this country. A significant rise in the selection of STEM subjects for young people to study is brilliant news for our future as we move into our new modern industrial strategy, seeking the jobs of the future, which will include a lot of the ideas the hon. Lady advocates.

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Will we be able to have a debate on the cycle to work scheme, to respond to calls to raise the threshold of the scheme in order to benefit more people, particularly those with disabilities and those on low incomes?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady raises an issue that sounds very concerning; if there is a two-tier system, she is right to raise that in this place. She will be aware that it was this Government who introduced the national living wage and we will be increasing it again in April. That will mean a significant real-terms increase for people on some of the lowest incomes in our country. There is more to do and I encourage her to raise her particular concerns directly with Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Ministers.
everything we can, and if she has some good ideas I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate so she can share them with Ministers.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Given the concern expressed this week by two leading charities and the anxiety being expressed to me by my constituents in Edinburgh West who are affected by the lack of clarity about the availability of vital medicines such as insulin if Britain leaves the EU, will the Government set aside as a priority some time to discuss and clarify this important issue?

Andrea Leadsom: We are working very closely with pharmaceutical companies to make sure that patients will all continue to receive the medicines they need. This involves asking many of them to ensure a minimum of six weeks’ additional supply of medicine over and above the usual buffer stocks by 29 March. Patients, doctors and community pharmacists should not stockpile medicines—obviously, that then in itself presents a problem—but we are confident that, if everyone does as they are being asked to do, the supply of medicines will be uninterrupted in the event of a no-deal Brexit.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Can we have single-sentence questions? I call Daniel Zeichner.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Government responded positively this week to Professor Abdel-Haq’s report on taxi and private hire licensing. Will the Leader of the House look at reintroducing my private Member’s Bill, which would do exactly what the Government want to do but was chopped by one Member of this House?

Andrea Leadsom: I am aware of the hon. Gentleman’s private Member’s Bill, and that was a shame. He will be aware that the Government have launched a consultation this week on robust new rules for licensing authorities, outlining how they should use their powers to protect vulnerable passengers from harm. These rules would ensure that drivers were fit to carry passengers, keeping people safe while preventing those with bad intentions from getting behind the wheel of a taxi or a minicab.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Will the Leader of the House get a grip on the Government Whips Office and put a rocket right up them? They are playing games with an important private Member’s Bill on refugee children. We need a motion for Committee, a money resolution and notification of which Minister will be on the Committee. Being messed about with false promises, inaction and avoided phone calls is not good enough. This has to be sorted today, and I call on Members more widely, the public, celebrities and whoever else is interested in this to get on to the Government Whips Office so that we can get this shifted.

Andrea Leadsom: The Government have an excellent record of supporting private Members’ Bills on to the statute book. I can say to the hon. Gentleman that we support the principle of family unity and that we have helped to reunite 24,700 family members in the past five years. The policy allows a partner and children under the age of 18 to join refugees here if they were part of the family unit before their sponsor fled the country. There are already provisions allowing extended family members to sponsor children where there are serious and compelling circumstances, and the policy caters for extended family members where necessary.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Given that the Department for Work and Pensions is currently contacting older residents in my constituency and asking them to consider having their pensions paid into a bank account, without giving them the option to obtain them at the post office, may we have a statement or a debate on why the DWP is not promoting the post office, which is a vital lifeline to people in isolated communities?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a specific concern in his constituency, and I am very sympathetic to his problem. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can discuss this directly with DWP Ministers.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): A total of £160 million in European regional funding is due to be lost to the highlands and islands between 2021 and 2027 due to Brexit. May we have a debate in Government time on that, and on the Government’s failure to bring forward any details of the so-called shared prosperity fund, which was meant to replace that funding?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the next EU multi-annual financial framework has not been settled yet, so it is not possible to say what the UK’s share of that might be in return for the UK’s significant contributions. The UK will not be in the EU, and we are replacing that funding with a shared prosperity fund, which will seek to promote growth and opportunity right across the whole of the United Kingdom.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): There have been no trains through my constituency all this week due to a landslide. This is two years after I tabled questions in the House asking for the infrastructure to be checked following a previous landslide. My constituents put up with constant failures by the rail operator and by Network Rail. May we have a statement on their performance on the Southeastern suburban rail services?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear about problems in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, and I am very sympathetic to commuters whose journey to work each day is being ruined by problems with the rail network. I do hope that he was present for Transport oral questions earlier and that he raised his question directly with Ministers then, because I think they would have been able to answer it for him.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Endometriosis is a condition that affects one in 10 women, and it is incredibly painful. It involves cells that should be growing inside the womb growing outside it. Please may we have a debate about endometriosis and its surrounding issues?
Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an important issue. I also know people who have suffered from endometriosis, and it is a very painful condition, as she rightly says. I think she could raise the issue in the debate on the NHS long-term plan, which we have organised for next week.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Can we have a statement on the UK Government breaking yet another manifesto promise about maintaining pensioner benefits? Will the Leader of the House explain why the UK Government have completely abrogated their responsibility to the over-75s, putting it on to the BBC’s shoulders, by withdrawing their support for free TV licences? The change will potentially leave 9,000 pensioners in my constituency alone much poorer and more socially isolated.

Andrea Leadsom: As I said in response to an earlier question about BBC licences, the Prime Minister made it clear that she expects that these licences continue to be made available. They are vital for older people wanting to get information and to alleviate loneliness, which is so often a problem for people in isolated communities. The hon. Lady is right to raise the matter, but it is for the BBC to ensure that licences continue to be made available.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): As business looks quite light next week, can legislation be brought to the House regarding tougher sentences for causing death by dangerous driving, as promised by this Government in October 2017?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady refers to an important issue that has been raised in the Chamber several times. Dangerous driving causes too many deaths. We had a debate on road safety quite recently, for which I was able to offer Government time, but I will take her request into consideration against all the other competing requests for time in the Chamber.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): An MP hiring an intern is supposed to provide a valuable opportunity, but nearly three months after I made an offer to a London School of Economics undergraduate—paying the living wage, of course—he is still waiting on security clearance and is therefore in complete limbo. Security is important, but can we have a process for expediting security clearance?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear that. I have recently recruited people and did not have the same problem. It may be an isolated case, but if the hon. Gentleman wants to write to me, I will take the matter up on his behalf.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The SNP Scottish Government have imposed nearly £200 million of cuts on the City of Edinburgh Council over the past decade, with another £41 million to come. May we have an urgent debate on how the Scottish Government are quadrupling Tory austerity through savage cuts in my local council area?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there was absolutely no need for further SNP tax rises or cuts, thanks to this Government delivering a further £950 million funding boost in the Budget. The SNP Government have sought to raise taxes and cut services entirely unnecessarily because the UK Government have supported their budgets. We have Scotland questions on Wednesday 20 February, so I encourage the hon. Gentleman to raise his concerns then.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Attacks on shop workers are up, and shoplifting is up. In the unlikely event that I do not get my Westminster Hall debate on retail crime at the fourth attempt, can we have a debate in Government time?

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman should keep pursuing that debate. I am sure that Mr Speaker is listening carefully. He is right that retail crime is a blight on businesses across our high streets, and we need to do everything we can to resolve the matter. He may like to seize the opportunity to contribute his thoughts during the debate on serious violence next week.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It has been evident for some time that properties located next to whisky maturation sites are being affected by a stubborn black material. That is happening not only in West Dunbartonshire, but across the United Kingdom. In a recent survey conducted by my office, 85% of respondents in Clydebank, Dumbarton and the Vale of Leven highlighted the negative impact of “whisky black”. The issue has an impact on all our communities, so will the Leader of the House make time for all Members to discuss it?

Andrea Leadsom: I was unaware of that issue before the hon. Gentleman raised it, but he is right to do so. He may like to raise the matter with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on Thursday 21 February so that he can look into it on the hon. Gentleman’s behalf.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): This Government must surely seek a new mandate for their proposed massive cuts to low-income pensioner households, given that they were approved seven years, two Governments and two Parliaments ago. Why is the Leader of the House denying this House the opportunity to vote on the Government’s cuts to pension credit?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that it was this Government, in 2010, who introduced the triple lock to ensure that pensioners on fixed incomes will always have the reassurance of a secure basic income. He raises a specific issue, and he might like to raise it directly with Ministers in an Adjournment debate.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Last month, Pakistan’s supreme court appointed Dr Muhammad Suddle to lead a commission on equal rights for minority religious groups in Pakistan. That will ensure the implementation of a supreme court order requiring the Pakistani Government to establish a national council for minority rights and requiring the police force to protect their places of worship. It is important that this House not only points out human rights violations but praisess positive actions to help suffering communities. Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming this appointment and urge hon. and right hon. Members to sign early-day motion 2050?
[Jim Shannon]

[That this House welcomes the Supreme Court of Pakistan’s decision to appoint a commission chaired by Dr Shoaib Suddle; notes that the intention of the commission is to ensure implementation of the decision PLD 2014 SC 699 of June 2014 to safeguard the rights of religious minorities in Pakistan; affirms its confidence in Dr Suddle as a man of integrity and impartiality and capable of carrying out this critically important task; and assures him of its cooperation and assistance in matters of religious freedom.]

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about the need to protect the rights of religious and racial minorities. I join him in welcoming this new move and encourage him to raise this point at Foreign Office questions the week after next.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance on a certain matter. You know how much I respect your running of the Chamber, so I wanted to ask you this question. What recourse does a Member have when a colleague uses business questions to make serious, damaging and unfounded allegations about another Member’s constituency that cause real distress outside this House?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her characteristic courtesy in giving me advance notice of her intention to raise this matter, which could affect any right hon. or hon. Member here present. She asks very specifically what recourse she, or any Member, has when a colleague makes damaging and unfounded allegations about her constituency. She knows how seriously I take this issue, which we have discussed.

I expect an hon. Member to give notice to the colleague whose constituency he proposes to refer to, to give notice to my office and to ensure that he is properly careful in what he says. Members take responsibility for what they say in the House and for its impact outside this House. The privilege of free speech must be used maturely and with sensitivity. It is no part of a right hon. or hon. Member’s role to be merely abusive or insulting. I hope that an hon. Member causing offence in this way will reflect very carefully on such conduct. Let me just say tactfully, but in terms that are not ambiguous, that I hope that I do not have to return to this issue again. The message should be clear, and the hon. Lady’s concern, which is very real and, I think, widely shared, should be respected. We will leave it there for now, and I hope it will be able to be left there.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Minister for small businesses, the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), claimed in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) during Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions on Tuesday that:

“Every piece of no-deal legislation that we have brought through the House has had an impact assessment”. —[Official Report, 12 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 714.]

The truth is that only two of the 20 BEIS statutory instruments that have been in Committee since Christmas have had an impact assessment available for them. The lack of this vital information has been a bone of contention during each Committee; it hinders our ability to scrutinise legislation; and it adds to uncertainty for businesses and consumers, who do not know how a no-deal will impact on them. What advice can you give me to set the record straight?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for giving me advance notice that she wished to raise this matter. The provision of impact assessments is of course the
responsibility of Ministers. There is no statutory or procedural requirement for the Government to provide impact assessments on SIs, but I believe that I am right in saying that Government guidance requires Departments to do so at least in respect of instruments with significant impacts. I appreciate the current pressures on Departments, but it is clearly unsatisfactory if the House is being asked to adopt instruments without access to full information about their impact. I know that a number of Select Committees have been pursuing these issues with Ministers. Meanwhile, the shadow Minister has made her concerns on the matter very clear.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I just get some clarification on what you have just said? Did you say that Members ought to give you notice when they wish to raise something about somebody else’s constituency? I do not want to comment on the case you have just raised; however, I think that I heard you say that they should give your Office notice. I would be pleased to have greater clarification on that.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is entirely justified in seeking further clarification, and I am happy to provide it. The answer is, yes, I do expect that if the intended reference—I thought that I had conveyed the flavour of this, but if I had not, it was my fault—is pejorative. It is not unknown in the course of debate for a Member to refer to another Member’s constituency, for example, to its level of prosperity or joblessness, to a reduction in joblessness or to start-up businesses there—whatever it may be—but if a Member intends to refer pejoratively or disobligingly to another Member’s constituency, raising serious issues, potentially of order and certainly of House reputation, I think that it is reasonable, and I am so advised, not only for the Member affected to be told in advance, but for the Chair to be notified in advance. I hope, therefore, that the relatively narrow application of what I am talking about is reassuring to the right hon. Gentleman.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I seek your guidance about a trend that seems to be becoming more and more prevalent? When reading newspapers and listening to the reporting in anticipation of the motion that we will be discussing today in the forthcoming debate and all the amendments, I have come across a phrase, which has clearly come from the Government, being used a lot, which is that this motion is “non-binding” on the Government. When I came into this House, it was a point of honour and the unwritten rule that if the Government lost motions and motions were passed through this House, they would then respect those motions. We now suddenly see this distinction being made by Government spokespeople, not always named, who say that some motions are more equal than others. I seek your guidance on the appearance of a distinction that I deplore and that certainly was never present when I first came into the House.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. May I just draw your attention and that of the House to the report produced by the Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs on exactly this question—the status of motions of the House of Commons—because I think the House would find it instructive?

Mr Speaker: That is a public information notice from the hon. Gentleman and we are grateful for it—genuinely so—and I thank him for what he said. In response to the hon. Lady, I am conscious of a concern on that front, and it is a concern that has been articulated not least by the Father of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), who is able to look at these matters with the benefit of a 48-year—approaching 49—perspective, so he knows how things used to be done. In some respects, they are now done rather differently—I have noted that.

The essential point is this: some votes in this House are simply expressions of opinion, and others, depending on the terms of the motion, are genuinely binding. They can be construed, and would be construed, as orders or instructions and are therefore, in the literal sense of the term, effective. Others are not automatically effective, and they do depend on the way in which the Government choose to view them—I use those words carefully and advisedly. We have the opportunity to debate the hugely important matter of Brexit today and we know that there are plans for subsequent debate, but I can assure the hon. Lady that, if there is an appetite in the House for further debate, that appetite will be met. I can say that without the slightest fear of contradiction by anyone. If the House wants to debate a matter, no amount of circumlocutory activity to seek to avoid it will work—it simply will not happen.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. You are ruling on what is binding. This probably has to be resolved, but I do not want to take up too much more time on this matter now, because you gave an indication on it.

Plainly, certain things—legislation—change the law; they are binding. The question comes when a majority of the House, by a motion, expresses an opinion on a subject of policy. I still believe that our constitutional convention in our parliamentary democracy is that the Government are bound to follow and give respect to a declaration of policy that has been declared by the House. It is no good saying that it does not change the law, so it is just a matter of opinion and we will proceed guided by newspapers and pressure groups instead.

Mr Speaker: I entirely understand what the right hon. and learned Gentleman is getting at. I can say only for my own part that I do not want to give a flippant response to the Father of the House. I have never been much preoccupied with the opinions of newspapers. I really do not attach any weight to their views. I am sure that they think their views are important, and if that brings happiness into their lives, good luck to them, but the blatherings of a particular media outlet are a matter of absolutely no interest or concern whatever to me; they are simply not consequential at all.

Decisions that this House makes, resolutions that this House passes and motions that are supported matter and should be respected. Some motions, however,
do specifically instruct, and if they instruct, there can be no slightest doubt or uncertainty at all but that they must be followed, just as if, for example, the House were to pass a motion instructing the Speaker. The Speaker is the servant of the House. If the House passed a motion or an amendment instructing the Speaker, the Speaker would do as instructed; that is the way it is.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would like your guidance because the Home Secretary is actively ignoring a written question that I tabled back on 18 October 2018, the best part of four months ago. I have since tabled two named-day questions to chase it up and both have been ignored. The Chair of the Procedure Committee wrote to the Home Secretary over a week ago, and still I have had no response. Is there any further mechanism to stop the Home Secretary ignoring the democratic processes that are in place to hold him to account?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving me notice of this point of order. Clearly, it is unsatisfactory that she has not had a ministerial response to her question, though, of course, the content of the response is for Ministers. The Chair of the Procedure Committee has recently written to the Home Secretary, I hope that a response will now swiftly be forthcoming. If it is not and she needs to return to the House to raise this matter, that will be extremely unfortunate, but if she has to raise it again, she will, and if she does, I will respond as appropriate.

I hope more widely that the distinction between opinion and an effective order is clear to, accepted by and commands the assent of, the House.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In substance, just to be clear, you are absolutely right that a motion of this House is an expression of opinion. Ultimately, if this House has an opinion to which it is sufficiently attached and which the Government refuse to adopt, this House can remove the Government, but recently this House expressed confidence in the Government. Unless this House changes its mind on that, the Government should respect what the House says and respond to it respectfully, but they are not bound to implement an instruction that is expressed in the form of an opinion in a motion passed by the House of Commons.

Mr Speaker: Where a motion is declared to be effective and binding, it is effective and binding, or, if it suits the palate of the hon. Gentleman, he prefers the words the other way round, binding and effective.

Mr Speaker: Well, the hon. Gentleman offers his political opinion from a sedentary position and he is perfectly entitled to his political opinion, but I am answering questions about procedural propriety. Although I much value the camaraderie of the hon. Gentleman and his occasionally proffered advice, I do have other sources of advice and I do feel that I can manage with the advice that I am offered. I am quite capable, after nine and a half years, of discharging the obligations of the Chair, which I do, on the basis not of political opinion, but of what is right in parliamentary terms—not what somebody thinks about a political subject, but what is right in parliamentary terms. The Clerk and I regularly discuss these matters, and I will always do what I think is right by the House of Commons whether or not a particular person likes it. I also observe the Standing Orders of the House, which, I am sure, is something with which the hon. Gentleman, most of the time, is familiar.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You described the debate today as hugely important to Parliament and the country, as indeed it is. Would there not be an expectation, under Standing Orders, that, if the motion today is in the name of the Prime Minister, the Prime Minister is here either to open or to close the debate? Would that not be what the House might expect?

Mr Speaker: No. It may well be desired by the hon. Lady, and it is clear that that is what she desires, but it is not to be expected, and there are very large numbers of cases in which it is not so. Perhaps she is trying to establish a new standard, but it is not yet there.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Mr Speaker: I am not sure that the House particularly wants another point of order at this time.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered.

That, at this day’s sitting, the Speaker shall put the questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to the UK’s withdrawal from the EU not later than 5.00pm; such questions shall include the questions on any amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; the questions may be put after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(Jo Churchill.)
UK’s Withdrawal from the EU

Mr Speaker: I have provisionally selected the following amendments in the following order: (a) in the name of the Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn); (i) in the name of the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford); and (e) in the name of the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry).

I remind the House that, under the terms of the business motion just agreed to, the debate may continue until 5 pm, at which time the question shall be put on any amendments that may then be moved. To open the debate, I call the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union.

12.19 pm

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): I beg to move,

That this House welcomes the Prime Minister’s statement of 12 February 2019; reiterates its support for the approach to leaving the EU expressed by this House on 29 January 2019 and notes that discussions between the UK and the EU on the Northern Ireland backstop are ongoing.

On 29 January, a majority of right hon. and hon. Members told this House and our country that they would support a deal, but that this support was conditional. Members were prepared to compromise on issues, but not on the overriding issue of the backstop. The Government’s motion today references and confirms this House’s support for the motion passed on 29 January, as amended by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady). His amendment in effect gave this Government an instruction, which we have taken to our European partners.

This Parliament’s mandate must now be the given the opportunity to achieve its end, and the Prime Minister must be given the chance to ensure that. It is clear that the Government’s priority is to address the indefinite nature of the backstop, which, under article 50, is legally required to be temporary. Today I will address issues raised by a certain number of my hon. and right hon. Friends who are concerned about whether this motion gives credence to the idea that the Government are taking no deal off the table.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): Given the debate and dispute about the meaning of the Government’s motion, will my right hon. Friend be clear with the House that if the European Union does not agree to a deal that is acceptable to this House and the Government, we will still be leaving on 29 March?

Stephen Barclay: I am very happy to give my right hon. Friend and predecessor in this role that assurance. The Cabinet’s position on no deal has been agreed; it was agreed in response to the Cabinet paper that I presented on 18 December. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has repeated her commitment to the timescale on numerous occasions, including again in her statement this week.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Secretary of State has set out why he is observing what the House said on alternative arrangements, so why is he not also observing and acting on what the House has said on the Government ruling out no deal?

Stephen Barclay: The short answer is that the House has said two different things. It passed by a big majority legislation on article 50, which many Members on both sides of the House voted for. It passed by a large margin legislation to say we are leaving the EU on 29 March, and put that date on the face of the withdrawal Bill. The House also voted by a large margin to give the people the decision through the referendum. Frankly, the legislation takes precedence over the motion to which the right hon. Gentleman refers. In essence, this issue was raised earlier in a point of order. I appreciate that he is making this point as an intervention, but it is the same point.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I encourage the Government to keep their nerve during these negotiations. I accept that the vast majority in this place would favour a good deal over no deal, but will the Government confirm for absolute clarity that if we are not able to secure a good deal—probably courtesy of intransigence by the EU—we will not only leave on 29 March, but will leave on no-deal/World Trade Organisation terms?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend, as a former member of the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, knows all about holding his nerve. He is correct that Parliament needs to hold its nerve. We need to send a clear signal to those in the European Union with whom we are discussing these issues, who share our desire to have a deal and to deliver on our shared values, and who respect the fact that we are trading partners, and wish to get on with the future economic partnership and work together.

Mr Baron: I think we all agree about the importance of keeping our nerve, and keeping no deal on the table actually makes a good deal more likely, but will the Secretary of State answer my specific question and confirm that if we do not achieve a good deal on 29 March, we will not just leave the EU, but will leave on no-deal terms?

Stephen Barclay: For the avoidance of doubt, I am happy to confirm that, because that is what the legislation says. The only way to avoid no deal—the Prime Minister has repeatedly said, and as is backed up in legislation—is either to secure a deal on the terms that the Prime Minister has set out, with the mandate that the House gave her in response to the earlier motion, or to revoke article 50. The court case says that the only alternative would be to revoke, and revoking would be unconditional and unequivocal.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): My right hon. Friend was just moving on to an alternative, but it seems to me that he has just given the starkest expression of policy that I have heard the Government give so far on what will happen if the present negotiations fail; these are alarming possibilities. He says that we are bound by the legislation relating to article 50, which indeed we are, but when the House agreed to use article 50, it was on the assumption that a negotiated deal would be arrived at. [Interruption.] Well, of course it was. Indeed, at one point the Prime Minister presented to this House what she said was the ideal deal with which to go on to the full negotiations towards meeting the Government’s declared aim of having a proper, permanent relationship with the EU in due course.
The idea of going for the catastrophe of no deal on the arbitrary date of 29 March, simply because the Prime Minister will probably fail to persuade the other member states to put a time limit on a permanent open border in Europe, is ridiculous. The Government could have a policy of coming back here to defer or revoke article 50 to put the situation in some order.

Stephen Barclay: Although I obviously respect the considerable experience of the Father of the House, I frankly do not accept that merely restating the legislative position is presenting issues in a stark way; nor do I accept that the Prime Minister will fail. The Prime Minister is working in the national interest, is seeking to bring our country together, and is seeking a deal for our country. A short extension of article 50 does not take no deal off the table. It simply prolongs that uncertainty; it leaves in place the risk of no deal in a few months’ time.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The Prime Minister met hon. Members in the Boothroyd Room before the first vote, which she lost by 230, and said that if her deal was not accepted, it was either no deal or no Brexit. An amendment could have been moved to revoke article 50 today, but should not the Government be moving towards that point? We should put it to the House: we either have the Brexit that is going to crash the economy, or, with one letter from the Prime Minister to the European Union, we forget this silly game and revoke this nonsense. It could be over in an afternoon. Get on with it.

Stephen Barclay: Given the propensity of the Scottish National party to have referendums and not respect the result, the one thing that we can always be sure of with the SNP is that it will not be over in an afternoon.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): I very much want to see a deal done. It is in the interests of the country, and it is definitely in the interests of industry. The European Union has a wide history of changing its mind and coming through with fresh negotiations, perhaps at the very last minute. Will my right hon. Friend tell me how his talks have been going, and does he think that we should allow the Government to do exactly what they are doing?

Stephen Barclay: As is so often the case, my right hon. Friend reflects a sentiment that one hears expressed in the country at large, which is the desire for a deal. As he says, that desire is shared by many people we have been speaking to in the European Union. They recognise that no deal is in the interest of neither side, and that it is disruptive. Later, I will come to what Chancellor Merkel said about seeking a constructive solution. The political situation in many European countries, and the coalition that is in place, again shows that this is in the interests of both sides.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Of course we want to get a deal with the European Union, but is not taking no deal off the table the surest way of ensuring that the other side dig in on their current position? That is just a fact of life. Those who call for no deal to be taken off the table are playing into the hands of the possibility of no deal. Will the Secretary of State update the House on his discussions with his Irish counterparts, given that they play a crucial role? They cannot hide behind Brussels; likewise, Brussels cannot hide behind Dublin on these issues.

Stephen Barclay: The right hon. Gentleman is right on both points. First, it is important that we have no deal on the table. Indeed, the only way to take it off the table is either to have a deal or to revoke Brexit entirely.

Several hon. Members rose—

Stephen Barclay: If I can make some progress, I will come on to the discussions the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, which include the discussion that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister had with the Taoiseach last week, and also her visit to Northern Ireland, where there is a shared desire on this, as the right hon. Gentleman well knows. Indeed, in the House yesterday, in his evidence to the Exiting the European Union Committee, the highly respected former Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, talked about the impact of no deal from an Irish perspective, and the common desire to seek agreement.

Several hon. Members rose—

Stephen Barclay: I will make some progress, and then will happily take further interventions. A number of interventions have sought to represent the position of the Prime Minister, so it is worth reminding the House of what the Prime Minister said: “the Government’s position remains the same: the House voted to trigger article 50; that had a two-year timeline that ends on 29 March; we want to leave with a deal, and that is what we are working for.”—[Official Report, 13 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 881.]

Several hon. Members rose—

Stephen Barclay: I am going to make a little progress, and then I will happily take further interventions. This is also an important issue for European leaders’ positions on whether, if the EU were to make changes to the backstop, that would enable a deal to pass. That is why it is important to the negotiations that a clear message be sent from this House. Colleagues should be in no doubt that the EU will be watching our votes tonight carefully for any sign that our resolve is weakening. We shall not give it that excuse not to engage. Indeed, in the discussions we have been having with European leaders, there is recognition, as reflected by the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), of the shared desire to secure a deal, because the impact of no deal is asymmetric within the EU27. Indeed, that is a part of the discussions that member states are having with the European Commission.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Given that the European Union is saying that it will not entertain any legal changes to the withdrawal agreement—I share the Secretary of State’s desire to get a deal and have made it very clear that if it came to it I would consider supporting the Government in a future vote—what I need to know from the Secretary of State is what compromise he is going to give to this House that better
reflects the will of this House rather than simply putting a deal back to us that has already been comprehensively rejected.

Stephen Barclay: I am going to come on to that exact issue. The hon. Gentleman cited at the start of his intervention the premise that the European position, as stated, is that there will be no movement. Well, actually, the European Union has also stated that it wants to avoid no deal, which is hugely damaging. The European Union has also stated that it wants to be clear what the will of this House is and what is required in order to secure a deal. It is self-evident that there is a degree of ambiguity between those positions. Indeed—I will come on to this—the discussions we have been having with European leaders are absolutely on that issue. That is why we need some time, in terms of the vote this evening, to continue with those discussions.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Further to the Secretary of State’s answer to the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), is he really saying that if the Government have no deal in place by the end of March—if they have run out of time—then they would go ahead with no deal on 29 March even when top police chiefs are saying that it will make the country less safe and NHS leaders are saying that there will be shortages of medicines? Is he 100% committed to no deal on 29 March in those circumstances, or are there any circumstances in which he would extend article 50?

Stephen Barclay: Again, what I set out was that we are 100% committed to the position set out and agreed by the Cabinet. That position was agreed on 18 December. I was drawing the House’s attention to the fact that the motion today does not change that position, and that position is that it is our priority to secure a deal. I have stated at the Dispatch Box previously that the best way to mitigate the risk of no deal is to secure a deal. I will come on to some of the issues in respect of the consequences of no deal. I have been quite clear with some of my colleagues on my own Benches that I do view no deal as disruptive—much more so than some of my hon. and right hon. Friends. Our priority is to secure a deal, but the principal operational focus if not is to prepare for what is the legal position.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): The reality is that the vote against no deal in this House was more convincingly passed, including with cross-party support, than the vote to have the Prime Minister go back and negotiate on alternative arrangements. The Government cannot simply just pick and choose which votes they will support. That is fundamentally wrong and anti-democratic, and it is the totally wrong way to handle such an important issue for this country as Brexit. Does the Secretary of State not see that? Can he not listen to the representatives of communities around this country who are deeply concerned about a no-deal exit and want this House’s will to be respected?

Stephen Barclay: Again, I very much respect the position of my right hon. Friend. I suspect that, on this, we will agree to disagree. I have set out, first, the position as agreed by the Cabinet; secondly, what is the legislative position; and thirdly, what is the interplay in terms of the motion before the House this evening. I absolutely respect her in terms of how she cast her vote in that Division, but the point is that it does not change the stated position of the Government, and that is what I was setting out.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I support the Prime Minister’s deal. I want us to get a deal. But I am looking very closely at this motion, which includes the words: “support for the approach to leaving the EU expressed by this House on 29 January”.

Two motions were carried that night, both of which I supported. I would like to hear from my right hon. Friend that he gives equal respect to the opinions expressed by the House, for if he fails to do that, it is contemptuous of this House.

Stephen Barclay: First, I absolutely respect votes of this House. Indeed, when we had, for example, the Humble Address on the Attorney General’s legal advice—

Hon. Members: We can’t hear you.

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just appeal to the Secretary of State? He is, in my experience, a most courteous individual, and I understand the natural temptation to look in the direction of the person questioning him, but the House wants to be hearing what he says. Please face the House.

Stephen Barclay: I absolutely accept your direction on that point, Mr Speaker. I was seeking to engage with my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) on the point she is making about respecting the House. Of course we do. That also applied, for example, in votes such as that on the Attorney General’s legal advice, which was disclosed following a Humble Address, notwithstanding the precedent that creates for a future Government.

The point I was merely stating, which I thought was a point of fact, is that the legislative position as it currently stands is as set out following the vote to trigger article 50. That is the position.

Several hon. Members rose—

Stephen Barclay: I have taken quite a few interventions and I will make a bit of progress, not least because I am conscious that many others will wish to speak.

One part of the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West was to explore whether technology offered a solution to the backstop. I am grateful to my hon. and right hon. Friends who have engaged with this work. Following the support of the House for the amendment, including that approach, the Prime Minister gave a commitment to engage seriously with the ideas put forward, and I have held a series of detailed meetings doing just that. The political declaration makes it explicit that both the EU and the UK agree to exploring alternative arrangements. I am happy to commit to my hon. and right hon. Friends that the Government will take that forward, including both investing civil service resource in exploring its viability and considering its acceptability to the community as a whole.
The possibility of alternative arrangements, as envisaged by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West, has been reflected in the wording of the political declaration. The document notes that the UK and the EU “envisage making use of all available facilitative arrangements and technologies”.

It goes further, noting that such technology should “be considered in developing any alternative arrangements for ensuring the absence of a hard border on the island of Ireland on a permanent footing.”

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that using techniques and technology that already exist at the border in Northern Ireland is a good foundation for the alternative arrangements?

Stephen Barclay: I agree. That is already agreed by the European Union and the United Kingdom in its reflection in the political declaration. I have been discussing that issue with hon. and right hon. Friends in the alternative arrangements working group. I also raised it in my discussions earlier in the week with Monsieur Barnier, as I committed to do. I must be frank with the House that he was sceptical about the timescale, but we are actively discussing it. I simply point out that that is already accepted in the political declaration, and following the working group, we are exploring what can be done in terms of the timescale of that work.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Is it now Government policy to take forward the Malthouse compromise that we have all read about? Will the Secretary of State take a fully worked-up proposal to the European Union as part of the negotiations?

Stephen Barclay: I can confirm that we have taken it forward to the European Union, in that I have raised it with Monsieur Barnier. I will be discussing it again with him. He has raised some initial concerns, but we are making that case and discussing it with him. It is already accepted by the European Union in terms of the political declaration and the workstream that will flow from that.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State just told the House that he has put proposals to Michel Barnier. Can he therefore explain why Donald Tusk said yesterday that the EU27 are “still waiting for concrete, realistic proposals from London on how to break #Brexit impasse”? Stephen Barclay: One should always be slightly cautious about what is said on Twitter, and that applies even to someone as esteemed as President Tusk. I was simply updating the House on the discussions I have had with Michel Barnier, my opposite number in the European Commission, to follow up on what this House agreed, which was that we should explore that. We have engaged seriously with colleagues on it and raised it with the European Commission.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The task that the Secretary of State has set out in terms of the alternatives is large, and the window to deliver it is getting smaller. I appreciate that we are not going to extend article 50 for no purpose, but in the interests of pragmatism, if all it requires is another three or four weeks’ work just to dot the i’s and cross the t’s, surely to goodness we are not going to bite off our nose to spite our face.

Stephen Barclay: I respect my hon. Friend’s point, but what I hear from many, particularly in the business community, is that they do not want more uncertainty. They want to see this move forward, and they want to see a deal secured.

In terms of the next steps, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will meet President Juncker next week, and today she is holding conversations with other European leaders. In parallel, my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General is pursuing other avenues for a possible legal challenge to the agreement. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made the wider Government position clear to many in the EU, as I have to the leader of the European People’s party, the European Parliament’s Brexit co-ordinator and the EU’s chief negotiator. In addition, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and I have met a wide range of key European stakeholders.

While the EU’s public statements have said that there will be no reopening of the withdrawal agreement, it has also said, as I pointed out to the right hon. Member for Belfast North, that it wants to avoid no deal and wants to reach an agreement that will be supported by this House. Members will have seen the comments from leading European figures such as the German Chancellor, who spoke of her desire for a “constructive solution”. The House needs to give the Prime Minister time to explore that.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way, although he may not be so grateful for this intervention. Will he confirm that the British Government have absolutely no intention of replacing the backstop, which is essential for maintaining peace on the island of Ireland—a hard-won peace that we value in Northern Ireland?

Stephen Barclay: I looked with interest at the hon. Lady’s reference in the Brexit Select Committee to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, and in particular her point about mutual consent and bringing the community with her. That point is particularly well made, and it is at the forefront of the discussions that the Prime Minister is having with the Taoiseach and European leaders in the context of the backstop.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): The amendment that the House passed, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West, clearly stated that the intention was to replace the backstop with alternative arrangements to avoid a hard border. We have had constructive meetings with the Secretary of State. Can he confirm that the Malthouse compromise is stated Government policy, has been put to Monsieur Barnier and now has the full force of the civil service to work it up into legally binding text?

Stephen Barclay: I have already confirmed to the House that this issue has been raised with Michel Barnier. I have given a commitment that it will be raised...
again in our next exchange. I have given a commitment that civil servants are engaging on this issue. I have also communicated the fact that the initial response from Michel Barnier was to raise concerns about the extent of concessions that would be required, but that is part of the discussion we are having.

Several hon. Members rose—

Stephen Barclay: I have taken a lot of interventions. I am conscious that many other Members wish to speak, including the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), so I will make some progress.

It is clear that a workable compromise with the EU on the backstop can secure a substantial and sustainable majority in this House and give the Prime Minister a clear and irrefutable mandate to get her deal over the line. In supporting the Government’s motion today, this House can do exactly that. Getting to a compromise is a challenge, but it is not an insurmountable one. It requires the EU and the UK to come together and find a solution, and it calls for both sides of the House to continue to work hard to find and grow the common ground, which is in the interests of many watching these proceedings.

As we prepare to exit the European Union, this Government are focused on their most pressing task—to deliver a legally binding change to the backstop—and committed to delivering on that key demand. I am meeting European ambassadors tomorrow to continue making that case, and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is speaking today with a series of European leaders. We are also engaging widely across the House, be that with the alternative arrangements working group, yesterday with the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras or in the 30 January meeting between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition.

We have a clear outcome: a programme of engagement with European leaders and engagement across this House. Tonight Members need to give the Government time to make good on this work and, as a House, to hold our nerve, to deliver a deal that addresses the twin risks of no deal or no Brexit and to respect the biggest vote in our democratic history and deliver what people voted for.

12.49 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I rise to support amendment (a) in my name and that of the Leader of the Opposition. The Secretary of State ended by saying that we have to “hold our nerve”, but he was all over the place this afternoon on all the important issues.

It is obvious—obvious—what the Prime Minister is up to. She is pretending to make progress while running down the clock: a non-update every other week to buy another two weeks of process, and inching ever closer to the 29 March deadline in 43 days’ time. We should not be fooled. Let us look at the history of recent months and set it against the exchanges today. The Prime Minister pulled the meaningful vote on 10 December, promising to seek further reassurances on the backstop. She feared a significant defeat, and it was obvious that the backstop was the problem way back then, as it had been through the autumn. That was 66 days ago, and there were then 109 days until 29 March.

Mr Baron: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: I will in a minute.

And the Prime Minister returned with nothing—warm words in the margins of the EU summit in December, and a letter, coupled with a statement about Northern Ireland, that simply repeated already existing commitments. That is what she came back with. The meaningful vote was then put on 15 January, and it was lost heavily. That evening, the Prime Minister stood at the Dispatch Box and promised to explore ideas with the European Union, following cross-party talks on how to proceed. That was 30 days ago, and there were then 75 days until 29 March.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: I will give way in just a minute.

The amendment called for the backstop to be replaced with alternative arrangements. It was extraordinary: a Prime Minister voting to support her own deal only on condition that it is changed—conditional support for her own deal. Nobody prepared the business community for that, and nobody prepared Northern Ireland or EU leaders for that. Anybody who has spoken to businesses, been to Northern Ireland or spoken to political leaders in the EU in recent days knows that, by three-line whipping her own MPs to vote against the deal she negotiated, the Prime Minister has lost a good deal of trust in the process.

James Cleverly: Can the right hon. and learned Gentleman not understand the nonsense of his own argument? He suggests on the one hand that the Prime Minister is trying to run down the clock, and then he lists the various occasions when she has attempted to stop the clock, get a deal and exit the European Union.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention: I think the hon. Gentleman has missed the point. The Prime Minister has spent weeks—[ Interruption. ]—the hon. Gentleman wants an answer and then interrupts while I am trying to speak. The Prime Minister has spent weeks and weeks trying to negotiate changes to the backstop—it started way before the vote was pulled on 10 December, and it has gone on ever since—and she has got absolutely nowhere.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: I will just make the next point and then I will give way.
The idea that the vote on 29 January for the Brady amendment gave clarity is for the birds. The Government united around a proposition that they want an alternative to the backstop, but uniting around an alternative that means different things to different people does not get anybody anywhere, and that is the central problem.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: I will in just one minute.

On Tuesday, in another non-update from the Prime Minister, she said what she wanted on the backstop and listed three things: a time-limited backstop; an ability unilaterally to end the backstop; or alternative arrangements. That is how she put it. The first two of those have been repeatedly ruled out by the EU for months, and there is no sign of any movement. The Secretary of State, from his discussions in Brussels in recent days, knows that very well—there is no room for a move on those two fronts.

Stephen Gethins: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: I will in just a second.

The third option—alternative arrangements—remains undefined, and when the Prime Minister is pressed, either here or in Brussels, about exactly what she means, she does not say. The Malthouse compromise and the answer the Secretary of State gave about it give the game away. If that was a serious proposition and the Government were engaging with it, they would adopt it as policy and put resource into it, but they are not doing so. What signal does that send to Brussels about what the Government really think about the Malthouse compromise?

Mark Pritchard: May I commend the right hon. and learned Gentleman for his courage and bravery in standing up for his own alternative arrangements, which of course include a second referendum? I just wonder how he is getting on with that in his own party. More importantly, does he believe a second referendum would increase or decrease investor and business confidence in the United Kingdom?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for the concern, and I am getting on fine, thanks very much. I will tell the hon. Gentleman and the House one thing on business certainty. I have been talking to hundreds of businesses across the country. Even in the last 10 days, I have been in Belfast, Cardiff, Birmingham and Dublin talking to businesses. What they are most concerned about is the uncertainty of the situation that we are in now, and all of them would welcome anything that prevents a no-deal Brexit.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Are not all these meetings and activity that my right hon. and learned Friend is outlining, when it comes to these alternative arrangements, really just a repetition of the Brexit unicorns on no hard border that we have heard time and again? The reality is that the Government’s strategy on this is the same as it has always been, which is the desperate hope that Chancellor Merkel will come to the rescue and the European Union will throw Ireland under the bus.

Keir Starmer: I completely agree with that intervention and that observation.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. and learned Friend has been talking to businesses, as I have. Does he agree that the issue of no deal is a matter not simply for 28 March, but for now? Exports can take six weeks and companies need to make decisions now about how they are planning to trade.

Keir Starmer: I do agree with that. One of the things that saddens me most from the discussions I have had in the last two or three weeks—the Secretary of State and others who have had such discussions know exactly what is being said—is that decisions are having to be made because of the fear of no deal. Such decisions are being triggered, but the chilling bit from the discussions I have had is that some of those steps are now irreversible. This is the first time we have come to that point.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: I promised I would give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Is not the thing this House has to understand that the backstop is there in case the Malthouse compromise turns into the Malthouse fantasy—if all the technologies are technological fantasies—and that Europe cannot give up on the backstop just because of all the wishy-washy promises from the UK Government? The EU has to stick with it, and Conservative Members just do not understand that.

Keir Starmer: The EU has been very clear about the backstop. It is to be observed that there are hon. Members working on the Malthouse compromise, but it is equally to be observed that the Government have not adopted it as their policy position.

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: I will just make a bit of progress on this point.

So it goes on, and so it will go on. The simple and painful truth is this: if there had been a viable alternative to the backstop, there would never have been a backstop. The negotiating parties, as everybody knows, searched for months for that elusive alternative. If there had been an alternative, the Prime Minister would never have signed up to the backstop and neither would the EU. They searched and they searched, and they did not find it, and everybody who has observed the negotiations knows that. The chances of a breakthrough now, in 43 days, seem to me to be slim.

Stephen Gethins: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is making a powerful point, as always, about the ineptitude of this Government. We know that there is not a whole lot of love, even on St Valentine’s Day, for the Government’s deal—we know that—and we know that we are in
danger of crashing off the cliff edge, with the damage that that will cause, and he is right to highlight it. Will he back our amendment (i), which very simply asks for an extension of no less than three months to ensure that we can avoid such a no-deal Brexit?

**Keir Starmer:** I have sympathy with the point that we will need an extension to article 50 sooner or later, whether a deal goes through or not, and that the question is what is the right binding mechanism for doing that. We will support measures proposed by others on that issue in due course, and I will return to that point.

**Mr Baron:** The right hon. and learned Gentleman is being generous with his time. In contrast to what he just claimed, the Secretary of State’s point was admirably clear. A good deal is preferable to no deal, but if there is no deal we will leave the EU on 29 March on those terms. Labour Members have an unfortunate habit of taking everything that the EU says as gospel, which is clearly not the case, and they ignore the fact that the EU could write the textbook on 11th-hour deals. Have some optimism in the ability to achieve a deal.

**Keir Starmer:** As for the Prime Minister taking us out of the EU on 29 March this year without a deal—we’ll see about that. I do not think that the majority in this House will countenance that; I think the majority in this House will do everything they can to prevent it. Having worked with the Prime Minister when she was Home Secretary and I was Director of Public Prosecutions, I know that she has a deep sense of duty. Deep down, I do not think that this Prime Minister will take us out of the EU without a deal on 29 March, and that is the basis on which we should be having this discussion.

**Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab):** My right hon. and learned Friend is right in what he says about business and the need for clarity, and it is clear for all to see that the Government will need to apply for an extension to article 50 to avoid no deal, or even if there is a deal. The reason they are not doing so, and the reason why the Brexit Secretary is not saying what he claimed, the Secretary of State’s point was admirably generous in giving way. No self-respecting businessman or woman would walk into negotiations on a deal and take no deal off the table. The United Kingdom is negotiating the biggest business deal in its history. It therefore makes sense to keep no deal on the table, because we know from the history of the EU that it makes concessions at the last minute. We need to hold our nerve. If we do, then at the wire we will get a good deal in the interests of both the EU and the United Kingdom.

**Keir Starmer:** I do not know how to let the hon. Gentleman down gently, but let me try this: we are so patently unprepared for no deal that it is not credible. Let me give an example. There are very serious allegations against people in custody across the EU under the European arrest warrant, which goes between our country and the EU27, and vice versa. If we leave without a deal, no arrangements are in place to deal with that. The idea that we will leave in such a way is simply not credible.

I have heard the argument that if we face the truth and say that no deal is not credible, that somehow plays into the EU’s hands. We have heard that for the past two years. I stood here and said that the Government needed to publish a plan of their objectives—remember the days when they said that they could not even do that because it would give the game away and the negotiations would be over? Then they published a plan. I stood here and argued that we needed an impact assessment. What was the response? They said, “If we publish impact assessments, the show will be over. Nobody in a negotiation would do that.” I stood here and said that we needed legal advice, and we got the same argument: “If we do that, the show will be over. We will give into the EU.” Now we have the same thing with a no-deal scenario. It is not credible, and it is not going to work.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Keir Starmer:** I will give way to the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main).

**Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab):** Is my right hon. and learned Friend as astonished as I am that we have a Prime Minister and Government who are willing to take this reckless gamble with the future prosperity of our country, just to keep their rotten party together?

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Keir Starmer:** I will make some progress. I have taken a lot of interventions, and I will take some more in a minute. My simple point, which I stand by, is that both sides have been searching for this alternative for most of the negotiations, and certainly since the phase 1 agreement in December a year ago. People have been searching for an alternative and they have not found it. If they had found it, we would not have a backstop. The likelihood of them finding that alternative in the next few weeks seems to me very slim, and even if they do, the chances of the deal getting through, with everything that has to follow by 29 March, are even slimmer. So many pieces of legislation and statutory instruments still need to be resolved.

That exposes what is really going on—this has come out in comments from across the House—which is a Prime Minister who is running down the clock and hoping to get to March, or even the end of March. The House should remember that the next EU summit is on 21 March, and if we get real changes to the deal, that is when they are likely to be signed off. At that late stage, the plan is essentially to send the same deal back to this House as a binary choice: my deal or no deal. There might be additional words that the Attorney General can say have real significance, but it will essentially be the same deal. That is not holding our nerve; that is playing recklessly, and we must say no.

**Mr Shaiilesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con):** The right hon. and learned Gentleman is being extraordinarily generous in giving way. No self-respecting businessman or woman would walk into negotiations on a deal and take no deal off the table. The United Kingdom is negotiating the biggest business deal in its history. It therefore makes sense to keep no deal on the table, because we know from the history of the EU that it makes concessions at the last minute. We need to hold our nerve. If we do, then at the wire we will get a good deal in the interests of both the EU and the United Kingdom.
Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman so much for giving way—I was beginning to think I had an invisibility cloak on. Just over a week ago there was a debate on a petition about extending article 50, which was signed by more than 100,000 members of the public. I spoke in that debate, which was sparsely attended, but I did not hear from the shadow Front Bencher that Labour policy is to extend article 50. Indeed, some speakers made it sound as if Labour policy was to have a people’s vote. Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman confirm what Labour is arguing for?

Keir Starmer: I am sure the question of policy is important, but I am facing the practical reality. We are 43 days away from 29 March, and no credible alternative is in sight. Either we accept that or we do not. The Prime Minister keeps coming back and giving a non-update: “I’m meeting people”—she does not say she has agreed anything—“can I have another two weeks?” We have been going on like that for weeks, and it must stop.

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: I am going to make some progress. Labour’s amendment is intended to put a hard stop to running down the clock. It states that on 27 February the Government must put a deal to the House for its approval, or table an amendable motion so that the House can take control of what happens next. It is essential that we do so. Businesses are saying that they cannot wait any longer. They are putting off investment decisions, and they cannot tolerate the threat of no deal. They are making and implementing contingency plans, some of which are irreversible.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The right hon. and learned Gentleman is making a strong point about the perils of no deal. Does he agree that the Government’s position on no deal is not just criminally reckless, it is also plain stupid? The EU knows as well as we do that a no-deal scenario would hurt us an awful lot. It is ridiculous.

Keir Starmer: I agree and I am grateful for that intervention. That is really the point. If it is not credible that we can leave on 29 March without a deal, and it is not, it is actually not a negotiating stance at all. It has never been seen in that way and it does not work. It is just farcical to suggest that we have to keep up the pretence that we are ready because then the EU will back down. It is ridiculous.

Let us put some detail on this. We have heard the warnings from Airbus and Nissan about future jobs and investment in the UK. Yesterday, Ford, another huge UK employer, said that no deal would be “catastrophic for the UK auto industry and Ford’s manufacturing operations in the country”, and that it will “take whatever action is necessary to preserve the competitiveness of our European business.”

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The right hon. and learned Gentleman is right to say that business wants certainty—he has made big play of that—but it was the CBI, the Federation of Small Businesses and GE Aviation in my constituency that said, “For goodness’ sake, back the Prime Minister’s deal.” He did not do that. He must understand that in failing to do so he and the Labour party become complicit in a crash-out.

Keir Starmer: Well, I am not going to take that lying down for this reason: on the Government Benches, did they vote for the deal on 29 January? [Interruption.] Hang on, hear me out. The answer to that is no. Anybody who voted for the Brady amendment was saying that it is conditional on change, so do not lecture anybody else about voting for the deal. Even the Prime Minister says, “On reflection, I’m not voting for my deal unless there are changes.” The hon. Gentleman really cannot throw the challenge across the House and say that the Opposition have to support the unchanged deal but the Prime Minister wants it changed.

Some on the Government Benches will casually dismiss the threat of job losses as “Project Fear.” It is not “Project Fear”—it is “Project Reality.” It is the jobs and livelihoods of those we represent that are at stake.

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: I am going to make some progress and then I will give way again.

Therefore, we need to take whatever steps are necessary to prevent a no-deal exit. Two weeks ago, this House voted to approve the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) and the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman). That was hugely welcome and it is just as binding on the Government as what else was passed that evening—you can’t choose one part and not the other. It showed what the Opposition have always said: there is no majority in this House for a no deal.

Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con): I have listened carefully today. In defence of the Secretary of State, he has made it quite clear that the Government’s policy, if it comes to it and the deal does not pass in the week beginning 25 March, is to leave with no deal. Is the right hon. and learned Gentleman clear in his mind what his party’s position will be in the same circumstances?

Keir Starmer: I am. Happily, we discussed that at our party conference and agreed unanimously—something I do not think happened at the hon. Gentleman’s party conference—[Interruption.] He knows very well what it is. It is to vote on the deal; if the deal does not go through, to call for a general election; and if that does not happen, there are two options: a close economic relationship and a public vote. We committed at our party conference to ensure we take whatever steps are necessary to avoid a no-deal exit and we will do so.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Excuse me, I have a bit of a head cold. The amount of white flags being thrown would give anyone a head cold. Can the shadow Brexit Secretary confirm that the Labour party’s position is that there must be legally binding changes to the withdrawal agreement on the backstop? That is the same position as that of DUP Members.

Keir Starmer: The position of the Labour party is that we have concerns about the backstop. [Interruption.] This is a very serious point and I intend to answer it. I
have not yet met anybody who does not have concerns about the backstop, both here and in Brussels, but we also recognise that, at this stage, with the article 50 window all but closed, we need a backstop, and it is inevitable that we need a backstop. That is our position.

Lady Hermon: I thank the shadow Brexit Secretary for allowing me to intervene on that very important point. He is very knowledgeable about Northern Ireland and is a great friend to Northern Ireland. He will recognise the importance of the backstop to the people of Northern Ireland and indeed across the United Kingdom. There seems to be some confusion about what the leader of the Labour party says about the backstop and what he, the shadow Brexit Secretary, says. I think the people of Northern Ireland—indeed, this House—are entitled to clarification from the right hon. and learned Gentleman about what exactly the position of the Labour party is on the backstop.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. As the hon. Lady knows, I worked in Northern Ireland for five years with the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I know how deeply this is felt in Northern Ireland across all communities. I was there for two days last week. I made the point there that, although we have concerns about the backstop, we do accept that there must be a backstop, it is inevitable and that, therefore, notwithstanding those concerns, we support a backstop. That is very important.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way because I actually find that I agree with a great deal of what he is saying. He is saying that leaving with no deal would bring huge consequences for our economy and we should not countenance it. He is also saying that within the withdrawal agreement he sees the need for a backstop. I have listened closely to what he said before: that he also agrees on the elements about needing a transition period and certainty on citizens’ rights. Given that he now appears to agree with everything that is in the withdrawal agreement, why will he not vote for it and what more does he need?

Keir Starmer: I am not sure the hon. Lady carefully read the proposition we were voting for on the meaningful vote. It was the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration taken together. The statute requires them to be taken together, because we cannot read the withdrawal agreement without reference to the political declaration and vice versa. What I have said about the backstop is important and it is important I say it for the whole of the United Kingdom, but particularly for people in Northern Ireland, and I stand by it.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Is the right hon. and learned Gentleman able to clarify in plain English at what point the Leader of the Opposition will unequivocally back a people’s vote?

Keir Starmer: The policy we have adopted is clear about what the options are. What we are trying to do today is to put a hard stop to the running down of the clock. That will enable options to be considered in due course. I hope that will happen. When they are considered, we will take our position and we will see where the majority is in the House.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): The backstop is taking up a lot of the discussion today because it is incredibly important. May I remind my right hon. and learned Friend that, in the debates leading up to the meaningful vote, concerns about trade were mentioned three times more than the backstop? Can I encourage him to move on now from the backstop and talk about all the other problems that Members across the House have with the deal?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. One of the central problems in all this is that the political declaration is 26 pages long, it is vague in the extreme and simply talks about a “spectrum” of outcomes. The main theme of the political declaration is that the extent of any checks at borders will depend on the degree of alignment; therefore, there is a spectrum of outcomes. I think that we all understood that within hours of the referendum. That is why there is all this pressure on the backstop—because the political declaration is so ill-defined.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Following my right hon. and learned Friend’s replies to the hon. Members for Bracknell (Dr Lee) and for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), does he agree that the Government have clearly rejected Labour’s offer of a less damaging Brexit, and that to wait until the end of March to activate our unanimously agreed conference policy in favour of a public vote would be far, far too late?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that point. What I will say is this—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Kwasi Kwarteng): What is it?

Keir Starmer: Just as I am about to give the answer I am asked from a sedentary position what the answer is. Perhaps those on the Government Front Bench should just listen. The position is this. As the House knows, we set out the Labour party’s position in a letter to the Prime Minister. We set out in clear terms what a close alignment; therefore, there is a spectrum of outcomes. I am not going to disclose at this stage what those discussions are about because they are, by their nature, confidential. They are ongoing, I think the Secretary of State would want them to be kept confidential—that is the only way in which they can properly be held—and there are plans for further meetings. We go back to the point raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), there must come a point at which the options are clarified, reduced and voted on—I agree with that proposition—and it needs to be done before the end of March.
Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. and learned Friend is making some important and good points about the Prime Minister’s running down the clock, but he took that round of applause—that standing ovation—at the Labour party conference when he talked about a people’s vote with a remain option, so I have been waiting patiently for the section of his remarks in which he will perhaps dissociate himself from the remarks of the general secretary of Unite, who said yesterday that it would not be in the country’s interests to have remain on the ballot paper in a public vote. We are aware that sections in letters and remarks sometimes have a habit of being redacted by others, perhaps further up the pay chain. Will my right hon. and learned Friend assure us that at the next available opportunity we will be voting in favour of a people’s vote?

Keir Starmer: I do not think I need to associate with or dissociate from anybody on what my views are. I think they are pretty clear. As for the timetable, I have set out the order of events.

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: I am going to make some progress and then I will take more interventions. I have taken a lot of interventions and I am conscious that a lot of people want to speak in this debate.

Let me go back to the amendment that was passed in respect of no deal, because it was passed by a majority in this House and is just as important as the other amendment that was passed. Let us make no mistake, though: on its own it is not enough. If Parliament wants to prevent no deal, it has to take further action. We cannot be bystanders; we have to act. The simple truth of it is that we cannot declare that we are against no deal, because it was passed by a majority.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): Will the right hon. and learned Friend assure us that at the next available opportunity we will be voting in favour of a people’s vote?

Keir Starmer: Not at the moment.

The hard stop would ensure that on 27 February the Prime Minister must either put her deal to a vote or allow Parliament to decide what happens next. Let us be clear, though: other steps need to be taken, beyond today’s amendment. They will include the Bill introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), which would provide a further safeguard against no deal and allow the House to decide whether the Government should seek an extension of article 50 if no deal has been agreed by 13 March. I hope that anyone who genuinely opposes no deal would see that by that date, 13 March, an extension would be unavoidable.

Gareth Snell: Will my right hon. and learned Friend clarify something for me? I am sympathetic to and almost supportive of the efforts of my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and her Bill, which was introduced with good sincerity. What is the Labour party Front-Bench position, though? Were we to have an extension that went further than the three months, would my right hon. and learned Friend intend that we would participate in European Union parliamentary elections? Those of us going on the knocker this weekend ought to know.

Keir Starmer: As I have said from this Dispatch Box, so far as the extension is concerned, it obviously depends on the period and the period the EU has indicated might be available is the period till 1 July, because that would avoid involvement in the parliamentary elections. It is not our policy to participate in the parliamentary elections——[Interruption.] For obvious reasons, we will not be——[Interruption.] This is a really serious point. There is this casualness about no deal—that we can somehow, in a macho way, march off the cliff and it will all be fine; it will be so good for the country. The point is that if, by 13 March—just over two weeks before the potential for no deal—there is no deal, we have to take action if we are serious about avoiding the calamity and catastrophe of no deal. I do not mind standing up here and saying that I will take whatever steps are necessary to avoid no deal, because I will never be persuaded—never—that it is a good negotiating tactic or could possibly be good for our country.

The House will then need to debate and vote on credible options to prevent no deal. We have been clear that those options are either the close economic relationship that includes a customs union and close alignment to the single market that we set out in the letter to the Prime Minister, or a public vote on a deal or proposition that can command the support of the House. There are no other credible options remaining, and those options are miles away from the approach that the Government are currently taking. First, though, we need to stop the Government further running down the clock, put in a hard stop and allow this House to take control of the process. That is what today is about and I urge all Members to support our amendment.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): We have moved yet another of these almost weekly engagements, at which we are told that historic decisions are about to be taken, a meaningful vote is on the verge of emerging and all is going to be clear. Every time we do that, one immediately encounters an appalling shambles—that is the only way to describe the position of the Government and of this Parliament, and I am sure that is the way it is seen by an overwhelming majority of the citizens of this country, regardless of what side of the argument they are on. So far, the debate today is following precisely that pattern.

I have not been lucky enough to have my amendment (c) selected, which is also in the name of, and was tabled at the behest of, the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman). An amendment has been selected—the one in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry)—that addresses the same problem, which is that, so far as I can see, in these debates we have not yet identified, and certainly not demonstrated, a clear majority for any particular course. We are not being given many opportunities to do so, and we keep retreating when we get given them. We have to decide—cross-party, obviously, given the divisions—how a majority will be established to pass motions, which in my opinion, under our constitution, will bind a Government, so that we can move policy towards something that resolves this situation satisfactorily.
Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I agree with everything that my right hon. and learned Friend has said. Does he agree that a very important discussion that preceded this business—and, indeed, questions and answers during the Secretary of State’s speech—indicated that the only way that what he and I seek to achieve, namely consensus across the House if the Prime Minister’s deal does not succeed, will be implementable is if we legislate for it, and thereby legally bind the Government? The Government have made it perfectly clear—I think the Speaker has ruled in this direction—that they will not be bound by anything short of legislation. That means that we have a rather elaborate process ahead of us as we come to a conclusion over the next few months.

Mr Clarke: I think I agree with that; I cannot give an off-the-cuff response to my right hon. Friend’s detailed procedural point. Eventually, yes, we will have to legislate, first to gain time, and secondly, to get the necessary resolution of these problems in the long-term interests of this country.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend referred to legislation. Of course, he voted for the Third Reading of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, which expressly states that the European Communities Act 1972 will be repealed on exit day. Is that not sufficient proof of the need for the kind of legislation to which he referred? We do not need to have all these mysterious differences, because the anchor to the referendum is the repeal of that Act. Does my right hon. and learned Friend not agree? He voted for it.

Mr Clarke: Government and Parliament can at any time produce legislation to reform previous legislation because the circumstances have changed. The idea put forward by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that the Government are now bound by what they passed on article 50 and by the withdrawal Act, and cannot possibly contemplate amending that Act or asking us to vote again on article 50, is, with great respect to him, one of the most preposterous propositions that I have ever heard anybody put before this House. The Government have every possible power in their hands to decide to avoid the calamity of leaving on 29 March with no deal whatever—leaving not with any deal or agreement—a withdrawal agreement. I have just heard the Irish backstop accepted by its Front-Bench spokesman—quite rightly; it is necessary, unfortunately. The money has been settled, and nobody is arguing about EU citizens’ rights. Labour voted against the agreement because it was a divided party, and it decided that the only thing on which it could keep itself together was on all voting against the Government. That was all.

Both the big parties are shattered now; there were large rebellions on both sides. The biggest group of people who joined in the defeat were ardent remainers who, unlike me, are firm believers in the people’s vote. They are still facing difficulties, because they do not want us to leave on any terms, so they are going to keep—

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr Clarke: I will give way to my right hon. Friend—my best friend among all these arch-remainers, who are otherwise my political allies in the House, day in, day out, though they all voted against the agreement. They are still threatening to do so, because they do not want to leave. They think there should be a people’s vote.

Then there was a faction of people who were not content to vote for the political agreement, because it will take years to negotiate and is rather general, and who wished to be reassured on the record, before we started negotiations, that we would establish basic and sensible points, such as our staying in a customs union and having some regulatory alignment. If that was established, all the arguments about the Irish border would go completely out of the window, because we would have an open border in Ireland and an open border in England. I would like to see that. I would vote for that—and I have, several times; I voted with the official Opposition once or twice on a customs union—but it is not necessary, because everything is up for grabs after we leave. There will be wide-ranging negotiation. I think the pressure from business interests, economies and people of common sense on both sides of the channel will drive us towards something like that in some years.

Meanwhile—this is where we are now—the Government have pursued one of the factions on the Conservative side of the House. We have a kind of breakaway party
within a party—a bit like Momentum, really—with a leader and a chief whip. They are ardent right wingers.

The Government have set off in pursuit of these bizarre—as some Government members say—negotiating tactics; some of them, though, seem positively to want to leave with no deal, because any agreement with foreigners from the continent is a threat to our sovereignty.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) rose—

Mr Clarke: I will not give way any more. I have great respect for my hon. Friend, so I hope that I will not be too disparaging of his views—he and I fundamentally disagree—but lots of people want to speak, and I cannot give way as if I were a Front-Bench spokesman. That is not possible.

That is the wrong group to pursue. The Brady amendment, which I voted against, is meaningless; it rejects the agreement that the Prime Minister has spent two years getting and has commended in warm terms to the House. We can see from interventions that a lot of the people in the European Research Group will reject anything she comes back with, because they want—some of them—to leave with no deal. That is where we and the House must start from, and we have very little time within which to do something.

We must get past these procedural obstacles that the Government keep putting in place about what we can and cannot do, and get some binding policy that the Government have to follow. In the end, some of us—even remainers, divided over referendums—will have to back down once a sensible majority is established, and will have to compromise. That was the aim of the amendment that the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland and I tabled. I hope that method will still be considered—a single transferrable vote, a ballot—because we will get nowhere until we have some idea of what can command a majority here.

I think there is a majority in favour of a customs union. I do not know whether there is a majority in favour of a referendum—there might be, I do not know. I am certain that there is an overwhelming majority flatly against allowing us to leave with no deal. My guess is that there are about 20 or 30 Members of this House who actually want to leave with no deal, and they should be rejected; I very much hope that they will be.

We will need more time to do this. I am quite happy to revoke article 50, and then invoke it again, if the House wants, when we have some idea of where we want to go. If we do get through this immediate crisis without a calamity, there will be four or five years of negotiations, on any sensible estimate, on what kind of arrangements we will have. That will be based on the political declaration. We cannot allow this kind of calamitous debate and constant crisis to continue throughout those five years.

Before we even start those negotiations—this is why we would revoke or extend article 50—we need a British consensus, a clear parliamentary majority, a path established that the British Government can go to Brussels with, knowing that it commands a majority. Our partners must see that we can command a majority for it. We must get through these daft days and eventually have a debate that produces a majority for something sensible.

At the moment, I think Brussels has given up on us. It does not think that the British Government even agree with themselves on what they are trying to pursue, and they have no idea what the British Government are asking now. It requires great faith on Brussels’ part to believe that the British Government can get a majority for anything that they will produce in the next two or three weeks, if they get some form of words amending what we have. It is time that this House found some method—I have advocated some approaches that we might take—of taking command of the situation. That would have the support of the vast majority of members of the Government; it would make their position easier. The vast majority of Members, I suspect on both sides of the House, are looking for such an eventuality to emerge very soon indeed.

1.40 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I rise to speak to our amendment (i), standing in my name and that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) and other right hon. and hon. Members—I am grateful for the support that we have received from the Liberal Democrats today. It is a much shorter and simpler amendment than the one we tabled two weeks ago, because above all else we need to get the House, as I hope the whole House will agree, to halt, at least temporarily, the headlong rush towards the cliff edge of no deal. Indeed, I find the degree of consensus developing between the Secretary of State and the no-deal brigade on his own Back Benches to be extremely alarming. I hope that is not an indication of where the Government’s thinking is leading.

Our amendment asks the Prime Minister to seek an extension of at least three months. That is important, because it takes us past the European Parliament elections, which could otherwise cause a significant difficulty, certainly for the European Union.

Gareth Snell: I want to ask the hon. Gentleman a similar question to the one I put to those on our Front Bench. If the SNP amendment is adopted today, is the intention for the United Kingdom to participate in the European elections at the end of May?

Peter Grant: I think that option has to be open, but it will be very difficult, because the Europeans have already carved up our democratic representation in Europe. I keep an open mind. I want us to continue to be part of the European Parliament and other European institutions. It looks as if, at least in the short term, Scotland will lose that benefit, but I look forward to us getting back in as quickly as possible.

The other amendments that have been selected have a lot of merit to them. I do not think there is anything in them that I would oppose or that is incompatible with our amendment. I would ask the supporters of those amendments to look at our amendment, because extending article 50 has become an urgent prerequisite for anything else. We do not have time to spend tabling motions, having debates or developing substantial legislation, whether on a customs union, a people’s vote or anything else, unless we stop the clock. Contrary to what the
Secretary of State said, the Prime Minister has not been trying to stop the clock. She has been trying to let it keep ticking down, while nothing but nothing was happening to prepare us for Brexit.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the Speaker has ruled that all these motions are advisory, including the motion rejecting no deal, and that the referendum itself was also advisory? Why are we hurtling over the cliff on an advisory referendum and not accepting the will of this House that it would be calamitous?

Peter Grant: I do not accept the argument that says, “Because the vote was close,” or, “Because the legislation did not say it was binding.” I think we have to accept the results of the referendum in each of the four nations of the United Kingdom. That is why, although I sympathise with where my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) is coming from, I have some difficulty with his amendment, because I do not think we can permanently revoke article 50 unless we have a revised decision in another referendum.

When I say that we have to respect the result of the referendum, we have to respect the results in the four nations. It would be unacceptable for us to permanently revoke article 50 for England and Wales without asking the people of those nations what they thought. It is equally unacceptable and unconstitutional to ignore the express will of the people of Scotland or indeed Northern Ireland. We have the ridiculous situation where Northern Ireland cannot be made to stay in the United Kingdom against the will of its people and cannot be taken out of the United Kingdom against the will of its people, but can be taken out of the European Union against the will of its people. How does that work?

I cannot see any prospect of the Prime Minister’s deal being accepted by Parliament either before or after 29 March. I cannot see any prospect of the European Union agreeing any significant changes in the next month to a deal that it has spent two years with the Government agreeing to, so we are not going to leave with a deal on 29 March. As the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), the Father of the House, has said, there are barely 25 people in this place who would countenance leaving with no deal on 29 March, so surely the only credible, tenable and defensible solution is not to leave on 29 March, but to put back the leaving day until we can sort things out and at least engage in some kind of damage limitation.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con) rose—

Peter Grant: I could not give a speech without giving way to the hon. Gentleman.

Stephen Kerr: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is quite right that the vast majority of people in this House want a deal that we can leave the European Union with in an orderly way. On that basis, and given the urgency of the situation, why did the First Minister of Scotland, our country, refuse to turn up for a high-level meeting involving the Prime Minister, the Chancellor, the Home Secretary and the First Minister of Wales to avoid a no-deal Brexit?

Peter Grant: It really is a bit cheeky to criticise the First Minister of Scotland for missing one meeting when she has been available to meet every day since the Brexit referendum. She and other Ministers of the devolved nations have attended meeting after meeting. They have been invited to express their views and then been told that their views counted for nothing.

Any Prime Minister who was putting the best interests of the people before the narrow, short-term interests of herself and her party would have asked for an extension by now. I want Parliament to say to the Prime Minister, bindingly or non-bindingly, “Ask for an extension.” I also want Parliament to be respected when it said, “Get no deal off the table.”

I do not know whether Members will recognise these words: “We must reject the ideological templates provided by the socialist left and the libertarian right.”

Those words are from the Conservative party manifesto of 2017. Those were the promises on which every single Conservative Member of Parliament stood and was elected. If no-deal Brexit is not an ideological template provided by the libertarian right, I do not know what is. Those Members have been elected on a promise not to go with the disaster of no deal, so if the Government cannot prevent a no deal, they will have to go, because they will be in flagrant breach of one of the most fundamental promises of the Conservative manifesto.

Stephen Gethins: I thank my hon. Friend for making such a powerful case. Colleagues on the Government Benches have made the point about not wanting a no-deal Brexit. Regardless of what anybody wants—I would like a people’s vote and for us to remain in the EU; others take a different view—all that our amendment does is give us an extension, so that we are not rushing this when time is fast running out. I therefore look forward to welcoming the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) in the Lobby with us later.

Peter Grant: I never give up on the possibility of anybody in this House or elsewhere finally seeing sense and recognising what is best for the people, so I, too, look forward to welcoming the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) in the Lobby later.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: The hon. Gentleman has reminded me of the party manifesto, on which I apparently stood at the last election, and which is binding on me. I have never seen this document. It was produced some time during the campaign, rather obscurely, and I read about it in the newspapers. No copy was ever sent to me and I have never met a constituent who bothered to get a copy or read it. It had one rather startling policy in it, which was abandoned within about a day and played no further role. There is another myth growing: a new constitutional convention that says that anyone who stands for a party and gets elected here is bound by some rubbishy document that somebody unknown in central office, not the Cabinet, has produced and that is meant to bind them for the next Parliament.

Peter Grant: That is certainly an interesting proposal. Let me say that each and every time I have stood for election I have read, and often contributed to, the manifesto on which I have stood, and I will always honour my manifesto commitments to the best of my ability. I would expect my party colleagues in the Scottish Government to honour the manifesto on which they were elected as well.
The backstop is not the problem for me; in fact, I do not think it is really the problem for more than a tiny minority here. The reason I reject the deal—and the reason it is rejected by the Scottish National Party and the overwhelming majority of Scotland’s parliamentarians, both here and at Holyrood—is that it is a rotten deal for Scotland, and changing the backstop will not fix that. It will seriously damage our economy, it will place unsustainable strain on the public services that are so dear to our hearts, and it will cause wholly unacceptable pain to tens of thousands of citizens who have chosen to give Scotland the benefit of their talents.

Let me give just one example of what this means to real people. In November last year I had the privilege of visiting Glenrothes’s twin town, Boeblingen in southern Germany. The occasion was the town’s award of its highest civic honour to my good friend John Vaughan—a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) across the border—in recognition of the decades of voluntary service that John and his wife Karen had given, and their contribution to the bonds of friendship between our two towns. I later submitted an early-day motion to mark John’s achievement, and I am grateful to all who signed it.

On Tuesday, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife told the House that Karen Vaughan had been told that she must travel to Edinburgh and ask permission to register as a foreigner in her own country. Karen has lived in the United Kingdom for longer than the vast majority of people whom I can see in the Chamber. She has been here for 74 years. Someone whose contribution to these nations cannot be measured—someone who came here as a babe in arms three quarters of a century ago, after the defeat of Nazism in Europe—is now being told by this Parliament that she must make a round trip of nearly 100 miles to ask permission to be registered as a foreigner in the only land that she has ever known, and probably the only land that she will ever know. What have we become, Mr Speaker? And, much more frighteningly, if this is what we have become before Brexit, where in the name of God will we be after Brexit?

Of course, the Government will do as they always do, and say that it is just an isolated case. Everything about Brexit involves “isolated cases”, such as Jaguar Land Rover, Nissan, Ford and AirBus. But those are not isolated cases. The heavy engineering manufacturing industry is not an isolated industry. There have been warnings for years from every sector of the economy and every area of our public and civic life that Brexit would not work, and every one of them has been ignored for years.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Given the hon. Gentleman’s comments about Jaguar Land Rover, will he join me in welcoming its decision to invest additional funds in the new petrol engine plant in Wolverhampton?

Peter Grant: I really must make progress, because other Members want to speak. [Interruption.] I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for pointing out, from a sedentary position, that all those people have said that they will support the Prime Minister’s deal. In fact, they were all approached by the Prime Minister and told, “It is my deal or no deal: ask your MPs to support my deal.”

I was contacted by a number of businesses in my constituency, and I also went to see a number of businesses and civic organisations that were brought over at the request of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Yes, they all wanted us to avoid no deal, but when they were asked what they really wanted, none of them said, “The Prime Minister’s deal, as I read it in Hansard.” All of them—with one minor exception—said that if they could have what they wanted, we would not be leaving the European Union. If the Government were listening to the concerns of business, we would not be leaving the EU, and if we had to leave the EU, we would not be leaving the customs union and we would not be leaving the single market.

Let me make it clear, incidentally, that the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has explained to me why he has to leave. I accept that, and I take no offence from the fact that he is not able to stay until the end of my speech.

I want to refer briefly to the backstop, but only briefly. The backstop is there because the Government have not yet fulfilled the obligation to which they willingly signed up in December 2017 to come up with a solution to the border question that would honour the Belfast agreement while also meeting their own unilateral red lines. It is no surprise that the Government have not yet come up with that solution, because it does not exist. The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), admitted that from the Dispatch Box just over two weeks ago.

What everyone is calling the backstop would be better described, as it was yesterday by the former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, as a safety net. It is there to make sure that whatever else gets dropped in the chaos of Brexit, the Belfast agreement will not, in any circumstances, be allowed to fall and smash on the floor. It is not a backstop; it is a peace process guarantee. I defy anyone to say that they want the peace process guarantee to be time-limited, or to suggest that any party to the peace process would ever want to walk away from it unilaterally.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman has cited the Belfast agreement, and has talked of its falling and smashing on the floor. Will he at least do us the courtesy of reading it? There is no suggestion that, deal or no deal, the institutions contained in that agreement will be broken. There is no suggestion that the ability of Northern Ireland citizens also to have Irish citizenship will be taken away from them. If the hon. Gentleman is going to make claims, he should at least get them right.

Peter Grant: Yes, I have read the Belfast agreement, and with all due respect, if it comes to any arguments about interpretation I would sooner take the interpretation
I believe that the Prime Minister and the Government deserve the time and the space in which to meet the assurances that they gave the House on 29 January to deliver a legally binding change to the backstop, and to press the Malthouse compromise as an alternative in Brussels. I want the Prime Minister to be able to deliver Brexit, and I want the Government to be able to deliver and make a success of Brexit. I also want it to be crystal clear that the only way we will leave on WTO terms is by the choice of the EU through the intransigence of its approach.

I turn first to today’s amendments. It is telling that all of them are process amendments. None of them stipulates a specific alternative strategic objective of their supporters; none say anything at all about the substance, notwithstanding their criticism of the Government. As a result none offers a credible alternative to the path set out by the Prime Minister, which of course is both written in UK law and reflects international law under the Lisbon treaty, namely that we will leave the EU on 29 March either with a deal, as is being negotiated and as I believe is still possible, or on WTO terms.

We need to make sure we leave the EU on 29 March. We need it for the certainty and clarity businesses require, and we need it for the finality that the public want: an end to the tortuous haggle with Brussels, an end to the distraction and the displacement of all the other activity in this place and in government at large that has inevitably followed Brexit. It seems to me that extending article 50 cannot make any of the problems or challenges that we face easier; it can only make them worse. It is also clear that the EU will not agree unless there is a clear alternative model on the table that is reasonably deliverable within a finite period of time. Of course, some of the objections that have been made—it requires legislation, or it requires the Norwegian model, or some other whizzy idea that is no doubt being conjured up by thoughtful minds on the Opposition side of the House, and indeed on mine—would require time both to legislate and negotiate. We do not have that time, and the EU would not accept it.

Alan Brown: The right hon. Gentleman says that a deal can still be negotiated. Given that one of the reasons for the backstop is the admission that at the moment there is no off-the-shelf technological solution that can provide a working mechanism to have no border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, how is a solution going to be found over the next 40-odd days that would allow the backstop to be removed? It is impossible, is it not?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman raises a perfectly respectable point, but the head of HMRC has said there would not need to be any extra infrastructure at the border under any circumstances, and on the hon. Gentleman’s point about time, while I do not accept his point about the absence of technological solutions, we will have the implementation period to work closely with our partners in Dublin and the EU to make sure they can be put in place.

Of all the question-begging amendments, the one in the name of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) is the most devoid of credibility for three reasons. On the one hand the leader of the Labour party wants to be a member of a customs union—the
customs union—but at the same time he boasts of his plans to nationalise half the country, which would immediately and directly conflict with those rules. On the one hand he personally is widely regarded, although he does not say so explicitly, as being a proponent of Brexit—he wants to leave the EU, along with many on his side and on his Benches, and of course it is a requirement of the 2017 Labour manifesto—but on the other hand he is willing to trade free movement to allow open access to our borders in order to get a deal, again despite the pledges to exit the single market made in the Labour party manifesto. Finally, while he pledged in his 2017 election manifesto to leave the EU and the single market, he is flouting with a second referendum, yet without any indication of what the question might be or indeed which side he would be on. His Members in this House, the members and supporters in the various Labour party associations and indeed the public at large are entitled to question that and come to the conclusion that it is nothing but a fraud or a con; it is not a serious position.

That was affirmed by the shadow Brexit Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer): he talked of the hundreds of businesses he has met that have raised uncertainty as the No. 1 issue. I can imagine that as we have all heard businesses talk about uncertainty, and the public want some finality too, but that is why, if he and his party were genuinely serious, they would rule out extending the so-called Malthouse compromise proposal, and we have heard nothing about whether it has been formally tabled with our EU friends and partners. I understand that it has been raised and discussed with Michel Barnier, but has a written version of it actually been shared? We are seven weeks on from 29 January. This was the basis on which the Brady amendment was adopted, and it is a legitimate question to ask.

On that basis I will vote against the amendments, but I am, at the moment at least, struggling with the idea of voting for the principal motion. However, I will listen very carefully to the further assurances Ministers will give in winding up, because I would rather be in the position of supporting the Government, as I think the Government need the time and space to go in to bat in Brussels and to deliver the best deal for this country. We have a reasonable, modest set of demands to get a deal over the line and we want the Government to go in with the strongest hand possible.

2.6 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): My fear is that we are just drifting—that we are stuck in limbo on something that is going to have consequences for our country for generations. We know not what the alternative arrangements are going to be, and we know not when the Government are going to bring anything back and what it will be, and there are only six weeks to go. Businesses have no idea what to do about their April orders, because they do not know what the terms of trade will be. It is not just that they do not know whether there will be a deal or no deal; they do not even know, if there is no deal, what the basic arrangements are going to be. The British Chambers of Commerce has put questions to the Government and still not had any answers about what tariffs would apply and in which circumstances, and when rules of origin checks need to be done. The police do not know whether European arrest warrants that they have out at the moment on wanted criminals are going to just be ripped up overnight. The NHS does not know what its supplies of medicines are going to be in just six weeks’ time.

A local manufacturing business that exports about 80% of its products contacted me today saying that European suppliers are refusing to agree terms for continued supply; they are now establishing alternative suppliers. That is happening already, because there are only six weeks to go. The business says:

“We are rapidly becoming the laughing stock of the world.”

The Secretary of State, faced with what is effectively this growing chaos, responded today by hardening his position, I thought, in response to the question from the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis). I assume that that was an arranged response as a result of the threats from the European Research Group again today. The position used to be that the Government were embracing the prospect of no deal if the Prime Minister’s deal is not passed. I have heard people, including in this House, advocate no deal, and I would just say that they are not the people who are going to be overstretched if the prices of their food go up because of WTO tariffs and shortages at the border. They are not the people who will be hit if manufacturing jobs are lost, as so many manufacturers across the country have warned. But all of us will be affected if our border security is undermined because the Border Force cannot do basic criminal records checks on people coming into this country to see whether they are wanted criminals, having lost overnight the basic information from databases that they rely on.
David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): The right hon. Lady might recall that in November, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee warned that Brexit could actually cause a huge amount of cheap food imports to flood into the UK. Which particular scare story does she side with: the one that says there will be cheap food imports or the one that says that we are going to run out of fruit and veg?

Yvette Cooper: We should take very seriously the warnings about a reduction of up to 80% in the volume of goods passing through the border and the preparations that Border Force is making for that, as well as the warnings from major supermarkets including Lidl, Asda and Tesco about the potential restrictions on the food that they will be able to get into the shops and the warnings from the Environment Secretary—a strong leave campaigner himself—about tariffs on beef and lamb.

Tom Brake: Did the right hon. Lady hear a couple of days ago that the food industry is saying that it can no longer take part in Government consultations because no less than a third of its staff are now working on Brexit-related matters?

Yvette Cooper: That is really troubling, and it is now happening right across industry and across every sector. We heard this week from manufacturers in the car industry that they are putting tens of millions of pounds into preparations for no deal. It shows the scale of their concern about no deal that they are actually hoping that that money is going to be wasted. They hope that it will not be needed, but they are having to put that money in in the first place.

Some people have said that having no deal on the table is really important as part of a negotiating ploy, but that is just nonsense. The fact that no deal would hit us more than it would hit the other 27 means that this is not like negotiating a business deal, as one hon. Member has suggested. I am afraid that this is much more like negotiating a divorce. You do not just walk out and say goodbye to the home and all the assets without any clue of where you are going to sleep that night, while at the same time thinking that this is going to persuade your ex to give you half their pension. It just does not work like that, yet we are taking all these risks.

I would like to believe that the Prime Minister is heading for a workable deal and that she can build a consensus. I have called many times for cross-party consensus and for a cross-party commission to oversee negotiations. I have called many times for a customs union to support Yorkshire manufacturing, for a security backstop—not just for Northern Ireland—and for clarity about the future arrangements. My biggest concern is that we are facing a blindfold Brexit with no idea of what kind of arrangements we face. I would like to see indicative votes on the kinds of approach that hon. Members have suggested.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is the Prime Minister’s red lines, including not meeting our proposals on the customs union, that are holding us back and keeping us in this position?

Yvette Cooper: I agree with my hon. Friend that the Prime Minister has to change her red lines, particularly around the customs union but in other areas as well, because they are preventing any change and any proper debate on the way forward. Instead, she appears to be trying to create a sense of crisis and chaos in the final two weeks, during which Parliament and the EU will be locked in a game of chicken in which we will be forced to choose between the huge damage of no deal and a deal that has already been strongly rejected by this Parliament. That is not a responsible way to make decisions. It is not a responsible way for any Parliament to operate, and it is certainly not a responsible way for this Government to operate. They have a responsibility to keep us safe, to make sure that the sick can get their medicines and to make sure that the poorest people in this country can afford the price of food. The Government have a responsibility to do things in an effective way, not to create chaos because they cannot get a bad deal through.

We have put forward a revised Bill. Under the proposals, if we get to the middle of March and we still have no deal in place, the Prime Minister will have to choose whether she wants the default to be no deal or an extension of article 50 to give her more time to sort this out. That would have to be put to Parliament, giving Parliament the opportunity to avert no deal on 29 March and the chance to say that the Government’s approach is just not working. It will not have worked if we reach that date without a deal in place. The problem is that if we do not do something sensible like this, we will be living in a fantasy world in which people talk about alternative arrangements and say that everything will be fine and someone will come along and sort it all out, even though none of that will happen.

Mrs Main: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Yvette Cooper: I will not; I need to conclude my remarks.

It is as though we are all just standing around admiring the finery of the emperor’s new clothes when actually the emperor is running around stark naked, and everyone is laughing at us—or at least they would be if it were not so sad. So I really hope that the Government will show some responsibility and that they will end up supporting this Bill. Frankly, I hope that they will sort this out before we get to that point—before it is too late.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. An eight minute limit on each Back-Bench speech now applies.

2.16 pm

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I rise to support the amendment in my name and those of many hon. and right hon. Members from all parties across the House. In simple terms, it calls for the publishing of papers that I know have been placed before the Cabinet, that the Cabinet has looked at and debated, and that in stark terms identify the very real dangers to our economy, to trade and to business of a no-deal Brexit.

I had the great honour to serve in Cabinet and to attend Cabinet. You may call me old-fashioned, Mr Speaker, but I am firmly of the view that there are times when the
advice given to Ministers by their officials should remain confidential and should not be shared beyond the confines of that particular discussion. There are very good reasons for that, in my view. As a Minister, I made decisions not to share things. I take the firm view that advice given by, for example, the Attorney General to the Government should be subject to legal privilege. In those circumstances, it must be right that civil servants should be able to give advice without any fear that it might be made public. They should have no fear about giving such advice robustly and honestly.

The difference in this instance is that these papers that the Cabinet has debated contain important information that I believe my constituents and those of all other Members should have. It is also the view of a number of Cabinet members that those papers should be published. The fact—which nobody has denied—that members of the Cabinet take the view that those papers should be made public is the reason that I have tabled my amendment today and seek to persuade hon. and right hon. Members to support it.

These are not papers in the normal sense; they are papers of national importance. I am told that they make it very clear what the effects of a no-deal Brexit would be. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary has said that a no-deal Brexit would be “ruinous”, and he has no doubt come to that conclusion not only because he speaks to business, as he undoubtedly does, but because he has had sight of those papers and formed that sound opinion based on their contents.

Mrs Main: My right hon. Friend is being very informative. Is she prepared to tell us whether she has seen the papers or who is giving her this information? She is talking with great authority, so are we supposed to take her at her word that she is in the know?

Anna Soubry: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her intervention. I hope that she will take me at my word. Although the things I say in this place are often not agreed with, I do not make things up. I have asked both the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy about the papers, and it has never been denied that they exist, that they have been debated in Cabinet or that some Cabinet members believe that they should be published.

I gently suggest to my hon. Friend that the papers might assist her. I believe that she asked a question of a Minister about the need for us to get on with Brexit—I do not demur from her point on that—and get on with the trade deals so that businesses in her constituency can get on and trade with other countries. Perhaps if she saw the papers, she might know that businesses the length and breadth of our country already trade across the world. Businesses do not need a trade deal to do business and to trade. A deal enables us to do that business and that trade all the better. Perhaps it really is a very good idea that this place sees these papers, so that those hon. Members who are actually saying, as members of the Conservative party—the party of business—that it would be the right and responsible thing for this country to leave the European Union without a deal might be better informed as to the consequences.

Mark Pritchard: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Anna Soubry: I will take one short intervention.

Mark Pritchard: My right hon. Friend is being generous with her time. I do not agree with her, although I do respect her opinion, but does she accept that she may be asking for another precedent to be set? She sat in Cabinet and will know that documents can be sensitive, official, secret or top secret. Might this amendment not open the Pandora’s box for every Cabinet paper marked from sensitive to top secret to be leaked or let out?

Anna Soubry: I would not disagree with my hon. Friend at all. I have indeed seen those very same papers myself. When I was a Health Minister, I saw the risk assessment documents that took the firm view that it would not be in the public interest at all for some documents to be disclosed, for the very reasons that I have outlined. These papers are different, however, because members of the Cabinet who have seen them have unsuccesfully made arguments in Cabinet that they should be made public. That is the profound distinction in this case.

It really would be to the eternal shame of the Conservative party if it were to continue to support a no-deal Brexit. As ever, I make my views with perhaps too much robustness and sometimes with some passion, but I am one of the founding members of the people’s vote movement—I am very proud of that—and I believe that the only way through this impasse and mess is for this matter to go back to the country. However, I have now taken the view that the bigger national interest—I say this without any fear—is that I am no longer prepared not to vote in the interests of my country and my constituents and in accordance with my conscience. I am now of the view that ensuring that we do not crash out without a deal is my absolute priority and that is why I tabled amendment (e). I make that clear to my right hon. and very dear learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). We disagree on the people’s vote, but on this we are absolutely—probably as ever—as one.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Anna Soubry: I will not, just because I am running out of time and I want to make several important points.

The Conservative party is the party of business. This party is the party of competence when it comes to the economy—[Interruption.] Oh yes, and history shows that a Conservative Government always leave office with the economy in a better state than when they inherited it, because we always have to clear up the mess made by a Labour Government. That is the simple fact and reality of history. However, will this great party be so reckless and go against all that we value in our principles by actually suggesting that we should leave without a deal in the face of overwhelming evidence? How many more car manufacturers—Ford, Toyota, Nissan—have to make it clear that if we leave without a deal, that will seriously impact the way that they do business? In the real world, that means our constituents will risk losing their jobs. Over 800,000 people work in
just the automotive sector, never mind all the other millions who work in our manufacturing sector. Everybody with a scintilla of knowledge of the real world and of business and trade knows that the worst thing that could happen to our country is to leave without a deal. That is the view of the majority of Members of this place.

I gently say to the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, who is a thoroughly good and decent man, that his speech chilled me to the bone. He is a Conservative, yet he stood at that Dispatch Box ignoring the amendment that was passed that was tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman)—a former chairman of the Conservative Party—and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) for which 318 Members voted. The other amendment that was passed, which was tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady), was passed with 317 votes in favour. It is therefore shameful that the Secretary of State spent almost the entirety of his speech addressing the latter, not the former, even though the former had won cross-party support and the support of more hon. Members.

However, my party is in hock to the party within the party: the ERG. As others have said, it is funded by the taxpayer and others, with its own leader and its own Whip. The Secretary of State stood up and tossed out what each and every one of us must do, which is to do what is right for our country. The right thing for our country is to be as one in rejecting no deal and standing by, as this party once did, the people of this country, their jobs, their futures and the prosperity of business and trade.

2.26 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): What a mess. What a complete and utter mess our country is in. There are just 43 days to go before we leave the European Union and, as we currently do not have an agreement, we are staring down the barrel of leaving with no agreement at all. I urge the House to lift up its eyes from the Order Paper, the amendments, the whispered conversations, the scurrying of the Whips, and the scripted exchanges that we saw earlier, which I have to say reminded me at times of a badly written play in which some of the actors did not seem to know their lines, and actually look around at what we can see. We know that companies that export to Europe and companies that provide services to Europe are in a state of despair. Some of them are spending millions of pounds on preparing for the worst, including moving their operations across the channel. Official figures from the Netherlands Foreign Investment Agency showed this week that 42 companies relocated to the Netherlands last year citing Brexit as the reason.

Other firms have no idea what to prepare for. Last week, I was on a train and the man opposite me leaned over and said, “Can I ask you a question?” I said, “Of course.” He runs a small firm that makes products, and he sends his fitters out across Europe to fit them for his suppliers. He told me that his largest customer had rung him up and said, “Can you promise me that if there is a no-deal Brexit, you will be able to continue to fulfil my orders?” He looked at me and said, “What am I meant to say to him, because I don’t know the answer?”

I had to look at him and say, “Well, I don’t know the answer either.” I wonder whether the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), will be able to tell him what the answer is, because that man’s fear—we heard this from my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper)—is that his big customers will say, “We’re not taking the risk anymore. We’re taking our business somewhere else.”

Look at the companies that manufacture in Britain. We have heard about Airbus, Nissan, Jaguar Land Rover and, most recently, Ford. Look at those that export from Britain. We have spent much of this week debating the fact that the trade deals we were promised would be rolled over by now are not all going to be rolled over. The truth is that we are not ready and we are not prepared. Most Members know that no deal cannot possibly be allowed to happen, yet it remains—we heard it again from the Dispatch Box today—the official policy of Her Majesty’s Government that they will allow it to happen.

I was genuinely puzzled when the Secretary of State said that he respects the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) and the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) two weeks ago, and which was passed, but that his hands are tied by legislation. Well, I have a message for him: untie your hands and change that legislation.

It is no wonder that the rest of the world looks at this country with utter astonishment and amazement at what we are doing to our economy, our country and our future, and it should not need to be said in this House that thousands of businesses make about their future. What are we offering them? The Prime Minister said this week, “Hold your nerve.” I am entitled to ask, hold our nerve for what?

It is now more than two weeks since the Brady amendment was passed, more than two weeks since the Malthouse compromise was seized upon like a thirsty man grabs at a drink in the desert, yet I fear it is a mirage. We all know that the search for alternative arrangements to keep an open border in Northern Ireland did not start two weeks ago; it has been going on for about two years. The best minds, the best negotiators and the best brains have searched, but they have not found. Those arrangements do not currently exist, a point made forcefully by the former Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, in his evidence to the Exiting the European Union Committee yesterday; and it is why Donald Tusk said yesterday that he is still waiting for proposals from the Government.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Further to the point my right hon. Friend is making, last year there was all this discussion of the so-called “max fac” option and the European Union rejected that option, which was based on technology that is now being put forward again.

Hilary Benn: My hon. Friend is, of course, entirely right. Nothing I heard from the Prime Minister on Tuesday and nothing I heard from the Secretary of
State at the Dispatch Box today persuades me, or anyone else, that those alternative arrangements will miraculously appear in the 43 days that remain.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Just a slight nuance on the earlier debate. The European Union is not so rude as to say that it has rejected this, but it is saying, “If your fantasies don’t come through, let us have the security policy of a backstop. We don’t say your fantasies are wrong, but we are taking our insurance policy just in case.”

Hilary Benn: The backstop is, indeed, an insurance policy, and we cannot put a time limit on it, because it would not be an insurance policy if it is not there when it is needed. We cannot allow one side to withdraw unilaterally. The tragedy that the backstop illustrates is that we are spending all this time on something that is necessary because the Prime Minister created the problem in the first place when she casually announced that we are leaving the single market and the customs union, probably not thinking through the consequences that have brought her to this point.

We have these debates every two weeks, but we are spending barely any time focusing on the real problem. As the Father of the House pointed out in his wonderfully eloquent speech, we have no idea what Brexit actually, finally, means, because the Government have refused to make the choices that confront them and have failed genuinely to reach out across the House.

Nothing illustrates that more clearly than the example of a customs union. In her heart, the Prime Minister knows that, if we want to keep an open border in Northern Ireland and if we want to keep friction-free trade, we will have to remain in a customs union with the European Union, yet she cannot bring herself to confirm that fact, not because it would be economically damaging—it would be quite the opposite—but because it would be politically damaging to the party she leads.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I suspect the Prime Minister knows that the advice from the Law Officers is that to create a hard border, which follows axiomatically from the policy wanted by my colleagues in the ERG, would be a breach of our international legal obligations under the Good Friday agreement. As we are a rule of law state, we do not do that sort of thing, which is why it is a complete fantasy to try to pursue it.

Hilary Benn: I can only bow in admiration to the clarity with which the right hon. and learned Gentleman makes that point.

We know that is where we will have to end up, and humouring those who refuse to recognise it is where we will end up, while the national interest is being threatened, is not what I regard as the leadership that we have a right to expect from any Government in this country.

If the Prime Minister were genuinely to reach out, even at this late stage, I would welcome it, but we are careering towards a cliff. She is at the wheel and the Cabinet are sitting on the back seat. At some point, they will have to decide to lean over and take the steering wheel off her. If that does not happen, a no-deal Brexit might come to pass.

We know that today is not the day when we will take that decision, but in two weeks’ time we will. Two weeks’ time will be decision day, or whether whatever this Government is going to take for itself the means to prevent a no-deal exit from the European Union, so long as the Government continue to stand at the Dispatch Box and refuse to give the House the assurance it is entitled to receive, especially given the amendment passed two weeks ago.

I am one of the proud sponsors of the Bill, in its new and improved form, tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), and I will enthusiastically support it in the Division Lobby if the amendment is chosen. Whatever our different views about where we should go afterwards, I hope the one thing that will unite the House is that almost everyone—not everyone, but almost everyone—agrees that we cannot leave with no deal.

In most of my previous speeches I talked about where I would like to go, but the fundamental problem is that we have not debated what we want Brexit to look like. Future generations will look in puzzlement at the way in which the negotiations have been structured. One day I will see the Prime Minister stand at the Dispatch Box and say, “I am applying for an extension to article 50,” and at that moment the stranglehold of 29 March will be broken, the Members who have been humoured will discover that they were led a merry dance in their belief that we would, in fact, leave with no deal on 29 March and the question will then be asked: what do we use the extension for? At that moment, we will no longer be able to hide from the choices that need to be made, and I, for one, look forward to that happening.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. A six-minute limit now applies.

2.37 pm

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): It is traditional in this House to say it is a pleasure to follow the previous speaker; it really is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), with whose speech I thoroughly agree. I did not think that today’s event, unlike the one two weeks from now, would be of any real interest. I was wrong, but in a very bad way.

There was a fascinating, and rather horrifying, series of exchanges before this debate began and during its opening, and those exchanges have driven me, finally, to the conclusion that I admit I have gradually been forming over the last few weeks and months.

First, when the chips are down, this Government—my Government—and this Prime Minister, for whom I, unlike many colleagues, voted when she came for re-election, would prefer to do what some of my esteemed colleagues would prefer to do: head for the exit door without a deal. The Secretary of State informed us that that is the policy of Her Majesty’s Government if the Prime Minister’s deal does not succeed. That is a terrifying fact.

Secondly, I fear I have been driven to the final conclusion that it is only by legislation that we will resolve this problem, because it is only by legislation that the Government will feel compelled to act. They do not accept any motion in this House as binding on them—but they do accept orders that order you, Mr Speaker, to take certain actions, or that order the House to follow
certain procedures, the Standing Orders having been changed, as happened successfully in the past weeks and months. When it comes to governmental action, it is abundantly clear that only legislation will compel.

The third conclusion I am driven to is that the Bill that the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and I, and others, have put forward, which is a successor Bill to the previous Bill, is a necessary instrument. It commands the Prime Minister to take a series of actions that will enable her to find out what delay the House commands and what delay the EU is willing to accept, and then to follow that course if she has not achieved a deal by 13 March. Beyond that, I am driven to the conclusion—this came out in the brief conversation I had with the Father of the House—that we will then have to do what the Opposition shadow Secretary of State and many other hon. Members have suggested: find a consensus across this House for a positive alternative, also, alas, by legislation.

This is a remarkable condition for Parliament, the Government and this country to find themselves in. The structure of our affairs, almost throughout our history, since this House first established its rights over and against the Crown, has been that the Government—Her Majesty’s Ministers—put forward policy and carry it out, subject only to the ability to maintain the confidence of the House, and to legislate in it. To my knowledge, it has never previously been the practice for this House to have to take control and direct Government policy by legislation. That is an astonishing turn of events.

**Norman Lamb** (North Norfolk) (LD): Would the right hon. Gentleman like to reiterate that in a fortnight’s time, it really will be high noon, and there will be no further opportunity to intervene to ensure that Parliament takes control of the process?

**Sir Oliver Letwin**: The right hon. Gentleman, who was a colleague of mine in the coalition Government, and to whom I pay tribute for his part in taking forward this Bill and other measures in which we are jointly engaged, is absolutely right about that. On 27 February, there is no place to hide. On that date, this House will make a decision that will lead either to this country leaving the EU without a deal, or to delaying the UK’s exit, thereby giving us a chance, if many other things follow, to find an alternative deal that can be agreed by this House, that can be legislated through, that can be mandated for the Government, and that can give this country a secure and prosperous future outside the EU. It is on 27 February that we will have to make that decision.

My final point is that in these circumstances, being an ordinary Member of Parliament, as opposed to a member of the Cabinet—many of us have been in previous Cabinets—is no longer the kind of task that many of us have always assumed it would be. Mostly, our country has operated on the principle that its great work is done by Governments, and that we in this House have the extraordinary privilege of observing, informing, scrutinising and checking, but do not have to take the ultimate responsibility for those crucial decisions that those of us who have served in Cabinets and in National Security Councils have, from time to time, had to take about what this country does. On 27 and 28 February, if we come to debate that Bill, and in succeeding weeks and months, as we have to legislate for the policy of this country in relation to the EU, all of us in this House will suddenly have to take the awesome responsibility of playing our part in trying to find a way through that enables our fellow citizens to have a secure and prosperous future.

**Anna Soubry**: As ever, my right hon. Friend is giving a passionate and brilliant speech and statement of the situation we are in. I wonder whether he could help us in one respect: does he believe that the papers I mentioned in my amendment (e) should be published? Would that assist?

**Sir Oliver Letwin**: I most fervently believe that they should be published; much more information on the no-deal exit should be available. I would vote for my right hon. Friend’s amendment, were it not for the infelicity of the fact that it would knock out the Government’s motion, which I am committed to voting for, having consistently maintained the position in this House that I will always back the Government in their undertaking to get their deal through until that is no longer possible. Perhaps I am a romantic, but I have always thought that my task was to try to assist a Conservative Government in coming to a solution. Although many of my hon. Friends do not find themselves able to do that, I will continue to do it. It is only for that reason that I shall not back her amendment; I shall abstain on the matter.

My right hon. Friend is of course right in substance: those papers should be out, because when this House comes to legislate, as I hope it will and fear it must, it will be, so to speak, a Cabinet. We will be making real-life decisions about what happens to our fellow countrymen—not just legislating in the hope that many years later, subject to further jots and tittles, the law, as administered by the system of justice, will work better. We will be making a decision about the future of this country. How can we possibly make those decisions unless we are properly informed? The process of which we are now at the start will require the fundamental realignment of the relationship between the civil service, Government and Parliament. There is no way we can continue to act as though we were merely a body to which the Government were accountable; for a period, for this purpose, we will have to take on the government of our country.

2.46 pm

**Mr Chris Leslie** (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I applaud the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) for seeking leadership and decisiveness at this moment. It makes me ask: who should be held responsible for the groundhog day moment we find ourselves in? It is no secret that I regard Brexit as an unmitigated disaster, particularly for the most vulnerable and least well-off of my constituents, whose jobs and livelihoods are threatened. I also hold the Prime Minister responsible for the conduct of the negotiations, accepting as she did this ridiculous arrangement whereby the divorce arrangements are separated from the future relationship. That should never have been allowed to happen. She then negotiated a deal that nobody really wanted, but which she is absolutely determined to prosecute at
almost any cost. We are now in this ridiculous situation of the Prime Minister saying, “Back me or we all hold hands and jump off the cliff together.”

Brexit is not just a disaster; it is also a tragedy because of the economic consequences. We have been talking about the trade deals that we were promised would all be ready one second after midnight on 29 March. We discovered this week that only four or five of the 40 free trade agreements will be ready.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): We have got the Faroe Islands.

Mr Leslie: We do have the Faroe Islands, but the deals with Turkey, Japan, South Korea and Canada will not be ready. As well as the breach with our largest trading partner, the European Union, we must add a breach and fracture in our trade arrangements with all those other countries.

Brexit is not just an economic tragedy, because there are other tragedies. My heart breaks when I think about the history of our country leading up to this moment: working in alliances with our European allies; those citizens’ rights that have accrued; and the ability not just of generations of people to come, work, live and study here, but of our children to do the same reciprocally.

We talk about the backstop as though that nomenclature somehow describes what we are talking about. Let us be plain about what we are hearing. Let us be honest about why we are in this situation. I want action today. Earlier this week, I said that we needed to snap out of this delusion now, because I worry about the time that we have in which to legislate.
a remarkable job in getting all the various organisations together. Like her, I am concerned because, as she knows, Jaguar Land Rover and a number of other companies are based in Coventry, and the local CBI has contacted me voicing concerns about the direction we are heading in with these negotiations. I hope that the right hon. Lady agrees with me.

Dame Caroline Spelman: West midlands MPs from across the political divide have sounded the alarm together for the jobs that are being put at risk.

Let me turn to a fresh example of what is at stake. We often speak about the economic cost, but there is a huge human cost. As Second Church Estates Commissioner, I was approached by the Bishop of Europe—yes, the Church of England has a diocese of Europe—on this subject. There are approximately 1 million European citizens living in the UK, many of whom are pensioners, and 250,000 are estimated to be receiving ongoing healthcare treatment. In addition, there are 50 million visitors from the UK annually to the continent, and they are covered by the European health insurance card. Indeed, 27 million UK citizens are registered as having one—maybe some of us do—but that provision is at stake in a no-deal Brexit. Permanent employees and residents are covered by an S1 certificate, which enables healthcare treatments to be reimbursed in the European economic area and Switzerland, but that too is at stake under a no-deal Brexit.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): The right hon. Lady is absolutely right that this uncertainty is causing huge problems for the British community and businesses. I voted against the Government’s deal, but does the right hon. Lady agree that many businesses actually welcome the withdrawal agreement and say that it is indecision, rather than Brexit per se, that is stalling them now, and that we need to agree a deal without further delay?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I could not agree more. We need to heed businesses that say that the deal may not be perfect, but it is good enough. It is the jobs that are at stake as the uncertainty continues. But we are straying into economics again, and I want to return to the human cases.

Consider the 91-year-old man in an Italian nursing home. His son, who lives here, has just had a letter from the Italian authorities to say that they will no longer pay for his father’s care from 30 March if there is no deal. Imagine the younger man, worried sick that he cannot afford those nursing home fees and that moving his father could be fatal.

Then consider the young man living and working in France who has HIV. He has just received a letter to say that he will have to pay for his own antiretroviral treatment on 30 March. And listen to the voices of two pensioners living in Spain, who said:

“I will have to return to Britain as without the healthcare paid for, I can’t afford to live here. I wasn’t allowed to vote in the referendum. If we don’t get that healthcare lots of us will have to come home”.

The Government tell them that they are negotiating reciprocal rights. London and Madrid have already signed a deal ensuring voting rights and working rights for respective migrants, but healthcare is not part of this agreement. I wrote to the Health Secretary last week and have not yet had a reply. I stopped him in the Lobby to ask about this issue and he pointed out that the reciprocal healthcare Bill is being debated in the Lords, but will it have passed both Houses by 30 March?

Dr Wollaston: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I will not give way again.

More importantly, will other countries hosting UK citizens have legislated in their Parliaments to protect them? These are real people and real lives. Sick and vulnerable people have become caught up in the Brexit turmoil, and they need answers.

Until I heard the interpretation of the Prime Minister’s motion today, I was going to welcome it, because it supported the amendments that were passed by a majority in this House. I am not entirely happy with the apparent demotion of my own amendment. I have consistently supported the Prime Minister’s deal and I will continue to support her to get a deal agreed in this House. Businesses need to know what position they will be in after 29 March.

Our country had barely recovered from the 2008 financial crisis. Politicians in this place did not have a choice of avoiding that global slump. We are on the brink of a similar shock to our economy in the form of no deal, but this time it is in our power to avoid doing such damage. We must leave the EU to honour the result of the referendum, but we must ensure that we do it in a way that will not decimate the livelihoods of thousands across the nation.

I will be voting for the Prime Minister’s motion tonight. I implore colleagues to get behind the deal and secure the jobs and livelihoods that are so precious to those we represent.

3 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The Prime Minister’s own personal approach to Brexit has created what 40 former ambassadors have today rightly called a “national crisis” that she is presiding over. In their serious and important speeches, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie), my right hon. Friends the Members for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), and the right hon. Members for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) have risen to the occasion of the crisis that is now facing us. I only wish that the Secretary of State could have risen to it as well.

The fact is that the Prime Minister, from the beginning, has chosen to put the interests of keeping the Conservative party together over the national interest. She chose, because she had decided to kow-tow to the Brexiteers in her own party, a hard Brexit to get through her own party conference, without even discussing it with her own Cabinet. She set the hard red lines—out of the single market; out of the customs union—that created the problems with the Irish backstop. From the beginning, she made no attempt to forge a consensus across party lines or, indeed, across the country to define what Brexit would be so that it could be delivered in a consensual way rather than a way that has exacerbated disunity and
further divided this nation. She has decided that she has to deliver Brexit with Conservative and DUP votes, and nothing else, to keep her party together and avoid a split.

This has pushed her to a harder and more damaging conclusion than she might have reached if she had reached out, and it will do our country more damage. By her choices, the Prime Minister has further divided the country. She has not sought unity, and we are all paying the price. Unity does not consist merely of being forced to agree with her dubious, partisan choices and her definition of what Brexit should be, which are reckless in the extreme.

Anna Soubry: Does the hon. Lady also take the view that given the result of the general election, which resulted in a hung Parliament and the Conservative party actually losing its majority, there is no argument that there is any mandate for a hard Brexit, and in fact, if there is any mandate, it is against a hard Brexit and against no deal?

Ms Eagle: Not to my surprise. I find myself agreeing with the observations of the right hon. Lady. The only national poll that the Prime Minister talks about these days is the referendum. Somehow she never refers to the 2017 election in which her party lost its mandate for a hard Brexit.

The Prime Minister’s response to the result of that vote in 2017 and the loss of her majority surely ought to have been to go for a softer, more consensual Brexit that would have kept us in the customs union and avoided all these problems. But instead we have a Prime Minister who characterises disagreement with her own particular partisan choices on Brexit as if it is a betrayal of democracy. She has used those words, and that has further exacerbated the anger that we have in this country. In my view, it is actually beginning to bring democracy itself into disrepute. She flirts with authoritarianism and division, and invites the betrayal narratives that increase anger even more, so she is being reckless with our political stability.

The Prime Minister has ignored Parliament in the way in which she has gone about delivering Brexit. She allowed her attack dogs to attack judges who pointed in contempt of Parliament. Today’s motion only exists because she was defeated in an attempt to shut down Parliament’s say in Brexit, and yet the Government are fulfilling the terms of that vote by holding this debate according to the letter, not the spirit, of the defeat they suffered. They routinely ignore votes in Parliament. Opposition days have simply disappeared, and they do not deign to vote in Divisions that the Opposition secure anyway, much less take any notice of the result. We are seeing the phrase “non-binding on the Government” increasingly applied, which is why I made the point of order before the debate.

This development would have been unthinkable when I came into the House. The unwritten rules about our constitution are beginning to be ignored. Political gravity, which was always thought to be something that everybody respected, is being ignored. It is the letter, not the spirit, of our constitution and our law that is now apparently more important. We will rue the day we went down this dangerous path.

All agreements are intra-Conservative ones. The Chequers agreement was with the Cabinet, and that did not last the weekend. The ludicrously named Malthouse compromise has already been ruled out by the EU. The alternative arrangements working group, funded by civil service support, is all about trying to get the rabble of the ERG to agree with the rest of the Conservative party, so that the Prime Minister can move forward. It is all to kick the can down the road and let her stay in office another week.

The Prime Minister is deeply reckless, and she has made a deeply reckless decision to play a hugely damaging game of brinkmanship with her own party by threatening the entire country with no deal. We have heard in the powerful speeches so far the real damage that that is doing to our country, trashing our international reputation abroad and doing irreparable damage to our standing in the world.

Going to the brink in pursuit of this tactic is reckless with our economic prosperity and reckless with our political stability. Jobs are being lost now. Investment opportunities are being lost now. Growth is being sacrificed now. The Prime Minister has allowed the Tory Euro sceptic virus to infect the entire body politic. We are all ill with it; we are being weakened with it. Her and her party will never be forgiven for the damage that she is causing.

3.7 pm

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this important EU withdrawal debate, particularly after so many impassioned speeches from those on the Front and Back Benches.

Almost exactly three years ago, it was confirmed that the EU membership referendum would take place in June 2016, and it is now more than two and a half years since the referendum took place. In my constituency, the vote to leave the European Union was 58%, and across the country it was 52%. Since then, as the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) said, there has been a general election in 2017, when 589 now elected Members of this House stood on a manifesto commitment to deliver the result of the referendum.

The message I get is as follows. Just the other day, I was walking down Tilgate shopping parade in my constituency, and as is typically the case, someone came up to me and wanted to know about the current Brexit debate in Parliament. They said, “Why aren’t we getting on with the decision we made two and a half years ago?” That is a compelling argument.

We have heard this afternoon calls for a so-called people’s vote. I would argue that we had a people’s vote in 2016. We have also heard calls for an extension of article 50, to delay our departure from the European Union. We have heard from those Members concern about the uncertainty of Brexit. The one thing that will maintain uncertainty is questioning the democratic decision that was taken by holding a second referendum. That would certainly do a lot to damage our democracy and prolong uncertainty, as would a delay to article 50, and that is before we even get into the issues of whether the remaining 27 members of the EU would allow article 50 to be extended and, if article 50 were to be extended beyond July, of EU elections.
Mention has been made of how we should be taking no deal off the table. I have never known a negotiation where one party goes in and says that they are not willing to walk away from that negotiation. [Interruption.] I hear some jeering from Opposition Members, many of whom are sponsored by trade unions. I cannot imagine a trade union going into a negotiation with an employer and saying in those negotiations that it would not be willing to strike.

Mr McFadden: The problem with this “walk away” analogy is that in any other negotiation when someone walks away, the status quo applies. That is not the case here: when we walk away from this, a whole new and terribly damaging set of new things comes into force. That is why this analogy with a business deal is so fatuous, ridiculous and wrong.

Henry Smith: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for mentioning the status quo, because I do not think the status quo of remaining inside the European Union is good for this country. The European Union is increasingly a protectionist bloc. The European Union is not outward and global in its approach. This country, with its unique global links, can use them to have a much more positive future, instead of locking itself into the ever closer union that is producing a democratic deficit at the heart of the EU, not to mention things such as a European army.

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): My hon. Friend very clearly makes the point that we did not vote for the status quo. It is quite clear: 17.4 million people voted to leave. Does he agree with me that the inevitable outcome, if we do not have a deal, is no deal?

Henry Smith: That is not the status quo. It is quite clear: 17.4 million people voted to leave. I think people in this country have rejected the status quo, and I see Brexit as an opportunity for wider constitutional reform in relation to devolving power, fundamentally changing the way the other place works fundamentally and many other aspects. People wanted change. Actually, I think throughout Europe—throughout many EU member states—there is a real desire for change. If we do not respect the democratic decision, then some of the civil unrest we have seen on the streets of Paris, Lyon and Marseille, some of the economic contraction we see in Germany and the crisis in countries such as Italy will be visited on this country.

Charlie Elphicke: My hon. Friend is making a typically powerful speech. Can he think of anything more craven than for Members of this House to vote one day to trigger article 50 and then to say two years later, “Oh, we didn’t mean to do that. We need to carry on”? Is that not just craven and, frankly, pathetic?

Henry Smith: We have seen significant majorities both in favour of leaving the European Union, in that about 80% of Members of Parliament elected at the last general election said they would follow through on it—

Anna Soubry: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Henry Smith: I do not have any time; I do apologise.

Anna Soubry: Oh!

Henry Smith: Actually, yes, I will give way very briefly.

Anna Soubry: Can my hon. Friend remind us of the promises made by the leave campaign, which he supported? It repeatedly said that we would not leave the European Union until a trade deal securing our future trading relationship with the EU had been secured. Does he remember such broken promises?

Henry Smith: I never made that promise when I supported leaving the European Union. I believe that a deal is the best way forward, but let us not forget that the vast majority of right hon. and hon. Members voted in favour of the legislation to leave the European Union on 29 March, and if no deal is the result, that is the default position.

Vicky Ford: I thank my hon. Friend for reminding us of what was said in the past. The Conservative party manifesto that I stood on in 2017 stated clearly that we would seek a deep and special partnership with the EU, including a new free trade agreement and a customs agreement. Does my hon. Friend still stand by that promise?

Henry Smith: Yes, we absolutely should be seeking and honouring a deep and close relationship with our neighbours and allies in Europe, but the trouble with a customs union, which Labour Members advocate, is that it would prevent us from doing the global free trade deals that, in a world that is getting smaller, are key to our prosperity. The key to this country’s future prosperity is our unique global links, and being a conduit for that thanks to our proximity to Europe. We must be robust in the ongoing negotiations, and I support the Prime Minister in continuing them. I have never known an EU negotiation that did not go down to the last moment, and I therefore remain optimistic about our future. For goodness’ sake, we should be more optimistic as a House and country, because our best years are ahead.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): In just 43 days we are set to crash out with no deal, yet the Prime Minister and those on the Government Front Bench insist on running down the clock and presenting the completely false choice of no deal versus the Prime Minister’s bad deal. The motion under discussion today is non-binding, so why are we here to discuss the chaos that the Government have got us into? We are just days from the biggest disaster that we as a country have faced in a generation. Both before and after the votes two weeks ago, the House knew that the EU was not prepared to move on amending the withdrawal agreement, yet the Prime Minister still insists on going back to Brussels to ask again and again. She is running down the clock.

This House has been consistently clear that the majority of Members do not want the Prime Minister’s deal, and neither do they want a no-deal scenario. Why are those the options? Why are we facing no deal, just 43 days before we are set to crash out of the European Union? Why are we being blackmailed by the Prime Minister into voting for her deal to avoid a no-deal scenario? The Prime Minister is pursuing her policy of brinkmanship and trying to scare MPs into voting for her deal. Let me
Airbus are threatening to leave, and small businesses do not want this. Jobs are under threat. Ford and Airbus are threatening to leave, and small businesses are worried about their future. My constituents are worried about their future and the future for their children.

What is more, they are deeply, deeply saddened by the state of this country. They are saddened by the future that the Government are giving their children: a fantasy future based on nothing but lies and deception from the Leave campaign.

I am saddened too, but more than that I am deeply, deeply worried. I am worried that the Prime Minister is playing recklessly with this country’s future. We must take action urgently to reject and prevent no deal. We must immediately extend article 50 and put the deal, whatever deal it is, back to the people for a final say. That is the only proper, democratic solution. If the Prime Minister is so sure of her deal, then that is what she will do: put it back to the people for a final say.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): The two previous motions, one in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) and the other in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), are both incorporated in the Government motion.

With respect to the first motion, there has been no realistic suggestion for a credible replacement to the backstop since the motion was passed and the EU is still saying it will not renegotiate. There is no withdrawal agreement simply because it has not been signed. In that context, the Brady motion was meaningless. Furthermore, as I said to the Prime Minister on Tuesday, article 4 of the current draft withdrawal agreement undermines control over our own laws. That will create uncompetitive havoc for businesses, and for trade unionists and for workers, as the laws are passed by the other 27 member states, as they go through the Council of Ministers, and we will not even be there. The measure also contradicts the repeal of section 1 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 and the repeal of the European Communities Act 1972.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, were we to make the mistake of saying that we rule out leaving without signing the withdrawal agreement, we would take away the Government’s main bargaining card for getting improvements to the agreement?

Sir William Cash: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right.

On the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden, in reply to my question on Tuesday, which the Prime Minister agreed with, the Prime Minister said that Members from across the House voted to trigger article 50, which had a two-year timeline, ending on 29 March, and that every Conservative Member had voted for the withdrawal Act. She was right. However, the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden passed only because it was supported by Members from all parties who had already voted for the withdrawal Act, the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017 and the European Union Referendum Act 2015, and were in effect, on the Prime Minister’s own analysis, undermining their previous votes. Furthermore, we were whipped against the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden.
There was no consultation prior to the tabling of the Government motion now before the House. In any case, the Government’s position that a so-called no deal remains on the table is clear, as the Secretary of State confirmed. The motion makes no sense, so why are we faced with it today? We are told that it is to keep traction with the EU, which has been, as I said to the Prime Minister on Tuesday, both undemocratic and totally intransigent. As I have said, the withdrawal agreement itself is inconsistent with the European Communities Act 1972. It is therefore also inconsistent with the referendum itself and our manifesto. The 2018 Act includes the repudiation in UK law of all EU laws and treaties, and article 4 of the withdrawal agreement is completely inconsistent with that. A vast number of voters see through this charade—they see through the smoke and mirrors—and in particular so too does the Conservative party membership—a recent “ConservativeHome” poll showed that 70% of them are against the withdrawal agreement.

The real problem goes back to what I said at the time of the first vote on the withdrawal agreement and my observations about the failure of public trust in respect of the Chequers deal and this withdrawal agreement. Those words stand as much today as they did when I spoke on 15 January. Today’s motion further undermines public trust. We are now truly entering the world of George Orwell’s Ministry of Truth. In his book “1984” Orwell wrote:

“Doublethink means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them.”

This double motion is doublethink in action, and I cannot possibly vote for it.

3.27 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): The Prime Minister asks us to hold our nerve and give her time. One has to ask: more time for what? The answer is unclear, other than the obvious one, which is that it is to run down the clock towards early March. Despite the furious denials, that seems increasingly clear, as we have heard this afternoon. It seems that the Prime Minister cannot move an inch without enraging one faction or other of her own party. Brexit is problematic, but currently the problem is not the Irish, it is certainly not the Scots, or, for that matter, the supine Welsh Government, and it is not the backstop; the problem is clearly in the Conservative party. It is unsupportable that we are being led to this disaster for that very reason.

We are encouraged to keep our nerve while the wrangling proceeds and while the obfuscation for party advantage proceeds—to keep our nerve to keep our seats, while outside the bubble people are losing their jobs. We keep our nerve, they lose their jobs. Let me give a practical example. A small castings company in my constituency is an exporting company with products of the very highest quality. It is committed to the community in which it was established and which it serves, and from which it gets its workforce. Last time I talked to it, it said it was now looking at establishing a distribution centre in the Netherlands because it cannot face the confusion that now oppresses it. Only four jobs are affected, but for that community and that company, four jobs is a huge loss. Four jobs repeated endlessly across all the countries of these islands is a huge, huge burden that we could avoid.

After many years of representing Caernarfon, then the Arfon constituency, I have come to recognise the signs of a Government in desperate straits. We now have some more signs to add to the list—major Government defeats, crucial votes delayed without reason and a recess cancelled for no more than a few statutory instruments and general debates. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) said yesterday, this is a broken Britain, with its democracy stumbling, its economy unbalanced towards the south-east of England and inequality continuously amplified.

From the outside, the bickering and jostling for position seems to be entirely unreasonable and irrelevant to people’s everyday lives. It ignores a basic point that drives me and my party: any form of Brexit would leave Wales and the whole of the rest of the UK worse off economically. I concede that most well-to-do people who occupy the Benches in Parliament will probably be fine under Brexit, but my constituents—working people, factory workers, students, retired people, families and children—will not.

I want to confirm that my party will vote for the amendments and against the Government’s motion. Forgive me for finishing on a familiar note by repeating what my party has said over and again as Brexit day looms, but the reasonable solution for the Prime Minister is to reject no deal emphatically and then to put a vote on her deal, in whatever form that is, to the people to have a final say.

3.31 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams). While I agree with Wales in voting to leave the EU, I am afraid that I found little in his speech—though he put it powerfully and coherently—that I could agree with. I certainly cannot agree with a second referendum, or indeed, to taking no deal off the table.

I have always found that it is a good idea in the House to vote on what the motion says and not necessarily on what Ministers or other Members say in the House, so I thought I had better have a look at what it says today. It is very clear, actually:

“That this House...reiterates its support for the approach to leaving the EU expressed by this House on 29 January 2019”—so I thought I had better look and see what the House had agreed to, and within the motion that it agreed to were the words “rejects the United Kingdom leaving the European Union without a Withdrawal Agreement”.

In other words, the motion that we are voting on tonight takes no deal off the table. It does not matter what Ministers have said. It is what the motion says, so I would expect all Opposition Members who do not seem to want a no-deal option to support the Government’s motion tonight, which is exactly the reason I will not be supporting it. It is a badly worded motion—well, no, it is not a badly worded motion; it is deliberately worded that way. I think the Government thought that they could slide it through and that it would not matter. I know that, if I supported this tonight, the Whips would point out to me, “You have supported taking no deal off the table.” That is not what I can do.

I want to go back to when I was a co-founder of the Grassroots Out movement. I travelled the length and breadth of the United Kingdom during the referendum
campaign discussing with people what they wanted if they were going to vote to leave. It came down, I think, to a few things. They wanted to end the free movement of people, to stop giving billions and billions of pounds each and every year to the EU and for us to make our own laws in our own country, judged by our own judges. I fear that the current withdrawal agreement proposed by the Government fails on all those tests. Maybe that is one of the reasons why it suffered the biggest defeat in Commons history. Anybody who had suffered the biggest defeat in Commons history might want to go away and think very carefully about what they put to the House, and not tinker around for a couple of weeks before coming back with more or less the same motion, because the same thing will happen. It will get rejected by this House.

Let us look at the tests. Does the withdrawal agreement end the free movement of people? It does not, because there is no future deal worked out, just some sort of political wish list—a political declaration—so it fails on that score. Does the agreement stop billions and billions of pounds being given to the EU each and every year? We know that £39 billion is going to be given whatever happens under the withdrawal agreement, and if the transition period is extended, even more money will be given. Clearly, our courts will not be able to be the final arbiters, because the European Court of Justice has a significant say over our future.

Mr Bone: No, it is not rubbish, it is nonsense. But the hon. Lady can use the word “rubbish” as well—whatever she likes: rubbish or nonsense. [Interruption.] Oh, she is saying that I am talking nonsense? I listened to hon. Lady, who made a powerful remain speech that was absolute—let us use one of those words—nonsense. The truth of the matter is that the British people had the Cameron-Osborne “Project Fear” thrown at them. They were told that it would be the end of the world if they voted leave. They would be poorer, house prices would go up or down, interest rates would go through the roof and there would be mass unemployment—even bubonic plague—and they still voted for it, so I am afraid that people in this remain Parliament are ignoring the wishes of the British people. With the exception of very few Members, none of the Members who has spoken mentioned themselves and what they wanted—[Interruption.] Sorry, did the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) say, “Shut up”? If the hon. Lady suggests that, I am going to shut up very shortly, and I am sure we will hear from her, but I will say this—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me say in the most affectionate possible terms to the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), who is an extremely cerebral Member of the House, that at this moment he is behaving like an incorrigible delinquent. I urge him to desist from this disorderly behaviour. He is fundamentally a very good man—some would even say a great man—but something has seized him today, and he is behaving in a mildly eccentric manner.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): He is very irritating.

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman says that the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) is “very irritating”. Well, this is a subjective matter. Some people might find the hon. Gentleman irritating, or even find the Chair irritating—but who cares?

Mr Bone: I can assure you, Mr Speaker, that I am not a snowflake, so I will not take offence from the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman).

The truth is that a no-deal Brexit—which is, of course, a deal that means leaving on the basis of WTO rules—is the answer. It gives clarity to business, and it delivers what the British people voted for in June 2016.

3.40 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Poverty drove my parents to emigrate from rural Ireland to this country. This country gave them everything. I never thought when I was a snotty kid in Kilburn that I would ever end up as a Member of Parliament. I am proud of our country—it is truly Great Britain—and it grieves me to see it facing the biggest crisis since 1945 as a consequence of a self-inflicted wound as we drift towards an abyss. If we plunge into that abyss without a deal to protect the British national interest, our country will be the poorer for a generation to come.

On 29 January, the House spoke. The truly honourable right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), whom I praise in the warmest possible terms for her outstanding integrity, and I tabled an amendment that
said “No to no deal”. The House spoke, and that led to the commencement of constructive all-party negotiations. Today we heard not one word from the Secretary of State about progress in those negotiations as he pandered unashamedly to the European Research Group, whose members are oblivious to the consequences of their actions.

When it was put to the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) that there would be difficulties for the automotive industry—including the Jaguar plant in my constituency—in relation to frictionless trade in particular, he said, “Frictionless trade? Fake news.” So he knows more about how to make cars than those who make cars. Conservative Members pretend that they know more about how to build ships and planes than those who build ships and planes, and that they somehow know more than the head of counter-terrorism, who warned of potentially serious consequences for the safety and security of our citizens if we crash out with no deal.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does he remember the words of the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson)? He said, “Eff business.” Is that not the attitude that seems to be pervading this place when it comes to what will happen on the other side of Brexit? It is almost a “don’t care” attitude, but it will seriously damage our communities.

**Jack Dromey:** My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. Jaguar Land Rover—the Jaguar plant in my constituency and the Land Rover plant in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Meriden—has transformed the lives of tens of thousands of workers locally, and the riposte from the ERG is “Eff business.” It is absolutely disgraceful.

We are determined to press on regardless with positive talks, with a view to trying to reach agreement. Why? Not least because of what we were told on Tuesday night at a meeting that we organised here with representatives of the five biggest manufacturing companies, and others with interests in food, finance and farming. All spoke with one voice: “We cannot crash out without a deal, and we want a good deal to protect the British national interest.” We were told that “the effects of No Deal are happening now”, and that American investors in manufacturing companies now see us as the “problem child of Europe”.

An investment that would have created 1,000 jobs in Northern Ireland has been shelved, and 80% of CBI members have stopped investing while the uncertainty continues. Inward investment in the automotive sector has halved. Automotive companies are planning shutdowns after 29 March. Businesses are being told by their contractors to build up three months’-worth of stock after that date, which is costing them a small fortune and using up valuable storage space. As the National Farmers Union has said, 90% of animal vaccines are imported, and in a no-deal scenario it cannot guarantee that necessary vaccines will be readily available.

**Ian Paisley:** The hon. Gentleman reads out those statistics about the problems, but the fact is that we have the lowest unemployment on record in the history of the state of Northern Ireland, and the highest numbers in Northern Ireland’s history for inward and direct investment. The joint total of our export sales to the rest of the United Kingdom and the rest of the world is more than 73% of everything we produce; the fact is that that is where we make our money.

**Jack Dromey:** Come to Erdington, where we still have one in 10 out of work, with unemployment rising. When we turned around the Jaguar plant from closure in 2010, it doubled in size from 1,400 workers to 3,300, but it has lost 1,000 jobs in the last 12 months, and growing uncertainty is seeing more and more job losses. These are good, secure, well-paid jobs, now being put at risk by Brexit. It is nothing short of extraordinary that there continue to be too many Members in this House who are just oblivious to the consequences of their actions.

The week commencing 25 March will be crunch time for the Government, our country and businesses up and down the country. Notwithstanding some of the things said by Conservative Members, that “no to no deal” amendment that won on 29 January, on which parties from across this House united, stands; it is morally binding. It would be utterly contemptuous of the Government if they were to give two fingers to that clearly expressed wish of the House of Commons.

The extraordinary contributions we have heard today tell us that a safeguard is necessary at the next stages. We will engage positively, both formally and informally, with the negotiations under way, with a view to reaching agreement, because we believe we have a duty to put the British national interest first, but what we have heard today reinforces our view that we have to support that Cooper-Letwin amendment. It is an utterly essential measure that the right hon. Member for Meriden and I have signed and strongly support. It underpins things; it is a safeguard that prevents us from falling off a cliff on 29 March without a deal.

We have a sacred duty in this House to put the national interest first. When I get out of bed every morning, what drives me forward is those I represent, and the lives transformed because of successful companies, and I grieve at the thought of what is unfolding. We must come together across this House in the best interests and traditions of Britain to agree a deal that will protect it at the next stages. It would be utterly outrageous if we were to betray the trust of the British people, and we for one just will not do it.

3.48 pm

**Mr Dominic Grieve** (Beaconsfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey); I agreed entirely with the sentiments that he expressed about the depth of this crisis.

We still need to reflect a little to understand how we got here. After the referendum, I spent at least the first 12 months trying to persuade myself that there was some silver lining to the cloud, and that some of the arguments about us eventually finding a better destiny outside the EU, without so much interference, so much anger, and so much debate about our participation, might somehow prove right. Whereas a small minority in this House are absolutely fixated, and are persuaded that we can part company with our nearest neighbours entirely, the truth, not always uttered in this Chamber, but certainly spoken in the Tea Room, is that an overwhelming majority of Members of Parliament believe...
that Brexit, whatever form it takes, will be damaging to this country. Norway, the palliative that Norway plus may be seen as representing, a Canada-style agreement, or indeed the agreement negotiated in good faith by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister—all are inferior to participation.

The result is that we are tying ourselves up in knots, and that is why we are paralysed. We end up with people like my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) trying to have their cake and eat it; or—I say this gently—with those on the Labour Front Bench buying a plastic cake and pretending it is edible, rather than coming to the correct conclusion that we will have to go back to the public with the options and, pointing out the limitations of what happened in 2016, ask them whether some of the options can, in fact, be delivered—otherwise, we should not be doing it. That is where we will have to end up, but meanwhile, the crisis deepens.

We are in the extraordinary position of being told that we have to continue negotiating and threatening to leave, when frankly, threatening to leave is the behaviour of a three-year-old who says that they are going to hold their breath if they do not get the toy that they want. That is where we are, and we will have to do something about it ourselves if we are to get ourselves out of this mess. I agree so much with my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) that we cannot allow this to happen. That is why I have signed the Bill that he has presented, will work with him to get it through Parliament, and believe it is the only way out of the current crisis.

I will sit down in a moment, Mr Speaker, because I want to conclude quickly, but I will just say this. What troubles me is that my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench should be doing this themselves, in their own motion. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister talks about her sacred duty over Brexit. I do not think Brexit is a sacred duty at all; I think it is a pretty profane matter, and if it is going to plunge us into crisis deepens. It is unsurprising that people from the Labour movement know how to negotiate and do a deal. The Government should always have looked to us, but we have been ignored. We are simply pawns in a game in which the players are fighting not for our country but over the soul of the Tory party.

I have some sympathy with Labour Members who do want to find a deal, but that takes us back to the problem that was pointed out by the hon. Member for Wellingborough. Anything in the political declaration about the future framework is, frankly, pie in the sky, because it answers no questions. What is more, it is difficult to take the Prime Minister at her word, as she has demonstrated. It is incredibly difficult to trust the Tories.

That said, on the economics, the problems are even more profound. Economists talk about sunk costs—things that we spend money on that seem like a good idea but turn out to be a bad idea. In that sense, Brexit is now a sunk cost. We have been spending money hand over fist on no-deal preparations that we hope to never need. However, in economic terms, no deal is already happening. Disinvestment is already happening. Currency shifts are already costing us in terms of inflation, and growth is losing pace.

Things are worse than that, however. Some people will rightly tell me, “Well, the overall growth figure doesn’t really matter, because my constituents are poor enough already,” but the fact is that people in areas in the north of England that voted for Brexit will be hit worst by it. North-south inequalities will not be helped by Brexit; they will simply be made worse. That is why Brexit is a sunk cost. Sticking with a plan simply because we have already spent money on it is irrational. That is why we must ask ourselves the hardest of questions. Should we really keep going along with Brexit just because we said we would—despite the costs and whatever happens—because we have spent money on it, even if it turns out to be a really bad idea?

Matt Western: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. We are now in “Project Reality”, not “Project Fear”. As she says, we are beginning to see some of the
indicators of what is happening in our economy. Consumer confidence is at its lowest since 2012, and business confidence is also low, with four consecutive quarters of disinvestment. That is what is really eating away at the economy, and we should be tackling it.

**Alison McGovern:** I simply listen to the words of the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey). I find it hard to listen to them talk about the unemployment rates in their constituencies and to think that Brexit has anything to offer them. It will be a hindrance, not a help.

Some people who voted for Brexit who are not from the poorest parts of the country will say that, to be honest, they are not bothered about the cost. They want all the other things that people talk about, such as this notion of sovereignty, even though we have shared sovereignty as a nation for many years. They will say, “It doesn’t matter what it costs; I just want it.” Brexit is worth it to them. That is fine for those people. It is fine for someone to take an irrational decision for themselves. If that is what they really want, fine. However, the question for us is whether it is okay to take an irrational decision on the behalf of other people. Do we owe our country something a bit better than that?

3.58 pm

**David T. C. Davies** (Monmouth) (Con): Over the past three years, those of us who voted for Brexit have been treated with scorn and contempt. We have been derided as a bunch of uneducated, bigoted tabloid readers living outside the M25. In an attempt to try to get us to change our minds, Members on both sides of the House—in and out—various banks and businesses and all sorts of remain-supporting groups have adopted a sort of “Project Fear” on steroids. We seem to get a more ludicrous scare story each week. We get told that there will be mass unemployment as a result of Brexit, but the next minute we are told that there will be a huge shortage of workers to fill all the jobs available.

We are told one minute that we will run out of food, and the next we are told that farmers will be ruined by all the cheap food imports. I was on the radio a few weeks ago with an academic, who said that 12,000 people will die due to a lack of fresh fruit and veg. Needless to say he is from London, because I could have shown him a few orchards in Monmouth where we grow plenty of fruit and vegetables.

These stories just get more and more silly. Last June the papers were saying that one of Britain’s top private general practitioners had reported a huge increase in adultery and venereal disease due to Brexit. There was a headline in the paper the following month saying that we would have super-gonorrohea raging out of control due to Brexit. It almost came as a relief in September when another newspaper, it might even have been The Daily Telegraph, reported that there will be a shortage of Viagra as a result of Brexit. In the space of just three or four months, Britain had been turned from Sodom and Gomorrah into Eden before the fall as a result of Brexit. These stories are frankly ludicrous, and they are not fooling anyone. They certainly do not fool me.

Two weeks ago, I went with members of the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs to talk to some real experts at the port of Holyhead, one of the major crossing points to the Republic of Ireland.

**Peter Grant:** I assure the hon. Gentleman from direct personal knowledge that the story I told earlier, of Karen Vaughan being ordered to apply for permission to become a foreigner in her own country, is 100% true. Does he accept it is true, and does he think it is an acceptable consequence of his Brexit?

**David T. C. Davies:** I do not know the hon. Gentleman’s constituent, but my wife is an EU national, although she would not call herself one. She is Hungarian, and no doubt she will have to apply, as will everyone else. That is perfectly fair, and it will all be done on a straightforward application. It will not cost any money. Why is it so unreasonable for the Government to want to make a few checks on those who have chosen to come and live in this country and take back control of our immigration process? I fully support the Government in doing that, and I believe they have gone about it in a perfectly reasonable fashion.

The real experts at the port of Holyhead told us very clearly that they are perfectly well prepared for a no-deal Brexit. They made it clear that it would cause some inconvenience and a bit of extra work, but they know what paperwork is required. They told our cross-party delegation that they want a message to go back to Members of Parliament to dampen down the fears of Armageddon, which simply is not going to happen. The real experts are prepared.

The 17.4 million people who voted for Brexit in the original and genuine people’s vote did so because they know that this economy is the fifth biggest in the world and that Great Britain can stand on its own two feet, with or without a deal. I will vote for a deal, with its imperfections, because I believe in compromise. I can accept a bit of a compromise, which is why I back the Prime Minister. It is for Opposition Members, and some Conservative Members, also to accept that we all have to compromise if we want to sort this out. If they truly believed their own scare stories, they would be queuing up to back the Prime Minister’s deal.

We should leave at the end of March. We can leave with a deal, but we should not be the least bit afraid to leave without a deal. The 17.4 million people who are confident and optimistic about the country’s future expect Members of Parliament, their political leaders, to show that same optimism and confidence.

4.3 pm

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The theme of my remarks is that we need to build consensus, although I must confess that the speech of the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) has not made that any easier.

Delay and uncertainty are now really damaging our economy. This is not simply a question of politicians holding their nerve while a macho arm-wrestling game is played either in Parliament or with Brussels, because this is having a real effect on the real economy, on our reputation and on the jobs of real people.

**Sarah Jones** (Croydon Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend may have seen that today’s Evening Standard is reporting that Westfield’s £1.4 billion investment in Croydon is going to be reviewed, in part due to Brexit and the structural changes on the high street. This is happening right now. The people of Croydon need Westfield, so we need to rule out no deal.
Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend has given yet another example. During February, the Financial Times has had headlines that read “Nissan reverses investment pledge”, “Trade deal with Japan won’t be completed”, “No deal will lead to two more years of austerity”, “The economy shrank in December”, and “Businesses are moving to Holland and Ireland”. In my constituency, as in hers, this is playing out badly: sheep farmers are terrified of a 45% tariff on exports; the pharmaceutical industry is spending millions on stockpiling medicines; and brick makers are worrying about unfair competition from China. I talked to a foreign-owned manufacturer about the prospect of no deal and was told, “No, it won’t be catastrophic for our business, but we will have to sack several hundred of your constituents.” Well, that will be a catastrophe for those people who lose their jobs, which is why I will be supporting amendments (a) and (e), and, if it is necessary, the Bill from my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin).

We also need to look beyond the short term and what we can do to prevent or crashing into on how we come to a decision on where we go next. We need to acknowledge that not everyone is going to get their first choice; there will have to be compromise in this House, and we need institutional arrangements to facilitate this. Amendment (c), tabled by the Father of the House, is designed to do this. It has not been selected today, but I hope hon. Members will look at it seriously and consider whether we might need to come back to something like it in a fortnight’s time.

Thomas Cromwell invented the current Divisions system in 1529 in order to expose and intimidate those opposed to the King’s will. Binary choices are all right for some things, but the minute we have a complex system in 1529 in order to expose and intimidate those opposed to the King’s will. Binary choices are all right for some things, but the minute we have a complex situation that is V alentine’s Day today—you would not know it the way that this place carries on, with everyone going at each other hammer and tongs. Perhaps we should go back a little bit and remember why we are in this situation.

We are in this situation because people voted to leave the European Union. I backed remain, but I had a strong mandate from my constituency: two thirds said that they wanted to leave. I regard it as my job to make sure that we execute those instructions and leave the European Union.

It is important to remember why people voted in the way that they did: they believed in building a land of opportunity; they believed in building an independent sovereign nation; and they believed in taking back control of our borders, our trade policy, our money and our prospects across the world. Many Members of this House reject that view to this day, but that is what people wanted to do, and they are not wrong to have wanted that. They are not wrong because, in recent decades, Europe has been in relative decline. A few decades ago, it had a third of global GDP; today it has just 15%. Some 90% of future world growth is coming from outside, not inside, the European Union.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I just want to pull up the hon. Gentleman on that point. He said that Europe was in relative decline and produced a statistic. Europe is not in decline. It is just that other places in the world are coming up, which is great to see. It is great to see that other people outside Europe are becoming richer, but Europe is not in decline.

Charlie Elphicke: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point. The fact is that Europe is becoming relatively less important in the world and the rest of the world is becoming relatively more important. Is our national destiny best served by more involvement in Europe or more involvement in the world and more globalisation? [Interruption. I shall not take any lectures from a Member of Parliament who represents a party that wants to tear Scotland away from its biggest market. That is just crass, irresponsible and, frankly, reckless.
We need to bear it in mind that people want the kind of future that they can build, and we need to make that happen. The people whom I represent in Dover and Deal say to me, “What is going on? Why don’t you just get on with it? Why are you still talking about it? Why is Parliament not just getting on with it?” Those are the right questions. We need to get on with it, end the uncertainty, leave the European Union and make the best of it.

Peter Grant: Will the hon. Gentleman tell us what his constituents think we should be getting on with? As things stand, we have no idea what our relationship with Europe will be like in two years’ time. What exactly is it that people are telling him to get on with?

Charlie Elphicke: They are telling me very clearly that we should leave the European Union. Personally, I think that the Government should fully embrace the Malthouse compromise, which offers us a positive way forward, to make sure that we can have open and seamless trade without being stuck within the European orbit as a form of satellite state. That is why I take issue with Labour Members. They say that they are in favour of leaving Europe, but they want to remain in the customs union, and they want to continue to have freedom of movement. Then they say, “Well, it’s all terribly complicated. Perhaps we should extend article 50 as a bridge.” Anyone looking at extending article 50 as a bridge for three or nine months knows that that is a bridge to nowhere, but the Labour party does not want to build a bridge to nowhere; it wants to build a bridge back into the European Union. It is a bridge to remain. That is the wrong thing to do. We should all come together to make sure that we leave the European Union successfully by reworking the backstop, and by taking the strong and clear position to the European Union that we are prepared to leave, deal or no deal.

Everyone in this House knows that European Union business is really done at 5 minutes to midnight. That being the case, we should press the point strongly and have the courage to see through the demands, hopes and aspirations of our constituents to make sure that we successfully leave the European Union, move on, end these debates and chart our future onwards. We should be spending more time talking about the kind of Brexit Britain we can build after we leave Europe, rather than banging on endlessly with debates in which people are constantly trying to countermand the instructions of the British people because they really want to remain.

Mr Speaker: Interventions are of course part and parcel of debate, but I simply say for the purposes of advice to the House that, given the constraints on time, interventions now should be undertaken in the knowledge that Members are preventing others from speaking.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It has now been 67 days since the Prime Minister delayed the meaningful vote in December—67 utterly wasted days for our country. As the clock ticks down to 11 pm on 29 March, the Prime Minister continues the pretence that she is seeking concessions from the EU, but she knows that she is not going to get them. We all know her reckless game: keep that clock ticking down and keep bullying MPs into backing her deal or get no deal. But we all know that this is a false choice, as our country is simply not prepared for a no-deal scenario.

The Government’s failure to reach out and build cross-party consensus has left us in deadlock, so how do we unlock this logjam? Well, the answer has been hiding in plain sight and it is called common market 2.0. Common market 2.0 would mean joining Norway outside of the EU but inside the European Free Trade Association and the EEA; establishing a form of customs union with the EU; and maintaining a close economic relationship with the EU, but leaving the more political aspects of European integration. Common market 2.0 would involve leaving the withdrawal agreement precisely as it is while radically recasting the political declaration on the future relationship—something that the EU has repeatedly said it is open to doing. The Leader of the Opposition’s letter to the Prime Minister on 7 February was certainly a step in the right direction, but it is vital that we put more flesh on the bones by making an explicit commitment to joining the EEA via the EFTA pillar.

The Prime Minister’s political declaration is a bridge to nowhere. Common market 2.0 would transform the political declaration into a bridge to a clear, stable and exciting future for our country. It would mean safe-guarding jobs; guaranteeing workers’ rights; providing new controls over freedom of movement; allowing more money for public services; and reducing our contributions to the budget would be significantly lower; taking the UK out of the common fisheries policy, the common agricultural policy and the jurisdiction of the ECIJ; and eliminating the need for the Irish backstop. That last point is crucial given that it is dominating the debate, so let me explain why our proposals would remove the need ever to activate the backstop.

The fact is that a customs union alone will not solve the Irish border question because only 20% of the issues surrounding the border are customs issues. The remaining 80% are single market regulatory alignment issues. That is why we need both full participation in the single market and a strong customs union arrangement in place, at least until alternative arrangements can be agreed. But, as Brexiteers understandably ask, why would a form of comprehensive customs union be so infinitely preferable to the backstop? They say that it would not solve the problems around sovereignty and conducting trade deals. Well, here is what they are missing: article 127 of the EEA agreement means that we can leave the EEA unilaterally with a one-year notice period. Given that 80% of the Irish border issues are single market issues, common market 2.0 would completely change the dynamics of our relationship with the EU and give us far more leverage in the negotiations.

We desperately need a Brexit that begins to reunite our deeply divided country. Common market 2.0 is a strong compromise, and I believe that Parliament is ready to support this sensible, pragmatic, bridge-building approach. Brexit is a monster that is eating our politics, and it is time for us all to rediscover the lost art of compromise. It is time for common market 2.0.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): One thing that has struck me during this debate is the almost complete absence of taking into consideration how we got here today. In Dudley and Sandwell, part of which I represent, people voted in very, very large numbers for us to leave the European Union. It is
incumbent on us, whatever the situation we now find ourselves in, to find a way through to delivering on Brexit for the British people, and doing it in a way that delivers on their aspirations.

There are two things that will not help in our endeavour to deliver on Brexit for the British people. The first is to countenance a second referendum. A second referendum would be highly divisive. It would not resolve the issues that we currently face; it may in fact make the situation a lot, lot worse. The second thing that would not help in delivering for the British people and for the people I represent is any idea that we are going to extend or revoke article 50. That just kicks things further along the road. It does not, in any way, get to the point of resolving the issues we face today.

I recognise some of the words, although they are often expressed in very strong language, about some of the threats of no deal. I have spoken to Jaguar Land Rover in the west midlands. But the reality is that the way to avoid no deal is for us to establish a deal with the European Union. I supported the deal because I thought it was the most practical way for us to get to exit day with an arrangement that would deliver on the aspirations of the British people as well as finding continuity for business, but I recognised that there were issues with the backstop. I believed that we should give the Prime Minister the room to respond to the vote that was held in this House two weeks ago and get changes to the backstop so that we could get a deal that everybody in this House can support and thereby get to 29 March in a condition where we can move forward.

You may think, Mr Speaker, that I am a very reasonable and calm individual, but in my previous life as a businessman I have been involved in some very robust business negotiations. I would appeal to the European Union, and to some Members of this House, to reduce the temperature of the rhetoric that is being used about these negotiations, and to leave robust exchanges in the negotiating room. When I was negotiating in business, we had a lot of passionate debate, and there were often strong disagreements with the people I was negotiating with, but we never went out of the room to brief the press and put things on Twitter and Facebook to undermine the other side, because it is in the interests of both parties to get a deal.

I would urge us to get back to the discipline of negotiating a resolution to this issue so that we do not face in this country something that I fear, which is a major democratic crisis because we have been proven unable to deliver a good negotiated exit deal and unable to deliver on the aspirations of the British people that were clearly articulated in the referendum. We must redouble our efforts to do that.

4.23 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Well, 43 days to go and here we are—still pretty clueless in the House of Commons. When people ask what is going to happen, nobody really knows. I did hope to bring this to an end with my amendment (d). I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby), and my hon. Friends the Members for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) and for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) for supporting it. I think it is going to gain some currency over time. In the end, we are going to come down between taking the crazy Brexit route wanted only by the militant tendency of the Tory party or else revoking article 50.

Brexit is bad. Even Brexiteers do not want Brexit on 29 March. There are no Brexiteers: it is only the utterly deluded who want Brexit on 29 March. The International Trade Secretary says that it is damaging to the economy. We have heard other Brexiteers describe Brexit on 29 March as “a catastrophe” and as “a disaster”—not something they wrote on the side of a bus when they were going round calling for Brexit. They were making all sorts of promises about Brexit. If people were convinced to vote for Christmas every week, or free chocolate on Thursdays, or slices of cheese from the moon on Fridays, we would have to tell them, “This is as undeliverable as the ERG militant tendency Tory Brexit.” It is impossible without damaging the economy, and those on the Government Front Bench should be straight about that. That is what is about to happen.

The Netherlands is preparing for damage to its small businesses, and Ireland is giving its small businesses advice about Brexit, but that is not happening in the UK. What are the Government doing to bridge the gap for small businesses in the UK when the damage of Brexit comes? If any Conservatives can sit there comfortably—[Interruption.] If the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) wants to intervene and tell us that no businesses will go to the wall because of Brexit on 29 March, I will give him the floor. Does he want to take that opportunity?

Stephen Kerr: The hon. Gentleman is making a valid point—he is giving strong reasons why we should have a deal. The way we get a deal is by supporting the Prime Minister’s deal, which creates an orderly Brexit.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman should know that we have a deal at the moment with the European Union. It is a good deal, and any other deals we have with the European Union that involve us leaving the customs union and the single market will damage the economy. He should be straight about that. I notice that he will not give small businesses a guarantee—no Conservatives will, but none of them will go to the wall because of their political adventures. They should be aware, and the rest of the country should be aware, of what they are doing.

The chemical industry is very worried about exactly what regulation it will have. It describes itself as the “industry of industries”, underpinning pharmaceuticals and automotive in the UK, and aerospace. If it is outside the REACH regulation and cannot license chemicals, some chemicals might not be available in the United Kingdom.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I am happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman. Can he guarantee that all chemicals will be available after Brexit?
Bill Grant: I am concerned at the view that businesses in Scotland will go to the wall. Having spoken to businesses in Scotland, I know that they want to work within a deal. Can the hon. Gentleman explain why he will not support a deal for his businesses?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: They have been working within a deal, which is why I want us to revoke article 50. I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to say that.

I want to say a word or two about the trade continuity agreements. This nails a big lie of Brexit—that we can trade on WTO terms. The reason we want to roll over trade agreements instead of trading on WTO terms is that trading on WTO terms is an expensive way of conducting businesses. It involves tariffs, taxes and—[Interruption.] I hear laughter on the Government Benches. Clearly Tories do not know that that is the case. Other Governments will get in the way and tax business transactions. That is why we want to roll over these trade agreements. Without them, we will trade on WTO terms, which is an expensive way to conduct commerce, and businesses will go to the wall.

The Tories march blithely on, happy to rip up agreements and deals with our biggest customer—the 27-member trade bloc of the European Union. When I spoke recently to Alan Wolff, deputy director general of the WTO, he described the area between trading on WTO terms and within trade deals as the “Brexit gap”. There is an inevitable loss for the United Kingdom from following this crazy way.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the Faroe Islands, I am delighted to see that Poul Michelsen was down last week to sign their deal, which ensures a big slice of trade for them. But these trade deals with the Faroes, Chile and everywhere else are merely standing on the shoulders of what the European Union has already achieved—the European Union that Brexiters decry so much, but whose trade deals they want to follow.

The Government find themselves in a very funny place indeed. They wanted at one stage to resist having any meaningful votes in Parliament, but they have ended up having so many that they have rendered them all meaningless. A number of people in business have told me that there is a danger in extending article 50 because it extends uncertainty and further postpones investment. It does, however, allow them to move assets more readily to the United Kingdom when nothing seems to be appearing down the line.

The UK is heading for an existential choice: it is either going to revoke article 50 or head for a no-deal catastrophe. We have to get our heads around that fairly quickly, because those will be the choices. The Brexit promises have been reduced by the Prime Minister to jam tomorrow—in fact, it is not even jam tomorrow; it is jam tomorrow if you scrape the mould off the top. It is a shame that that was not on the side of a bus.

4.28 pm

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): Let me concentrate, in the minutes I have, on some of the essential points. When I regretfully voted against the withdrawal agreement and political declaration in January, it was primarily because of the Northern Ireland backstop, which was the reason for many of my colleagues as well. When we voted in favour of the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) two weeks ago and the House specifically argued that we should replace the backstop, we demonstrated that if the Prime Minister can secure movement on the backstop, she can get her withdrawal agreement and political declaration through the House. I want the Prime Minister to have the opportunity to do that.

However, we have to face some facts. In negotiations, the other side often does not move until the end point. I listened carefully to what the shadow Brexit Secretary said. I think he chose 13 March as his line in the sand, but if there is going to be any movement on a deal, it will have to be signed off by the European leaders at a Council. There are only two opportunities in the diary: there is an informal summit of the EU and the Arab League at the end of February in Sharm el-Sheikh; and then there is the European Council on 21 and 22 March. I am afraid it is my judgment, particularly now that we have another set of debates in this House on 26 and 27 February—

Sir Oliver Letwin rose—

Mr Harper: I am not going to give way to my right hon. Friend because I think you are very keen, Mr Speaker, to get everybody in, or some more people in, before the wind-ups.

We are going to have to go to the European Council on 21 and 22 March. Because we have the debate on 27 February, I do not see any prospect of the EU now moving before that Council meeting. I know that is uncomfortable and difficult, but that is how negotiations work. We may wish that they worked differently, but that is how they work. Our job as Members of Parliament is to get the best possible agreement that we can get—not for ourselves, but for our constituents—so that we can leave the European Union in an orderly way. That is my preference, so I think we are going to have to give the Prime Minister a chance to do it. If we in this House choose to frustrate that, she is not going to come back with a meaningful change to that deal and we are not going to get it through this House. Then we are going to have to face a choice—a choice I do not want to face—between leaving without an agreement and not leaving at all. I think we should be honest about all this stuff about delay. Many people who back delay really mean not leaving ever, and some other people think we can avoid the choice. I do not think we can but I would prefer to have an agreement.

It is also worth saying in the debate about deal or no deal that the Prime Minister and the Cabinet’s withdrawal agreement and political declaration is not really a deal in the normal sense of the word. All it does is give us a couple of years during which, admittedly, things stay the same. That might be welcome for business, but it gives business no certainty at all about what comes afterwards. What is to be recommended in the Malthouse compromise is that, if we can replace the backstop with a free trade agreement—a backstop that would be acceptable, even if it were a permanent solution—that would give business certainty from this spring about a baseline. They would know that in future, whatever happened, they would have a free trade agreement. I think that that would give business certainty to invest,
create jobs and be successful in our country. That is what I urge the Prime Minister to do, and I urge my colleagues to give her the opportunity to do so and to reject all the amendments on the Order Paper today.

4.32 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): May I welcome the assurances that the Secretary of State gave in a very clear way from the Dispatch Box at the beginning of this debate? The first is that the Government will stick to the 29 March date for leaving the EU. It is important to do that from the point of view of giving the Prime Minister the leverage that she needs in the negotiations. I know many Members have pooh-poohed this today, but many ordinary people outside wonder what kind of idiots we are here in this House if we think that it is wise to send someone in to negotiate and, at the same time, say to them, “And by the way, you’re not allowed to walk away from those negotiations”. Ordinary people on the street understand the importance of that, and to give the Prime Minister the best chance, we have to stick to that particular date. That also removes the element of uncertainty. If we leave this open-ended, businesses will not get the certainty they require because they do not know what the future will be. Indeed, the shadow spokesman, when he talked about extending article 50, spoke about going to the beginning of July. That is another date. We either decide we have a date, or we do not.

I was also pleased that the Secretary of State said that the Government are seeking an alternative, especially an alternative to the backstop. I know that the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) said that the backstop is of no consequence, but it is of great consequence. As the EU confirmed this week, the backstop would lead to Northern Ireland having to be regulatory aligned with the rest of the EU and part of the customs union. It has spelt out the consequences of that. It would mean systematic checks on trade between Northern Ireland and Great Britain at ports and airports. For me, that rips up the Union, it hurts the Northern Ireland economy and it is certainly of consequence.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: That could all be solved if the UK’s Withdrawal from the EU UK’s Withdrawal from the EU Irish Government; and trade facilitation measures, there are no checks on the Irish border, which will suit business; a protocol that will guarantee that the backstop is of no consequence, but it is of great consequence. As the EU confirmed this week, the backstop would lead to Northern Ireland having to be regulatory aligned with the rest of the EU and part of the customs union. It has spelt out the consequences of that. It would mean systematic checks on trade between Northern Ireland and Great Britain at ports and airports. For me, that rips up the Union, it hurts the Northern Ireland economy and it is certainly of consequence.

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): The clock is ticking down, both in this debate and towards 29 March, and it is imperative for the House to focus on delivering a successful Brexit, which is successful for jobs, trade and the economy. Despite what we might hear from the other side of the House, I believe that we must deliver a successful Brexit for Scotland. Despite all that we may hear, many organisations in Scotland support the Prime Minister’s deal, including the Federation of Small Businesses, the Scotch Whisky Association, the National Farmers Union, Scotland, and the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation, and that is because they, like business, want certainty.

I supported the meaningful vote and the Prime Minister’s deal. In my speech, I made it clear that I had reservations, particularly about the backstop; I would like an end date. In any business negotiation, if there is no end date on a suspensive condition, it is never dealt with: you always put that to one side and then deal with the things that are more important. I feel that an end date to the backstop is important, but as a Unionist and someone who does not want a second referendum, I could support the Prime Minister’s deal. I add further that in business negotiations, one does not take things off the table. For that reason, although I do not want no deal, I equally understand that we must not weaken our hand.

In the spirit of being equal, I say to the purists in our party that the referendum result was close. It was 52% to 48%. There is a mood in this House which is against no deal and I implore them to proceed with caution. As has been said before, in trying to win the match seven-nil, they may well lose it four-three. As a nation, we need the Prime Minister’s deal. I add further that in business negotiations, one does not take things off the table. For that reason, although I do not want no deal, I equally understand that we must not weaken our hand.

I say to all sides of the leave-remain argument that, for the good of the economy, which is the driver for all we hold dear in terms of public services, please let us
move forward. The Prime Minister said that we must hold our nerve. I say to my fellow leavers: if they definitely want to leave on 29 March, they have to not only hold their nerve, but hold their nose and vote for her deal.

4.40 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I came into the Chamber earlier today during business questions and the hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) was referring to robot day. I thought that was a reference to the Prime Minister and her Ministers on the subject of Brexit repeating the same mantra again and again. In fact, it is an event in Coventry on 9 March, which I of course welcome.

There are two things we need to do today. One is to rule out no deal. Many Members have given a large number of examples of why we should rule out no deal. I will add just one example. All of us, I suspect, have an EHIC card—the European health insurance card. People need to be aware that, if we crash out of the European Union on 29 March, the UK has to negotiate 27 bilateral agreements with each and every single EU country to ensure that our European healthcare continues. Members will probably not be surprised to know that the UK has so far not managed to negotiate a single one of those bilateral deals. If you have booked your holiday in the European Union after 29 March and we are in a no-deal scenario, you need to think very carefully about taking out travel insurance. The bad news is that, when we contacted seven of the largest travel insurance companies, only two were able to guarantee that their policies were valid in a no-deal scenario.

That is just one example of why we should not be pursuing no deal, but there are many, many others. Many Government Ministers have described, in the most colourful means possible, the impact of no deal, reinforcing the point. If any other evidence is needed, yesterday I met the CEO of one of the largest UK construction companies, who said that it has lifts and specialist cladding coming into the UK but that it has absolutely no idea what will happen to the tariff that applies to those goods at the point they get to the UK.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Tom Brake: I will not give way.

The second thing we need to do today is come out very strongly in favour of a people’s vote. I am going to throw down the gauntlet to all parties and individual MPs to finally demonstrate their courage and commitment to a people’s vote, and back the amendment we will table on 27 February so we can finally press this matter to a vote. I am very pleased that today, although our amendment was not selected, we secured support from both the SNP and Plaid. I welcome that but, if we are going to be doing this again on 27 February, I hope there will be a much, much greater level of support.

I am very pleased that the Leader of the Opposition arrived in his place in time for me to make that point, because on 27 February the overwhelming majority of his party members, the overwhelming majority of young people, the overwhelming majority of his supporters and I will want him to support that amendment, too. I very much look forward to that.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow on from such excellent contributions; among the finest speeches were those from my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), my hon. Friends the Members for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) and for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), and my hon. Friends the Members for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) and for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman).

I encourage every Member present to heed the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey. She warned of the degradation of our national political debate. When loose talk of treachery and betrayal leads directly to threats against Members of this House, we must do better, and today I think we have. We do, though, need to be honest with ourselves: we are no closer to breaking an impasse that simply must be broken. We are about to vote on a Government motion that is divorced from reality and oblivious to the gravity of the situation that we find ourselves in.

There are just 43 days to go until 29 March, and as my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said, British exporters and importers do not know what tariffs and regulatory checks they will face in just 44 days’ time. Those living on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic have no idea whether that border will be maintained in 44 days’ time without the symbol of division that is physical infrastructure. Businesses, local authorities and vital public services do not know whether, in 44 days’ time, the disruption at ports will be so severe that it will become difficult for them to access the goods that we all rely on. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), the shadow Secretary of State, said, it is already affecting business behaviour and investment—sometimes irreversibly.

Some say that if no deal came to pass, it would create a state of national emergency, and that is true enough, but the reality is that there is already so much uncertainty, creating so much anxiety, that we are close to national crisis now. It is a crisis of the Tory party’s making. How is Parliament asked to respond to this crisis? We are asked to note “that discussions between the UK and the EU on the Northern Ireland backstop are ongoing.”

It might also be worth noting that those discussions have so far consisted of the EU stating that it is not prepared to reopen the backstop—a backstop that the Prime Minister had already agreed to, and which she told the House was an inevitable part of any withdrawal agreement. She told us that before she voted against it on 29 January to placate the extremists on her Back Benches.

That brings me to the next absurdity in the motion. We are asked to reiterate our support for the Brady amendment. Well, we on the Opposition Benches will never support a strategy that so clearly puts short-term Tory party unity over and above the national interest.
The Secretary of State was once again unable to tell us what “alternative arrangements” the Government are actually seeking, and we understand that no legal proposals for alternative arrangements have even been put to the EU, so let us be clear what the Prime Minister’s real strategy is: she is running down the clock, playing for time and drifting towards no deal. She is hoping, in the face of all the evidence, that the passage of time and a few more reassurances will be enough to overturn a defeat of 230. That would be an irresponsible strategy even if it had any chance of working, relying as it does on creating a national crisis to strong-arm MPs, but what makes it worse is that it plainly will not work.

The extremists in the Prime Minister’s party want the backstop replaced— that, indeed, is what the Brady amendment calls for—or at the very least gutted of any force and effect through a short time limit or an easily used unilateral exit mechanism. The Prime Minister knows full well that neither of those things are going to happen. I will make a prediction: the extremists on the Government Back Benches will go against whatever she brings back. They will not be scared of no deal. They always have been and always will be prepared to plunge this country into chaos. We have a Prime Minister who prizes Conservative party unity above all else. She is putting party before country. Because she does not have a strategy that can work, this House will have to step in and prevent no deal.

Two weeks ago, the House approved a motion tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington and the right hon. Member for Meriden, and that was welcome. It showed that there is no majority in this House for no deal, but that is not enough on its own. If the House wants to prevent no deal, it has to take further action. The next step is to ensure that there is a hard stop to the Government’s “run down the clock and hope” approach, and to say that on 27 February, we must be able to debate further options to prevent no deal.

Other steps beyond today’s amendment will be needed. Those will include supporting the Bill tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford. [Interruption.] Anyone who genuinely opposes no deal can see that if no deal is in place, an extension by mid-March is in order.

Mr Speaker: Order. Quite a lot of noisy men are wittering away to each other and are not listening to the hon. Lady, who is replying to the debate. Be quiet; remember your manners.

Jenny Chapman: Mr Speaker, I am grateful. An extension might buy more time, but ultimately this House needs to be able to debate and vote on the credible options to prevent no deal. We are clear what those options are: either a close economic relationship that includes a customs union and close alignment to the single market—or this option was set out in the letter written by the Leader of the Opposition to the Prime Minister and welcomed by European leaders as a serious and credible way out of the impasse—or, if the Prime Minister digs her heels in and continues to pursue a failing and undeliverable strategy, a public vote.

I will finish with a reference to the right hon. Member for West Dorset. He said that if the Prime Minister and Government continued to fail to lead, this House would step in, fill the void and lead in their place.

4.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris): I thank the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman), for her comments about people’s speeches. She mainly chose people on her own side, but there were some excellent contributions from Government Members as well. A notable one was from the Father of the House, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), who pointed out the logic of the position of so many of the Labour Members who spoke. Based on the shadow Brexit Secretary’s argument today, they should all be supporting the Prime Minister’s deal. If the Father of the House will forgive me, I am very glad that his amendment was not selected, because it was one of the most lengthy amendments I have ever seen on an Order Paper, and it would have taken some doing to get through it.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab) correctly pointed out that those who asked for an extension of article 50 are just reinforcing uncertainty for businesses and people alike. I both understand and respect the position of my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman). She knows, and pointed out, that the best way to stop our country leaving the European Union without a deal is to do as she always has done, and work with and support the deal that the Prime Minister is trying to achieve for this country.

I was not quite sure about the story from my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) about a shortage of Viagra in a no-deal scenario. I am not sure that stands up at all. [Laughter.] We have had this debate a number of times; you have to try to liven it up. Hard Brexit, soft Brexit—who knows?

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) said when talking about her amendment, there is a long-standing convention of not publishing advice given by civil servants, quite properly and candidly, to members of the Cabinet. The Government, through the Chancellor the Duchy of Lancaster, are very happy to meet her to identify the information that she wants published, and then to commit to publishing that information. In the light of that offer, I kindly ask her to consider not pressing her amendment.

Anna Soubry: I am grateful for the Minister’s comments, and congratulate him on what I think is his first speech at the Dispatch Box. In any event, this seems like a very sensible resolution, because if those papers, which I believe must be published, as others do, are not forthcoming, I reserve the right to move an amendment on 27 February, or into the 28th, and I will do that unless we get those papers. However, I am confident that we will identify them in that meeting, that they will be published, and that people will then realise what a danger no deal is.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank my right hon. Friend for that clarification.
This afternoon continued the tradition of robust discussion on this subject, with a degree of deliberation that is only appropriate for an issue of such national significance. As you would expect, Mr Speaker, the Government are following the direction delivered by the House on 29 January to return to the European Union to seek legally binding changes to the backstop. This House has instructed the Government on how to proceed, and we are delivering on that instruction. As the Prime Minister set out on Tuesday, there are three ways in which that could be achieved. First, the backstop could be replaced with alternative arrangements to avoid a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. Secondly, the backstop could have a legally binding time limit. Thirdly, there could be a unilateral exit clause.

Ian Paisley: Will the Minister take this opportunity to confirm that the Government have started to draft textual legally binding changes to the withdrawal agreement on that point?

Chris Heaton-Harris: As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has said, we have three options to deliver on the will of this House. Initial discussions with the European Union covered all these proposals. At this stage, there is not a specific legal text on the table. Notwithstanding that, we are firm that any change must be legally binding, but as has been said, it would not be prudent to start providing a running commentary on the detail. I hope that clarifies slightly for my hon. Friend where we are going.

On no deal, as the Minister with responsibility for co-ordinating our contingency planning, I see the day-to-day work that Whitehall is doing to prepare us for that scenario and I remain confident that we are en route to being ready for that eventuality.

Neil Gray rose—

Chris Heaton-Harris: Sorry, I am afraid I do not have time.

However, this Government do not want to have to utilise that work.

Helen Goodman rose—

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am afraid I am not going to give way.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has consistently made clear, the only way to avoid no deal is to support a deal, and unless this House votes for a deal, the legal default in both UK and EU law is that we leave without a deal.

Let me assure the House that our programme of wider readiness is moving forward in a way that means that there is no need to extend article 50; there is absolutely no desire to do so, either. Four-hundred and thirty EU exit statutory instruments have been laid before the House to date, which is over 60% of the SIs that we anticipate will be required by exit day. Over 210 have been made, and five pieces of primary legislation have already been passed in preparation for our exit from the European Union.

We have spent a long time discussing the backstop, and this House’s concerns about it have been made clear, but it is important to note that there are wider benefits offered by the withdrawal agreement. It provides citizens with the certainty they need about their rights going forward. It signals the end of sending vast payments to the European Union, meaning more money for our NHS and other key priorities at home, while honouring the obligations we signed up to while in the EU, and it delivers the time-limited implementation period that is so vital for business.

Today is not the end of the process, but a way point directing us to the finishing line. It is a mark in the road towards the end destination—one that this country overwhelmingly voted to see. As I am sure Members understand, now is not the time to add any new conditions or create any unnecessary processes. Now is the time to allow our Prime Minister to finish the job that she is so diligently doing, and get this deal over the line. I ask all Members to support the Government in that tonight.

5 pm

The Speaker put the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Order, this day).

Amendment proposed: (a), in line 1, leave out from “House” to end and add “requires by 27 February 2019 a Minister of the Crown either (a) to move another motion under Section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 or (b) to make a written statement declaring that there is no longer an agreement in principle in the negotiations with the European Union and to move no later than that date an amendable motion on how the Government proposes to proceed.”—(Jeremy Corbyn.)

The House divided: Ayes 306, Noes 322.

Division No. 331 [5 pm]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane  Butler, Dawn
Abrahams, Debbie  Byrne, rh Liam
Ali, Rushanara  Cable, rh Sir Vince
Alin-Khan, Dr Rosena  Cadbury, Ruth
Amesbury, Mike  Cameron, Dr Lisa
Antoniazzi, Tonia  Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Ashworth, Jonathan  Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Austin, Ian  Carden, Dan
Bailey, Mr Adrian  Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Bardell, Hannah  Champion, Sarah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin  Chapman, Douglass
Beckett, rh Margaret  Chapman, Jenny
Benn, rh Hilary  Charalambous, Bambos
Berger, Luciana  Cher, Joanna
Betts, Mr Clive  Chidwy, rh Ann
Black, Mhairi  Coaker, Vernon
Blackford, rh Ian  Coffey, Ann
Blackman, Kirsty  Cooper, Julie
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta  Cooper, Rosie
Blomfield, Paul  Cooper, rh Yvette
Brabin, Tracy  Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben  Cowan, Ronnie
Brahe, rh Tom  Coyle, Neil
Brennan, Kevin  Crausby, Sir David
Brock, Deirdre  Crawley, Angela
Brown, Alan  Creagh, Mary
Brown, Lyn  Creasy, Stella
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas  Craddes, Jon
Buck, Ms Karen  Cryer, John
Burden, Richard  Cummins, Judith
Burgon, Richard  Cunningham, Alex
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment proposed: (i), in line 1, leave out from “House” to end and add “requires that a Minister of the Crown immediately begin negotiations with the European Council to extend the period specified under Article 50(3) of the Treaty on European Union by no fewer than three months from 29 March 2019, and bring forward an appropriate amendment to section 20 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 to facilitate this change.”.—[Ian Blackford.]”.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 93, Noes 315.

Division No. 332] [5.15 pm

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie
Antoniacci, Tonia
Bardell, Hannah
Berger, Luciana
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brook, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Buck, Ms Karen
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chapman, Douglas
Cherry, Joanna
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coffey, Ann
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Daby, Janet
Davey, rh Sir Edward
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Duffield, Rosie
Edwards, Jonathan
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Gapes, Mike
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Hayes, Helen
Hendry, Drew
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hosie, Stewart
Jardine, Christine

Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jo Churchill and
Paul Maynard

Jones, Susan Elan
Kilfen, Ged
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Law, Chris
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lucas, Caroline
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Mc Nally, John
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McMorrin, Anna
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Murray, Ian
Newlands, Gavin
O’Hara, Brendan
Owen, Albert
Saville Roberts, Liz
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Angela
Smith, Owen
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Swinson, Jo
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
West, Catherine
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Wishart, Pete
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Woodcock, John
Zeichner, Daniel

Adams, Nigel
Afzal, Bin
Afryie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breerton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, rh Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine

NOES

Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyly-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Elwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grealish, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hanham, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Head, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hind, rh Damian
Hoban, Simon
Hoe, Kate
Hollingbery, George
Mr Speaker: I understand from the exchange the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) had with the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), that she was not minded, on this occasion, to move her amendment (e). Is my understanding correct?

Anna Soubry: It is, Mr Speaker, on this occasion; I am sure we can sort it all out.

Main Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 258, Noes 303.

Division No. 333

[5.29 pm]

Ayes

Adams, Nigel
Afroli, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Andrew, Stewart
Argar, Edward
Akins, Victoria
Austin, Ian
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barron, Sir John
Berridge, Sir Mark
Berrysford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Boles, Nick
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, Sir Kenneth
Bradley, Bob
Brady, Sir Graham
Brenner, Jack
Brine, Steve
Browne, Sir James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burt, Sir Alan
Burt, Sir Alistair
Campbell, Sir Gregory
Carteridge, James
Caulfield, Maria

Noes

Chalk, Alex
Clark, Colin
Clark, Mr Greg
Cleverly, James
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damien
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, Mr Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Mr Chris
Davies, Mr David
Davies, David T C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Shailesh
Davies, Shailesh
Davies, Simon
Davies, Stephen
Doyle-Price, Jack
Duguid, David
Duncan, Mr Stephen
Dunne, Mr Stephen
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellwood, Mr Andrei
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Everett, Mr Simon
Fallon, Sir Robert
Fallon, Sir Michael
Field, Mr Frank
Field, Mr Mark

Tellers for the Ayes: Jo Churchill and
Paul Maynard

Tellers for the Noes:

Jo Churchill and
Paul Maynard
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**Tellers for the Ayes:**

Jo Churchill and Paul Maynard

**NOES**

Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nic
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tammanjeet Singh
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrell, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
It is surprising that the Prime Minister is not even here to hear the result of this vote. I was going to ask her to come to the Dispatch Box now to admit that her strategy has failed and to bring forward to the House a coherent plan that can deal with the stresses and anxieties that so many people all over this country are feeling, so that we can make some progress together, bring people together and prevent the catastrophe of a no-deal exit on 29 March. It is surprising that the Prime Minister is not here. Is there some way by which you could encourage her to return to the Dispatch Box and tell us what her plan is?

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Tonight’s vote shows that there is no majority for the Prime Minister’s course of action in dealing with Brexit. Yet again, her Government have been defeated. The Government cannot keep on ignoring Parliament or ploughing on towards 29 March without a coherent plan. She cannot keep on just running down the clock and hoping that something will turn up that will save the day and save her face.

**Mr Speaker:** It is not obligatory for the Prime Minister to be present on this occasion. Other representatives of the Treasury Bench are here, and if the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union wants to take to the Dispatch Box, it is open to him to do so, but he is not obliged to do so.

**Stephen Barclay** indicated dissent.

**Question accordingly negatived.**

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**Tellers for the Noes:**
Thangam Debbonaire and
Jeff Smith
Mr Speaker: Or if the Government Chief Whip, who is chuntering from a sedentary position for no obvious benefit or purpose, wants to beetle along to the Box, he is welcome to do so, but he has declined to do so. [Interruption.] No, it is not incumbent upon them. They have been invited, but they are not obliged to do so. The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) has made his own point in his own way with force and alacrity, and it is on the record for others to study.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is a significant defeat for the Government. This is a brougham, and at the end of the day, the Prime Minister should be here to accept her responsibilities on the back of this Government defeat. Where is she? Given the significance of this defeat, what powers are open to us to force the Government to bring forward their meaningful vote to next week? People in the United Kingdom want certainty. Finally, I thank those Members—Members of all parties—who had the courage to vote with us tonight to extend article 50, but where was the Front Bench of the Labour party on extending article 50?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. Gentleman for his point of order. In responding to him, I am seeking to be helpful to people interested in our proceedings who are not Members of the House, and therefore I will, as I hope he would expect, treat of the factual inquiry that the leader of the Scottish National Party in this House put to me—what can be done to bring forward or expedite the meaningful vote? The short answer is that it is not within the gift of the Chair to do so, and it is not for Members of this House who are not part of the Executive branch to do so. The meaningful vote is brought about as a result of and in accordance with statute, and the statute decrees that it be done by a Minister. It will happen when a Minister is ready to bring forward that vote. However, the right hon. Gentleman knows that there are at various times other opportunities for debates and votes, and he is not an innocent in these matters. He is well versed in parliamentary procedure, and he will know the opportunities open to him, and other Members in other parts of the House will similarly be so conscious.

Tom Brake: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I suspect that if the Secretary of State, in opening the debate, had said that he was going to honour what Parliament voted for on 29 January—ruling out no deal—the Government may well have won the vote this evening, but he did not. In what way can we, as Members of Parliament who have already voted to rule out no deal, ensure that the Government listen to that and respond appropriately? [Interruption.] Mr Speaker: A Member from Ealing who will be well known to colleagues—the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound)—has just chuntered in the background that that is beyond even the Speaker’s power. Well, it is certainly beyond the Speaker’s power.

What the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) has raised is an extremely important matter, but it is a matter of politics. The politics will play out—I use that term in a non-pejorative and neutral sense—in the days and weeks ahead, and we shall have to see where we get to. I think the right hon. Gentleman was mainly concerned, if I understand him correctly, to put his point on the record. I do not think there was really a question mark there, but if there was, I am not able to provide a definitive answer now. However, we will return to these matters ere long.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. What we do know tonight is that there is a majority in this House for replacing the backstop with alternative arrangements and that that majority rests on what is known as the Malthouse compromise. Is there any way to put on the record that the Government should adopt that compromise and enjoy a majority for it?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is a county colleague of mine, but that is a truly monstrous abuse of the point of order procedure, as the puckish grin on the face of the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound)—has just chuntered in the background—tells me. He is well versed in parliamentary procedure, and he will know the opportunities open to him, and other Members in other parts of the House will similarly be so conscious.

I hope there are no further points of order because there is an Arsenal match on television very soon—[Interruption.] But the Chair will always attend to his duties. Hon. Members need be in no doubt on that score.

Business without Debate

CHILDREN ACT 1989 (AMENDMENT) (FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION) BILL [LORDS]; (BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE)

Ordered, That the Children Act 1989 (Amendment) (Female Genital Mutilation) Bill [Lords] be referred to a Second Reading Committee as if it had been so referred under the provisions of Standing Order No. 90(2).—(Wendy Morton.)
Mineworkers’ Pension Scheme

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Wendy Morton.)

Mr Speaker: In the interests of the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), who has secured the Adjournment debate—I am playing for time here—[Interruption.] Yes, the Arsenal game starts in three minutes’ time. I appeal to colleagues who are leaving the Chamber to do so quickly and quietly, so that the Adjournment debate can be properly conducted.

5.52 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I also place on the record my thanks to you for selecting this debate, which I am pleased to have secured for one simple reason: to give the Government a chance to do right by retired miners and their families in my constituency and coalfield communities across the country.

I understand the significance of the mineworkers’ pension scheme to other hon. Members here today, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), who has brought so many of those involved together; my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero), who has brought so many of those involved together; my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), who led the recent Westminster Hall debate; hon. Members who are themselves former miners; and the many other coalfield MPs who join me here today.

This debate specifically seeks to address the injustices of the surplus sharing arrangement agreed in the mineworkers’ pension scheme back in 1994, but I want to start by explaining just why it matters so much to people in areas such as Barnsley. Our community is one built on the coal industry. It once helped sustain some of the most remote parts of Britain, providing the fuel that powered a nation. Many miners died prematurely, including my own father in his 50s and my grandfather in his early 50s. What will happen to the surplus when the last of the miners and their beneficiaries have passed away? Where will that surplus go, and is that driving the Government’s actions?

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. I am sure the Minister has heard it and will respond in due course.

The guarantee has provided a safeguard that has allowed the trustees to follow higher-risk, and subsequently higher-value, investments that have proved lucrative.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her fine speech. Picking up on a point from the previous intervention, the very reason there has to be action soon is that if there is not, the miners themselves will not get benefit from it while they are alive.

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I will come on to speak about that in a moment.

The guarantee is not without its merits, but what the debate seeks to address is the specific surplus sharing arrangement, which, as hon. Members have said, has seen the Government profit so disproportionately at the expense of miners.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Many people in Doncaster share the same concerns as those in her constituency in Barnsley. Does she agree that when the scheme was first set up the balance of risk was different? What we know now, all these years further on from 1994, requires at the very least a revision to look at the balance of risk being fairer in the future.

Stephanie Peacock: I thank my right hon. Friend for her comments. She is absolutely right, and I will come on to talk about that in a moment. She talks about when the agreement was set up. The Minister admitted to me, in response to a written question asking what actuarial advice was taken, that “no such advice was obtained”.

Can we consider that for a moment, Madam Deputy Speaker? This arrangement was put in place with no expert advice. It is little wonder that the initial prediction proved woefully inaccurate and the surplus has been substantially more than anticipated—and it shows.
The sheer amount of money that has been taken out by the Government since 1994 without returning a single penny is staggering. The Treasury has pocketed £4.4 billion since 1994.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, and I am sure many ex-miners in Coventry—we used to have two collieries—will be very grateful to her for securing this debate and for trying to put some wrongs right. I am sure they will appreciate that very much, because a lot of them suffer from silicosis and other diseases. She is doing a great service to the miners.

Stephanie Peacock: I thank my hon. Friend. He is absolutely right that a lot of former miners are taking a great interest in this debate, not least because the Government have taken £617 million this year alone, on top of £102 million over the past two years. As if that was not already enough, they plan to take another £427 million over the next three years.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a really powerful speech. Does she agree that pensioner miners in areas such as mine in Durham should be getting an enhanced set of benefits from the scheme, rather than the Government creaming off this money? It is an absolute outrage.

Stephanie Peacock: I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution. I know that her constituency hosts the Durham miners’ gala, which celebrates the coalfield communities. She is absolutely right about the money that the Government have taken out. I repeat that they have not contributed a single penny from their own funds. These are huge sums of money.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. The miners have had to fight every inch of the way, including for pneumoconiosis compensation and everything else. In my constituency in the Cynon Valley there is real anger and a feeling that the miners have been cheated by the refusal to share out this surplus money in a fair and proper way.

Stephanie Peacock: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The sums of money involved are huge, but for the individuals and families affected, it is striking how small the numbers are.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her speech. She is championing miners right across the UK, including in my seat in Ogmore. Does she agree that we are running out of time? Lots of widows now receive the miners’ pension, based on a reduction. Unless the Government take action now, we will be in a position where the money will simply be taken up by the Treasury. That cannot be right for the thousands of miners left and their families.

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The average pension is just £84 a week, but it is a lot less for widows in receipt of a pension. Some are forced to get by on much less. For instance, I have read of one who receives as little as £59 a week, after spending the best part of three decades down the pit.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Of course, the north Staffordshire coalfields were some of the most prosperous and efficient coalfields in the country. Does my hon. Friend agree that if the money that the Government are taking into the Treasury was spent directly on pensioners, the economic impact on their local communities, which have been starved of funds, would be immense, and in some cases transformative?

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is just totally unfair. How can £59 for a retired miner and £4.4 billion for the Government possibly be justified? How is that fair? These are people who toiled for years in dangerous, gruelling conditions to help to keep the lights on and our country running.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. So many people are present to register their support for what she is saying, and I am here to do the same. I have seen the surplus sharing arrangement referred to as a “legalised but grossly immoral raid on the funds.”—[Official Report, 10 June 2003; Vol. 406, c. 171WH.]

Is it not now time for this Government to right a wrong?

Stephanie Peacock: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and that is the purpose of this debate. It is time that action was taken. We should consider what a difference it would make to pensioners’ lives if we diverted more money into their pockets, rather than into the Government’s coffers.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is speaking compellingly, despite the many interruptions. She certainly speaks to the sense of injustice around this issue in my constituency. Has she had any discussions with the trustees of the mineworkers’ pension scheme to find out their views on what a fair way forward would be?

Stephanie Peacock: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. I know he has championed this issue over many years. I have indeed spoken to the trustees, and they are in agreement that we need to look at this again.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I would simply like to say, first, that I hope the hon. Lady gets a review out of this debate, at the very least; and secondly, that I have always supported the mineworkers, since the closing of the pits by Michael Heseltine. It was a long time ago, but the bottom line is that the miners deserve to be looked after properly.

Stephanie Peacock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that contribution. I am pleased that we have cross-party support today. It is very welcome.

The risk undertaken by the Government in guaranteeing the pensions no longer justifies the price paid by the miners for that assurance. The membership of the scheme alone has decreased substantially over the decades since the deal was struck. In 2006, there were 280,000 members; now, there are 160,000. The Government’s financial risk in their role as guarantor of the pensions is in permanent decline, yet in essence they are still charging miners the same price that they charged 25 years ago.
Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): My hon. Friend is completely right and is making a really powerful case on behalf of mineworkers all over the country. Does she agree that we need to know whether the Government are seeing the mineworkers’ pension as a source of income generation? If they are, that would be utterly morally wrong, given the contribution that the mineworkers have made to our economy over so many years.

Stephanie Peacock: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am sure that the Minister has heard her question and will address it in good time.

Never mind whether this is fair. From a financial perspective, the scheme fundamentally does not provide value for money for its members. I implore the Minister not to respond with platitudes about the benefits of the Government’s guarantee for the scheme. We know that it has been beneficial, and as many a former miner from Barnsley will tell us, they know there is no such thing as a free lunch.

Mr Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley) (Lab): I speak as a serving miner at one time, who had two broken legs. I wonder about this sometimes when I see in the newspapers about this Sir Philip Green and how he stole all the pensions, yet here we are, sitting here and the Government are stealing pensions. They should have their knighthoods taken off them as well.

Stephanie Peacock: I thank my hon. Friend. As a former miner, he speaks with passion and has done over many decades, and he is absolutely right. It is blatantly unfair that those who have spent a life working literally at the coalface will be left to struggle in retirement, when the Government can instead help the near 160,000 former miners still affected. This is their money, and I appeal now to the Minister to do right by them.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend, and as the grandson of a coal miner, I know that the speech she is making is so important for the communities that we represent. When the Prime Minister took over, she stood on the steps of Downing Street and said that there are “burning injustices” affecting our nation. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is one of those burning injustices? If the promises that the Prime Minister made are to mean anything at all, this wrong must be righted immediately.

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: it is totally unfair. That is why I ask the Minister to dispel the concerns that I briefly touched on earlier and protect the bonus element of the members’ pensions, which will prevent real-terms losses to pension value in times of poor investment return. Most importantly, is she prepared to amend the surplus sharing scheme and meet the coalfield MPs, the scheme trustees, members and the National Union of Mineworkers to discuss a revision, including consideration of the recent NUM-commissioned report that suggested a 90:10 split in favour of the miners?

Miners and their families in this country had their way of life ripped apart. They were branded “the enemy within”. Men were imprisoned because they were fighting for their jobs. Women ran soup kitchens because they were fighting for their community. Spirits were bruised but never broken. Tragically, too often our miners were let down. The unfairness of the scheme must not—cannot—be allowed to stand as the final chapter in that dismal history. Retired miners have waited long enough for the only thing they ever wanted: their fair share.

6.8 pm

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) for securing the debate, for her excellent speech and for the opportunity to speak very briefly on an issue that I am extremely passionate about. Many of us are now familiar with the shocking headline figures behind the mineworkers’ pension scheme story. The Government have received nearly £4.5 billion from the MPS since 1994. They have never had to pay a penny into the scheme in their role as guarantor and they are still pocketing in the region of £142 million a year. Those figures do not even include any moneys that they have received from the other coal pension scheme—the British Coal staff superannuation scheme, from which they have also made billions of pounds.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that what is absolutely fundamental is that at the time of privatisation, any surplus was envisaged as a safety net, not a cash cow for the Government?

Gloria De Piero: My hon. Friend absolutely hits the nail on the head.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Just to confirm what my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) said, I served on the Labour side on the Bill that privatised the coal industry in 1994, and those guarantees were given at that stage.

Gloria De Piero: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to make that point. What the headline figures that I have quoted do not tell us are the personal stories of hardship that our ex-miners and their widows are facing. The average weekly pension is not much more than £80 a week. It is hardly a sum that someone could live a luxury lifestyle on. MPS pensioners rightly feel aggrieved at seeing the profits from their pension investments being used to boost the Treasury’s coffers. An MPS pensioner from my constituency called into my office recently to show me his recent pension statement. He had received the news that, thanks to a 3.4% increase to his guaranteed pension and a 4.2% bonus, his pension was going up to the grand total of £74.71.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend remind the Government that we are talking about deferred income earnt by miners, not a gift that we are blessing them with? It is the miners’ money, not anyone else’s.

Gloria De Piero: That is why it is clear that the 50:50 surplus sharing arrangement put in place when the Government became guarantor needs to be renegotiated.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Ashfield and for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) for making such powerful speeches.
Does my hon. Friend agree that, at a time when we have had 40,000 excess deaths, many of them old people—the highest level for 40 years in this country—and when we see pensioners' income under attack from higher inflation and risks to their benefits, such as free TV licences, this is a wrong that must be righted by the Minister? These communities were devastated when their pits closed. These people lost income during their lifetime and are now being denied it in retirement.

Gloria De Piero: Absolutely, and the Government have made far more money than was ever forecast.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friends the Members for Ashfield and for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) for raising this matter. The calculation made in the privatisation in 1993-94 was done on the basis that a lot of coal mines were still open at that time. Clearly that is not the case now. This is a milk cow for Government. I do not know how many years the Government are going to keep looking at this to try to get some sense for it, but what is happening is wholly wrong. People can quote the increases in miners' pensions, but often a lot has been lost because these people are on means-tested benefits to start with. We should recognise that.

Gloria De Piero: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point from a wealth of experience of campaigning on this issue.

I, Labour colleagues from other coalfield constituencies, the National Union of Mineworkers, other campaigners and, crucially, the trustees of the miners' pension scheme—the Minister shook her head when my hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) to say that the scheme is incredibly serious, and that is that my mother-in-law is a beneficiary. She is a widow and her husband, Bill O'Neill, who was a leading light in the coke workers union, died very young as a result of his many years of work underground. Indeed, my husband turned down a job in the Keresley pit at the age of 16, but got into trouble at university for helping to organise the blockade of ports on the east coast to stop the imports of Polish coal, so I will not take any lessons from anybody in this Chamber about the impact of the scheme or the feelings that have been raised over the years, which were so powerfully expressed by the hon. Lady. I completely share her view that one thing that we always need to focus on is the sheer blood, sweat, tears and toil that went into building our industrial revolution. One of the marvellous things about my current portfolio is the opportunity perhaps to repurpose some of that work, through things such as geothermal energy projects, to basically create energy for the next generation, based on the effort that went in.

I want to pick up some of the hon. Lady's points about how the scheme is working and touch on some of the issues around cash flow. It is a little unfair of the hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) to say that there has been no engagement. There has been a lot of engagement on this process. I continue to be interested in what the trustees are bringing forward; indeed, I was discussing this with the Chancellor only today.

Nick Smith: I understand that the miners' pension scheme trustees tried to meet the Department before Christmas to talk about the guarantee but have still not heard from the Department about a meeting. Will the Minister please this evening to meet the miners' pension scheme trustees within the next fortnight?

Claire Perry: I will, but I met the trustees last year. I think that they have done an exceptionally good job, and I shall say more about that later. We have discussed their proposals with them, and I am shocked to hear that they were told that a meeting was not available to them. A meeting will be available whenever they want it.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Was a review process written into the 50:50 split when the decision was made? If it was not, would not agreeing to a review now be the honourable thing for the Government to do, not least because the decision was made more than 20 years ago?

Claire Perry: This is a factual point with which I agree to deal shortly. The split has already been reviewed. It was last reviewed in 2002 by a Labour Energy Minister, who said: “the trustees have been advised that the Government does not feel it would be right to adjust the current 50/50 surplus sharing arrangements.”

He also pointed out that markets could go up or down. In fact, in 2002, the scheme was in deficit, as it was again in 2008 and 2009. The then Labour Government decided that, given the future unpredictability of the scheme, it would not be correct to review the pension surpluses. So it is not correct to say that the decision has not been reviewed. Indeed, a Labour Government made the decision not to change the surplus sharing arrangements.

Stephanie Peacock: The Minister will acknowledge that that review took place quite a few years ago, when the scheme was in a very different state. Given that there are now more than 150,000 fewer former miners and their widows, the risk for the Government is substantially less than it was then.

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady has made a valid point but, as she has also said, if the scheme had been reviewed at that point, many more thousands of people...
would have received a higher pension. The decision not to conduct a review was made partly because of the volatility that is inherent in a scheme for which the Government act as guarantor, and partly because, notwithstanding the idea that this is cash that sits in the Government’s coffers, the Government have no money of their own. In many instances, the money that has come into the scheme has been spent directly in the coalfield communities. We have spent more than £1 billion—[Interruption.] Hang on. We have spent more than £1 billion of Government money in the coalfield communities over the last 20 years, and we have committed an additional £70 million since 2010. The point is that, if money comes to the Government, it is part of the Government’s general receipts and can then be recycled. That money has contributed to the benefits that many other pensioners have received.

Graeme Morris: Will the Minister give way?

Claire Perry: Let me make some progress. [Interruption.] Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Some important questions have been asked, and I am sure that Members want to hear the answers from the Minister.

Claire Perry: I am afraid that there is a fundamental fallacy in some of the arguments that have been advanced. I suspect that the Labour Government made the decision not to review the surplus sharing for the same reason, which is that the money that comes to the Government is then being spent to support pensioners in many ways, providing them with, for instance, free prescriptions and bus passes. It is not correct to say that the money is just sitting there.

Sir William Cash rose—

Claire Perry: No, I will not give way. Some important questions have been answered. I think that I was generous in allowing two speeches to be made before my response.

As the hon. Member for Barnsley East rightly said, the scheme continues to function and the numbers are falling. The only scheme that resembles this one is the one that was set up for rail workers. Again, the Government are the guarantor, which means that any liabilities incurred by the scheme will come back to them. For that reason, the trustees, who include ex-miners, have done an amazing investment job. Because of that guarantee—it is basically a Government-backed scheme—the returns are at least a third higher in real terms than they would otherwise have been, so it has generated a lot of value.

Nick Smith rose—

Claire Perry: Does the hon. Gentleman want answers, or does he want to keep asking questions? Because I love the hon. Gentleman, I will take a question from him.

Nick Smith: I have listened to what the Minister has said. We argue that the Government have received at least £3.5 billion in surplus in recent years. The Minister says that they have spent £1 billion in coalfield communities in the last 20 years. Labour Members feel that our communities have been short-changed by £2 billion. Given that the last review took place nearly 20 years ago, why will the Minister not do the right thing now and agree to another review?

Claire Perry: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be the first to acknowledge—the point has already been made—that, sadly, one of the results has been that many people who are in receipt of this pension scheme, including the hon. Member for Blyth Valley (Mr Campbell), who was in his place, no longer live in those coalfield communities, but they have benefited as pensioners from many of the other pension benefits that that income has gone towards providing.

I met, and was incredibly impressed with the trustees. Relative to other schemes, the results they have provided and the compassion and generosity with which they administer the scheme are second to none, and we should pay tribute to them for that. I point out again that the returns from the Government underwriting of the scheme are about a third higher in real terms than they would have been.

I want to turn to something that has been suggested by the trustees. When I met them—and perhaps the hon. Member for Barnsley East and I should meet them together to have the same conversation; I will be happy to do that—they indicated to me that they understood that changing the surplus sharing arrangements, as was considered by the last Labour Government and rejected, was not the biggest priority. The biggest priority was protecting the accrued bonuses and making sure that the scheme could proceed on that basis. They have come forward with some excellent proposals and I commend them for that. I had a brief discussion this evening with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor about my interest and the Treasury’s interest in properly reviewing those proposals and taking them forward. I am very happy to have those conversations face to face, as I have committed to do.

I genuinely admire the hon. Lady’s speech. It is brilliant to see her and so many colleagues standing up for a group of people who many may argue gave more to the system than they received from it. As a family member, I am proud to acknowledge that and to stand up as the steward of the scheme and pledge to her that I will do my best to ensure that it continues to deliver.

I do want to say that the trustees’ proposals are excellent, albeit we need to look at the cash flow implications. We will continue to explore options and I am very happy to do that on a cross-party basis with all Members who would be interested in doing so.

Question put and agreed to.

6.22 pm

House adjourned.
The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): May I take this opportunity to associate us with your comments about Paul Flynn, Mr Speaker? I remember having the privilege of serving with Paul on the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. As you quite rightly stated, he was always incredibly passionate about his constituents and about his beliefs. As a former Chief Whip, I also agree that Labour Members not following their Whip is good advice, but the same is not necessarily true on the Conservative side.

The UK will pursue a distinctive, independent and sovereign foreign and defence policy that meets British interests and promotes our values.

Helen Goodman: Mr Speaker, on my behalf and, I am sure, that of other hon. Members on the Opposition side, I would like to echo your words about Paul Flynn, whom I will always remember for his great independence of spirit and fantastic sense of humour.

I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his answer. On 7 January his junior Minister said, in response to a written parliamentary question, that in the event of no deal, “the UK would have to withdraw from Common Security and Defence Policy missions and operations”. What would happen to Operation Atalanta, which is against pirates, and Operation Sophia, which picks up refugees in the Mediterranean?

Gavin Williamson: Those missions will continue, and we will continue to have negotiations with the EU on how we can support those operations in the future.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I would like to echo your kind tribute to Paul Flynn, Mr Speaker. My thoughts and prayers are with his friends and family.

Is it not the case that the vast majority of our industrial collaboration with other European countries is done on a bilateral basis, which will very much continue once we leave the EU?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend raises an important point: 90% of all our collaboration with EU nations and EU defence programmes is done outside the framework of the European Union. I joined him in his constituency to visit Airbus and Boeing, and it was quite obvious how important those bilateral and multilateral relationships are to their growth. It is not through the European Union.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): What contingency measures will the Government put in place to protect the UK defence industry from losing the automatic right to bid for contracts within the European economic area in the event of a no-deal Brexit?

Gavin Williamson: As I touched on in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti), most of our defence procurement and most opportunities in the defence industry are not through the European Union. We will continue to work with the European Union to have access to programmes. That is not only important for UK business; if the European Union wants to succeed in developing a defence sector, it needs countries such as Britain and the United States to be able to participate in these schemes.
Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Mr Speaker, I associate myself with your eloquent words about Paul Flynn, whom we will all miss very much and whose book I read before becoming a Back Bencher, which I may remain.

Will the Secretary of State expand on how, in our future defence relationship with the EU in the north Atlantic, we will invest in and show continued commitment to protecting that northern flank of Europe?

Gavin Williamson: The high north is an important part of the development of our strategy. At the weekend, I had the opportunity to see our Royal Marines in Norway and what they are doing to support the Norwegian armed forces. We will be deploying our P-8s in 2020, along with Norway and the United States, to deal with the increased threat that we face from Russian submarines in the north Atlantic.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I add the condolences of those on the Scottish National party Benches to the family of Paul Flynn and to the parliamentary Labour party on the loss of a thoroughly decent human being.

The Secretary of State and his predecessors have been clear that NATO is the cornerstone of the UK’s security, but many leading experts, including Professor Beatrice Heuser of the University of Glasgow, see something of a devil in the detail. Much of the recent debate on Churchill missed out the fact that he was one of the architects of the Western European Union—a security-focused grouping that saw all its functions wound up into the European Union post Lisbon. Can the Secretary of State tell us what analysis his Department has undertaken on the difference between the UK’s obligations under article 5 of the NATO treaty and article 42(7) of the Lisbon treaty?

Gavin Williamson: Article 5 is a mechanism that delivers security right across continental Europe and the north Atlantic area. That has been proven. Article 5 has only been used in one situation, which was following 9/11, and we feel that it is a much more substantial guarantee of European security than what is in the Lisbon treaty.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I am grateful for that response. I am glad that the Secretary of State visited NATO and the Royal Marines during their winter warfare training, and I know that the Norwegians and many members of the Defence Committee will be too. Article 5 obligates members to respond to an attack with “such action as it deems necessary”, which, as put to me, could mean a conventional military response, just as it could mean a strongly worded letter. Article 42(7) of the Lisbon treaty, on the other hand, obligates states to react with “all the means in their power”.

Does the Secretary of State understand that many of our European allies are unnerved by this dilution of the UK’s obligation towards the defence of the continent? What preparations are being undertaken by the Ministry of Defence to ensure that our adversaries do not exploit that loophole?

Gavin Williamson: We have never as a nation shied away from our obligations, and there has been a clear understanding that Britain will stand with our European friends and neighbours in delivering security. Our commitment to security on the continent of Europe was there long before the creation of the European Union or our membership of it, and long before the creation of NATO. We have always been there, and we always will be.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend clarify for the House that it is in fact NATO, not the European Union, that has been and will continue to be the cornerstone of European security and defence?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. When we speak to the new nations that have been created out of the collapse of the Soviet Union, to which organisation do they turn to guarantee their security? It is NATO.

**Armed Forces Covenant**

3. Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to ensure the effective delivery of the armed forces covenant. [909266]

21. Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to ensure the effective delivery of the armed forces covenant. [909288]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I am pleased to say that there is broadening support for the armed forces covenant, which is a priority for the Ministry of Defence. We now have over 3,300 organisations participating in it, and the veterans strategy consultation, which was launched in November, is looking at further ways in which we can expand its support.

Mike Kane: May I too associate myself with your comments, Mr Speaker? Any budding politicians out there should read the part of Paul Flynn’s book where he describes setting on fire his oven’s cooking instructions five years after moving into his flat.

On a more serious note, with an estimated 58 veterans’ suicides last year and the charitable sector saying that it is struggling to cope with demand, does the Minister agree that there is too much reliance on the sector to support personnel leaving the service with mental health disorders?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important issue. We should not make the automatic assumption that because there is a suicide and the person is a veteran, it is because he is a veteran that there is a suicide. However, that should not prohibit us from understanding more about what is actually happening to those who serve and have served. We are working with the coroner’s department to get better data on this, and we also have a new programme to make sure that people are aware of the mental health support that they can gain once they leave the armed forces.
Mike Amesbury: The Minister will know that there are few very reliable statistics on veterans who are homeless. What does he intend to do to improve that?

Mr Ellwood: This goes to the heart of what the covenant is all about. I want to see all homeless people looked after, and I want to make sure that if they are veterans, the covenant is recognised and enforced. However, if we are to do that, it is not the MOD that needs to do it; it is actually local government. Thanks to the veterans board, we are now enforcing the covenant and encouraging Government Departments to ask, “Are you doing enough?” Each local authority has an armed forces champion, who should be looking at these issues to make sure that the authority is tackling homelessness issues in its area. If there are any areas where there is a problem with that, please let me know.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): It is anecdotally alleged, although not necessarily backed up by statistics, that a disproportionate number of prisoners are veterans. What consideration has my right hon. Friend given to making better use of the MOD prison estate—particularly Colchester Prison, for example, which I understand is relatively empty at the moment? Would that not be more appropriate housing for soldiers and veterans who are in civilian prisons?

Mr Ellwood: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the experience that he brings to the Chamber. My hon. Friend makes an interesting point, and I would like to pursue these conversations—perhaps with the Prisons Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart)—to see what more can be done.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): What?

Mr Speaker: Well, the Minister is going to pursue it with the Prisons Minister.

Mr Jones: It is stupid.

Mr Speaker: Well, the right hon. Gentleman can make his own assessment.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): A recent investigation has revealed that black African soldiers in the East Africa Force, formed in 1940, which encompassed thousands of troops drawn from the British colonies and current Commonwealth countries, were paid only a third of the wage received by their white counterparts. Will the Minister tell the House whether there will now be a full and comprehensive Ministry of Defence investigation of this issue, and whether such an investigation would consider granting appropriate compensation to all surviving veterans?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, of which the Secretary of State is aware. It is a Foreign Office lead, and I hope that the FCO will be able to provide more detail on how to move forward given the information presented.

Warship Construction

4. Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): What progress his Department has made on its procurement exercise for the construction of new warships in the UK. [909267]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): In December 2018, the Department announced the award of three competitive design phase contracts for the Type 31e frigate programme. It remains our intention to award a single design and build contract for five Type 31e ships by the end of this year. Construction of the Type 26 frigates remains under way, with the second batch of five ships to be ordered in the 2020s.

Scott Mann: I thank the Minister for that response. Following the Secretary of State’s recent successful visit to Plymouth, he will know of the south-west’s military shipbuilding capabilities. May I suggest that Plymouth would make a fantastic base for the littoral strike group vessels?

Mark Lancaster: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is an absolute champion for his constituency and the south-west. Her Majesty’s Naval Base Devonport and the south-west of England continue to be vital to the Royal Navy, and, as we plan to develop a concept for the littoral strike ship, we will look at how it goes. At the moment, no decision on basing has been made.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Many employees of GE Power in Rugby happen to live in the Warwick and Leamington constituency. Will the Minister update us on what discussions have been had with that company to preserve its quality manufacturing and skills in our country?

Mark Lancaster: I know that, for example, my colleague the Defence Procurement Minister has had several discussions with the constituency MP, my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey). Although of course this is very much a matter for the company, the MOD will look to see in what ways we can provide support.

20. [909287] Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that when decisions are made about the placement of orders for vessels for the Royal Navy, which have seen an encouraging increase in number, and about who wins them, contributions to UK prosperity will play an important role?

Mark Lancaster: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. May I take this opportunity to thank him once again for the valuable contribution he made through his report last year? He made, off the top of my head, some 41 sensible recommendations, and we are looking to address them shortly.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): Since the start of the last Labour Government, we have seen a 39% decrease in the number of Royal Navy ships and a 46% decrease in the number of frigates and destroyers. If the Secretary of State wants a carrier in the south Atlantic and one in the South China sea, where is the drumbeat of orders coming from when we have just lost another 150 jobs at our shipyard in Rosyth?

Mark Lancaster: Let us be clear that we are committed to maintaining the numbers of our frigates and destroyers. Indeed, later this year we will see the second of our aircraft carriers come out of Rosyth. Equally, it is this
Government who have secured shipbuilding jobs in Scotland all the way through to the 2030s. Indeed, there are probably some apprentices who will work on the Type 26 programme who are yet to be born.

**Armed Forces Personnel**

5. **Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the number of armed forces personnel. [909268]

9. **Mr John Baron** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase recruitment into the armed forces. [909273]

11. **Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve recruitment and retention in the armed forces. [909275]

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

**Toby Perkins:** Many people may see it as an incompetent accident that the Government continually fail to hit their supposed targets on Army recruitment, but is it not the truth that this is a Government without any sort of strategic vision for what they want our Army to do in 2019, and that their failure to get Army numbers up saves budget for the parts of the MOD that they do have a plan for?

**Mark Lancaster:** I could not disagree more. I think we have a clear vision as to what we want our Army to do. Equally, the hon. Gentleman should be encouraged by the fact that as of January we have had the highest number of applications to the Army in five years.

**Mr Baron:** I suggest that the Government should not take any lessons from Labour about manpower shortages, given today’s news about deserts.

The National Audit Office has recently confirmed that Capita has not recruited the required numbers of regulars and reservists in any year since the contract began in 2012. Clearly, extra resources are needed. May I also suggest that the Government consider reinstating the 2nd Battalion the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, which was the best recruited unit in the Army when it was disbanded?

**Mark Lancaster:** I have been here long enough to be able to pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his consistent defence of the 2nd Battalion Royal Regiment of Fusiliers. The same National Audit Office report states that the Army has already conducted a full review of the current recruitment strategy. As a result, the contract with Capita was realigned and a comprehensive improvement plan introduced. That will take time to bear fruit, but as I said in answer to the previous question we are now beginning to see early signs of the improvement plan bearing fruit.

**Stephen Kerr:** Will the Minister update the House on the results arising from the Army recruitment poster campaign last month? Has it enticed more women to apply? Has it enticed more people from ethnic minority backgrounds to apply to join the Army?

**Mark Lancaster:** The Army’s new campaign builds on last year’s successful “Belonging” adverts, which, as I said, took recruitment to a five-year high. The early signs are positive. At the moment, 12.4% of recruits are women and 6.5% are from the black, Asian and minority ethnic community. We are yet to see the audited results for the campaign, but we are confident that progress is being made.

**Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Public Accounts Committee has been looking closely at what skills we have in our armed forces. We know there are real shortages, particularly in cyber, with people leaving early. Will the Minister explain to the House how he is working with others across Government to ensure that we have the cyber skills we need in our armed forces?

**Mark Lancaster:** That is a very important question. The hon. Lady will be aware of the £1.9 billion investment in cyber across Government. I have taken a particular personal interest in this issue. I want to ensure that the career structure we offer in the armed forces matches these 21st century skills. Historically, it has not done so.

**Mr Mark Francois** (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): In the past few years, Capita has been 3,000 recruits short. The chief of defence personnel, Lieutenant General Nugee, told the Defence Committee a couple of weeks ago that this year it will be over 4,000, maybe nearly even 5,000, recruits short. Applications are up, but enlistments—those actually joining—are down dramatically. The Secretary of State called its performance atrocious and it is. The Scots Guards are barely at 50% manned. I believe that Capita is so awful that its performance is 10% lower than we need, but that is a significant increase and improvement on where we were last year. All the signs are pointing in the right direction.

**Mr Francois:** They are not.

**Mark Lancaster:** Yes, they are. The challenge we face is that while applications are up, the conversion rate is getting better and that will take time to feed through into the strength of the Regular Army.

**Mr Speaker:** Having known the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) for 35 years, I hope he will take it in the right spirit if I say that I really do wish he would tell us what he really thinks.
Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Following on from what was said by the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mark Francois), the reality is that the size of the Army has fallen in every year since the Conservatives came to power. For all the talk, the fact is that the initial applications are not turning into enlistments. Will the Minister tell the House what the trained strength of the Army will be at the end of this Parliament if the current trend and record we have seen so far continues?

Mark Lancaster: I am confident that at the end of this Parliament, assuming that it is 2022, the trained strength of the Army will be higher than it is now.

Nia Griffith: I do not think that gives us very much reassurance. Let me tell the Minister now that, if the decline continues at the same rate it has been over the time the Conservative party has been in government, by May 2022 the Army will be down to just 68,000. Given that the promise to reach 82,000 soldiers was unceremoniously dumped from the Conservative manifesto at the last election, will the Minister tell the House whether the Government are still committed to reaching that number? If so, what is his plan for how to do so?

Mark Lancaster: With respect to the hon. Lady, she talks about “the Army”. I assume that by that, she actually means the Regular Army—when she talks about 68,000. As far as I am concerned, the Army also includes the Army Reserve, giving a combined force of about 112,000. It also includes the approximately 3,500 soldiers of the Army Reserve, giving a combined force of about 68,000. As far as I am concerned, the Army also includes the Army Reserve, giving a combined force of about 112,000. It also includes the approximately 3,500 soldiers who wear a uniform and are proud to call themselves soldiers but are currently under training. I think she needs to think about what definition she is using.

Veterans: Mental Health Support

6. Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to provide adequate mental health support for veterans.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The provision of veterans’ mental health support is the responsibility of the NHS in England and the devolved Administrations, but the MOD is committed to ensuring veterans are aware of what support is available.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank the Minister for that answer. The Covenant Fund Trust will play a vital role in providing important organisations such as the Shropshire armed forces community trust with additional resources to help veterans with mental health problems. Will the Minister give me an assurance that he will update the House on how he and his other colleagues are lobbying the Chancellor for additional resources for the Covenant Fund Trust?

Mr Ellwood: The Covenant Fund Trust has increased, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right that it forms a wider package of measures. I join the Secretary of State in saying that we would like to see the defence budget increase not simply because of procurement or training, but because we need to look after our people. This is an illustration of that. We introduced the mental health and wellbeing strategy a year and a half ago. This has helped armed forces personnel to be more aware of what mental health support is available.

7. John McNally (Falkirk) (SNP): What contingency planning his Department has undertaken for the UK leaving the EU without a deal.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): The Ministry of Defence has conducted extensive planning and preparation to ensure that defence is ready for a range of scenarios including that of a no-deal EU exit. We continue to work closely with other Government Departments, key suppliers and industry partners.

John McNally: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Cyber-security is designated as a priority in the modernising defence programme, but given that we will lose the European arrest warrant, access to Europol and the sharing of data using EU frameworks, we face challenges that the programme simply does not seem willing to countenance. How is the Department going to replicate those vital benefits from day one of leaving the EU?

Gavin Williamson: The work that we are doing on cyber-security is not through the European Union, but through NATO or bilateral agreements with other countries, so I cannot see that having any impact on our continued work on cyber-security.

Anna McMorrin: May I just echo your words about Paul Flynn, Mr Speaker? He was a brilliant, radical and reformist politician and will be greatly missed.

A “No-deal Brexit will make tracking terrorists harder and British public less safe.” Those words are from the Minister for Security and Economic Crime, and this weekend we have heard another Defence Minister threaten to vote against the Government if they fail to rule out no deal. Will the Secretary of State put this country’s security first, and before his own leadership ambition, and rule out no deal here and now, today?

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Lady had an opportunity to vote for a deal just a few weeks ago, but she did not seem to bother.
Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Whether we leave the European Union with a deal or without a deal, will the Defence Secretary make it clear to his Spanish counterparts that it is completely unacceptable for their warships to try to intimidate commercial shipping entering British sovereign waters around Gibraltar?

Gavin Williamson: I will make it absolutely clear that we will always be there to defend our sovereign interests and to defend Britain’s national interest.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I know the Secretary of State will agree that throughout European history there has always been an issue when there has been a separation between defending North America and defending western Europe. Will he confirm that his contingency plan for our leaving without a deal remains the fact that with our NATO allies we will still come to the aid of our European allies if they need it?

Gavin Williamson: Our commitment to our European friends and allies is sacrosanct. The Prime Minister has been consistent in saying that as we leave the EU our commitment to European security is one they can truly rely on.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): The recent reports that the MOD has begun stockpiling food, fuel, spare parts and ammunition at overseas bases just in case of a no-deal Brexit are extremely concerning, so will the Secretary of State now agree that, as he said, no deal and urge his Cabinet colleagues to seek an agreement with the EU based on a permanent customs union and a strong relationship with the single market?

Gavin Williamson: We have legislated to exit the EU on 29 March this year, and the hon. Gentleman had an opportunity to vote for a deal, but he chose not to. The Prime Minister will always deliver the very best for this country, and I very much hope that not only Government Members but the hon. Gentleman will support it.

RAF Marham: Tornado and F35

8. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What plans has he to visit RAF Marham to discuss the reduction in the size of the Tornado fleet and the introduction of the F-35; and if he will make a statement.

Gavin Williamson: It is a whole community that delivers the Tornado’s fighting capability. In countless conflicts around the globe—be it the first Gulf war, the second Gulf war, or taking the fight to Daesh over the skies of Iraq and Syria—the Tornados have been at the forefront, and the pilots, navigators and ground crew have all been part of it. RAF Marham has an exciting future, however, with the two new F-35 squadrons and the additional training squadron.

Aircraft Carriers: Phalanx Weapons

10. Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): How many Phalanx close-in weapon systems will be fitted to each new aircraft carrier; and if he will make a statement.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): Three Phalanx close-in weapon systems will be fitted to each new aircraft carrier. Two are being fitted to HMS Queen Elizabeth during her current capability insertion period, with the third to be fitted towards the end of 2020. Three will be fitted to HMS Prince of Wales in 2020.

Dr Lewis: May I add to the tributes to Paul Flynn by noting the remarkable physical courage he showed in battling crippling arthritis over many years?

In relation to the Phalanx systems on the aircraft carriers, I agree that, if nothing goes wrong, the fitting of three will offer 360° coverage and protection, but, given that there is a fourth station on each aircraft carrier that could take a fourth system, and given that there are spare systems in storage following withdrawal from operational theatres, would it not be sensible to give some extra insurance by fitting a fourth system, so that if one is lost, there will still be total coverage and protection for these vital naval assets?

Mark Lancaster: My right hon. Friend is, of course, right in his assessment that three Phalanx systems offer a 360° capability, and that there is scope, potentially, for a fourth. We have the ability to adjust that according to the threat. I should also remind the House that the carrier will be at the centre of a carrier group. Protection for that carrier will consist of different layers of security provided by both the frigates and the destroyers, so it will not rely solely on the Phalanx system.

RAF Scampton

13. Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): What plans has his Department to support workers at RAF Scampton to find alternative employment in Lincolnshire.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): We have had a series of debates about the future of RAF Scampton, not just in the Chamber but in Westminster Hall, and the hon. Lady is aware that it is, I am afraid, due to close. I can assure her, however, that the RAF footprint in Lincolnshire will increase.

Karen Lee: As the Minister knows, RAF Scampton is very close to my constituency. It employs more than 600 people, many of whom live in Lincoln and contribute to the local economy as well as to our communities.
What specific assurances can the Minister give MOD workers in Lincoln, and throughout Lincolnshire, who fear that they will be made redundant or forced to relocate should the closure go ahead?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady is right to wish to ensure that we look after those workers—who are committed to the RAF—and, indeed, their families. However, as I mentioned earlier, Lincolnshire does well from an RAF perspective. It has RAF Waddington, with its intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance capability, and RAF Cranwell, with its training capabilities, not to mention RAF Coningsby, with its fast jet capability. I hope that most of the people who are transferred or moved will be able to remain where they live now, although their work will take them elsewhere in the county.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): As a Member of Parliament representing RAF Scampton, I thank my right hon. Friend for the work that he has done in trying to secure a future for it with our district council, West Lindsey. May I urge him, however, to consider the desire of all Lincolnshire people, which is based not on emotion but on sound, grounded fact, that the Red Arrows should stay in Lincolnshire? We can provide good employment for those 400 people. The three bases that he mentioned are within 15 or 20 miles of each other. We have superb airspace and a great RAF history, so please can we keep the Red Arrows in Lincolnshire?

Mr Ellwood: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend’s determination to ensure that this place recognises the work, the heritage and the history of RAF Scampton, which will, I think, be noted by his constituents and others. It is important for the museum there to continue.

As my right hon. Friend will know—[Interruption.]—Is that okay Mr Speaker? As my right hon. Friend will know, the location of the Red Arrows is partly due to an operational capability to ensure that they are serviced. The airspace is run by the Civil Aviation Authority, and that is the subject of a separate discussion to be had with them.

Mr Speaker: We want to enjoy the benefits of the Minister’s mellifluous tones. That was my only exhortation. It is quite understandable that a Minister looks back at his experience of hearing him.

NATO: National Security

14. Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the importance of NATO to UK national security. [909280]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): Last week I joined NATO Defence Ministers to discuss progress made towards fairer burden-sharing and increasing the readiness of all our armed forces.

Michael Tomlinson: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as we leave the European Union, we will of course continue to co-operate with our European friends and allies, but that it is NATO that is the bedrock of European security? Does also he agree that all talk of an EU army is an unhelpful distraction?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend has put his finger right on the issue. Talk of an EU army is indeed a distraction. It does not help; it does not build security. As we leave the European Union, 80% of NATO forces will be contributed by non-EU countries, but there is also a bigger point to be made. All European countries should be contributing more to defence, and they should all be spending 2% of their GDP on defence.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): May I, too, echo your generous words about Paul Flynn, Mr Speaker? He was a good socialist, and I therefore disagree with nearly everything he said, but that is the nature of parliamentary debate.

As my right hon. Friend knows, the political declaration talks of co-operation with Europe on future defence operations. Surely, however, the most effective way of keeping the peace in Europe is to concentrate on the primacy of NATO, and in particular to encourage our American partners to keep paying 50-60% of the budget.

Gavin Williamson: We will always co-operate with all organisations right around the world, but my hon. Friend is so right: NATO is what delivers security in Europe. That is where our focus will be; that is what we will be focusing our time and resources on in delivering our security with our NATO allies.

Defence Procurement: UK Prosperity

15. Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): What steps he has taken to promote UK prosperity in his Department’s procurement decisions. [909281]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): Since 2015, we have published a national shipbuilding strategy, refreshed defence industrial policy to help strengthen UK competitiveness and launched the future combat air strategy. We engage with global primes to create opportunities for all tiers of the UK supply chain.

Mr Jones: In the light of the Ministry of Defence decision to open up the procurement process for the fleet solid support ships to international competition, will the Minister explain what weighting will be placed on national prosperity in awarding those contracts?

Mark Lancaster: The one thing we are clear about is that we are constrained in that process because the fleet solid support ships are not warships; they are not frigates, destroyers or indeed aircraft carriers. However, I can reassure the right hon. Gentleman that any competition will be judged not solely on price but also on various other factors, and I am delighted that a UK consortium will be bidding.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. As we are constrained for time, I advise the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) that his inquiry on missile defence capability can be shoehorned into the current inquiry.

17. Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): [909284] Does my right hon. Friend the Minister agree that MBDA, located in Bolton and manufacturing in Bolton, makes a huge contribution to our defence, especially by keeping one step ahead of the competition in terms of technology?
Mark Lancaster: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and he is also absolutely right to cite his constituency company as a fine example of how we can continue to compete on the world stage.

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): First, may I thank you, Mr Speaker, for your kind words about our former colleague Paul Flynn, who was a great comrade over the years?

Following on from the question asked by my right hon. Friend for North Durham (Mr Jones), why does the Minister not defer any action until after 29 March, when we will not be under EU procurement rules and we can award this ship—a £1 billion British taxpayers’ order—to a British shipyard?

Mark Lancaster: The hon. Gentleman seems to have a crystal ball—I simply do not—to see exactly what the situation will be post 29 March.

Ex-service Personnel: Employment

16. Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of employment of ex-service personnel. [909283]

18. Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of employment of ex-service personnel. [909285]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Some 15,000 armed forces personnel leave the Army, Air Force and Navy every single year. We have invested significantly in resettlement provision, and the two key organisations that help provide that are the Career Transition Partnership, which helps individuals in that preparation, and the Defence Relationship Management organisation, which partners with businesses to make them aware of what skill sets are available.

Douglas Ross: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer. Copernicus Technology, based in Moray, was set up in 2008 with ex-RAF engineers and it provides excellent work for the US Department of Defence on an intermittent fault device. Will the Minister consider looking at the benefits of this in the UK, because it increases the availability of the elements that it is used on and reduces support costs for the US, and we could surely do with that here in the UK?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend raises an important point. In this and many other areas, we can learn from our US counterparts about what support we can provide for veterans. I will be delighted to meet my hon. Friend afterwards and discuss in more detail how we can move this forward.

Nigel Huddleston: Will the Minister join me in commending the work of Only A Pavement Away, which helps homeless ex-service personnel find employment particularly in the hospitality sector, and what else are the Government doing to help ex-service personnel who have fallen on particularly hard times?

Mr Ellwood: I pay tribute to the charity my hon. Friend mentions. There are over 400 service-facing charities out there providing support for ex-service personnel.

It is important that those who require support know where it is to be found, and I am pleased that more charities are working through the Veterans’ Gateway, the single portal that allows veterans to know where help can be found.

Common Security and Defence Policy

19. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect on UK defence capability of ending co-operation on the common security and defence policy. [909286]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): Europe’s security is our security. Co-operation with our European partners and allies through NATO, bilaterally and through a security partnership with the EU will enable us to address shared threats and defend our shared values.

Tom Brake: May I also pay tribute to Paul Flynn? I suspect that he was less surprised than I was when I had to read out the words to suspend him from the House of Commons after he had accused a Secretary of State—for the then Secretary of State for Defence, as it happens—of lying. On the subject of the European Union, the Secretary of State will know that the “National Security Capability Review” stated:

“As we leave the EU, we want a partnership that offers both the EU and the UK the means to combine efforts to the greatest effect, both operationally, and in developing capabilities.”

By what means will we achieve this partnership once we have left the common security and defence policy?

Gavin Williamson: What we set out in our negotiations with the European Union is the opportunity for Britain to opt into various programmes if it is in our national interest to do so. But it still keeps coming down to the most important point: what delivers our security in Europe is not the European Union; it is NATO. It is that framework that will continue to deliver that security.

Topical Questions

T1. [909289] Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): I announced to NATO Defence Ministers last Wednesday a significant increase in our commitment to the alliance, making the UK contribution to the enhanced forward presence in Estonia the largest of any nation. At the Munich security conference, I met counterparts from the global coalition of countries tasked with defeating Daesh, and in Norway, I had the opportunity to further our discussions with the Norwegian Government about how we can enhance our security in the high north.

Dr Lewis: The Secretary of State is far too modest: I was sure he was going to tell us about his dip in the icy Norwegian waters.

On a very much more serious issue, the Secretary of State knows that there are between 200 and 300 war widows who lost their war widows pension on remarriage and who, if they were to divorce or lose their husbands now would have it restored and it could not then be
taken away, but who have not had it restored and are therefore in the perverse situation that if they want to get quite a few thousand pounds a year more, they should divorce and remarry their husbands. Everyone agrees that that is an absurd and indeed disgraceful situation, and I know that the Secretary of State wants to do something about it. The war widows have been to see the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, and she has expressed sympathy. When will this matter be dealt with? What is holding it up?

Gavin Williamson: The next time I go to Norway, I will be sure to bring my right hon. Friend along so that we can go for a dip together.

My right hon. Friend raises an important issue, and it is one that has been ongoing for a very long time. I have had the opportunity to meet a large number of those affected, and we are keen to work across the Government to find a solution. This is a burning injustice, and I know that those women feel it very deeply. I am committed to finding a solution, and I very much hope that we can deliver that across all Departments.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): The Public Accounts Committee’s damning report has found that Ministers have made “little progress” in solving the affordability crisis at the heart of the Ministry of Defence’s budget. Despite a year of bolshie headlines, the Secretary of State has completely failed to get a grip of the equipment plan in the modernising defence programme. Instead of spending his time causing diplomatic rows, when will he come forward with a costed plan to give confidence to the armed forces and our allies that we will be able to afford the equipment that his Government have committed to?

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Lady has been saying that we will not hit our budget for over a year now, yet last year we delivered the Ministry of Defence budget on target and sort of within budget, and we will do that again this year. Over the past few years, we have made more than £9 billion-worth of cost savings, and as part of last week’s announcements, we made a commitment to invest a further £100 million to ensure that we work more efficiently and that we can make more efficiency savings so that we can meet our commitments in the future.

Nia Griffith: The Government’s own analysis shows that a no-deal Brexit would cause serious and lasting damage to our GDP. On the basis of sticking to our NATO 2% commitment, that would mean a massive cut of some 9.3% just because of the hit to our economy. With the Government failing so abysmally to manage the defence budget at present, will the Defence Secretary now drop the bravado and finally admit that leaving the EU without a deal would be so harmful to the UK that we must absolutely rule it out?

Gavin Williamson: Whether or not Britain has a deal with the European Union, we will continue to succeed and thrive. We did so before we were a member of the EU and will do so after we leave. We should have the confidence and belief in our nation that the Labour party obviously does not have.

T5. [99294] Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree with the former shadow Chancellor, the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie), when he questioned the Leader of the Opposition’s ability on defence by criticising his pursuit of policies—

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not want to be unkind to the hon. Lady, but she has taken too long to ask a question about Opposition policy, and we really cannot get into that. Questions are about Government policy, not that of the Opposition.

T2. [99290] Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): The introduction of a dry dock in Portsmouth for the nation’s new carriers could create and protect hundreds of jobs in my constituency and be worth £1 billion to the local economy. I am keen to see the facility based in Portsmouth, which is home to the Royal Navy, so will the Secretary of State give a timeframe for the decision?

Gavin Williamson: I am not in a position at present to give that timeframe, but I will ask the Minister for Defence Procurement, my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the plan. Portsmouth plays a vital role in all that we do with the Royal Navy, and we are incredibly grateful to the city for the support that it offers our servicemen and women.

Mr Speaker: I call Ross Thomson. Where is the fella? He is not here. I am sorry that he is not here, but Leo Docherty is.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): The Brigade of Gurkhas has given courageous and loyal service to this country for two centuries. Does the Minister agree that it would be a good idea for us to recruit more of them?

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): I started my military career in the Brigade of Gurkhas, so I declare an interest in that I am biased for obvious reasons. My hon. Friend’s question is timely. We recruit once a year and recruited 400 Gurkhas last year, which is within our agreement with the Government of Nepal. I am travelling to Nepal later this week for further negotiations with the Nepali Government about the future use of Gurkhas.

T3. [99291] Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Suicide claimed the lives of 71 military personnel and veterans last year, and mental ill health is a clear and present danger to our servicemen and women and to our veterans. What assessment have Ministers made of making an automatic link between those leaving the service and their local Royal British Legion to help them to ease their way back into civilian life?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising something about which we all need to be concerned because the numbers are worrying. We do what we can to offer a far greater relationship as people depart the armed forces. There is a cohort of veterans who served around the Falklands era who are not benefiting from the education that people receive as
they leave the armed forces today. We need to do more, and the hon. Gentleman provides an example of one thing that we can do.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Will the Royal Navy continue with freedom of navigation operations in the South China sea?

Gavin Williamson: Like so many nations, such as the United States, Australia, France, New Zealand and Canada, we believe in the rule of law and the international rules-based system. We will always be a nation that does not just talk, but one that acts to uphold the rule of law that has benefited so many nations right around the globe, so yes.

T4. [909292] Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I associate myself with the tributes to Paul Flynn. He was a great Welsh patriot, devolutionist and campaigner, and we will miss him.

According to a report by the National Audit Office, the RAF estimates that, at the current rate, it will be another 20 years before it has enough pilots. What urgent steps is the Minister going to take to rectify this?

Mark Lancaster: The pilot training programme has remained unchanged for many years. That is why we are looking at a complete review of the system, which will speed up the process and should rectify the current shortfall in pilots.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The Minister for the Armed Forces has already referred to the expertise of GE Energy, located in my Rugby constituency, in the manufacture of propulsion systems. Does he agree it is important to retain that capability as an important part of our manufacturing base?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend and I have met to discuss this on a number of occasions, and my Department, along with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, is doing everything it can to help. We are working with GE to see if there are different ways to pull work forward. It is an important capability, and I would very much like to see the technology, which was developed in the UK, continue to be manufactured in the UK. We have been very successful in selling the Type 26 around the world, including to Australia and Canada, and it would be great for Rugby to get that benefit.

T7. [909296] Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I join you and other colleagues in paying tribute to Paul Flynn. He was a funny, generous man, and we will miss him.

The MOD’s announcement that all posts in the military would be open to women was certainly welcome. Will my right hon. Friend confirm whether the armed forces recruitment drive will consider a similar campaign for people with autism?

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): Snowflakes and gamers are being recruited into the Army, in recognition of the wide variety of talents that people have. In that light, my constituent Zach is interested in joining the armed forces but feels that his autism would be an impediment to his application. Will my right hon. Friend confirm whether the armed forces recruitment drive will consider a similar campaign for people with autism?

Mark Lancaster: My hon. Friend is right to champion this issue. Over the past year, we have held a number of medical symposiums in which we have been looking very carefully at what medical standards we actually require in the military, not least because of the length of military service. Many conditions do not actually become an issue until later in life, when recruits would potentially have already finished their military service.

T8. [909297] Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Paul Flynn was a funny, generous man, and we will miss him in Gwent.

Capita’s performance on Army recruitment has been hopeless. When is the Secretary of State going to sack them?

Mark Lancaster: I feel this is a monthly exchange between the hon. Gentleman and me. All I can do is refer him to the answers I gave earlier in this session. The visible signs of progress are now there for all to see.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Will the Secretary of State update the House on how the carrier strike strategy is coming along in terms of the relationship on building it together with other Departments?

Gavin Williamson: As I am sure my hon. Friend is aware, when we make major announcements, including on the delivery of carrier strike, they are shared across the Government. The deployment of the Queen Elizabeth and the carrier group to the Mediterranean, the middle east and the Pacific is an important sign that Britain is a global nation and a nation that wishes to play its role in upholding our interests and, of course, our values. As we have invested so much in our global carrier forces, it is important that we put them to sea and demonstrate Britain’s global presence, our involvement and our ability to act when required.

T9. [909298] Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that a statutory association body, such as that provided for the police, would allow armed forces personnel to make representations to the Government on a wide range of issues—falling morale, for example?

Mark Lancaster: No, I do not, and, crucially, I sense that there is no appetite within the armed forces for such a body.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): The MOD’s announcement that all posts in the military would be open to women was certainly welcome. Will the Minister kindly inform the House what specific
measures are being taken to ensure that women and girls in school are made well aware that there are no no-go areas for them in the military?

Mark Lancaster: I refer my hon. Friend to the Royal Air Force advert that aired this week, which almost exclusively featured women, as a clear demonstration that not a single role in the RAF, or, now, in the other services, is not open to them.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): We have heard this afternoon about Capita’s abject failure in recruitment. While we are haemorrhaging personnel, there are clearly issues in the armed forces that have to be addressed, so will the Secretary of State support the Bill from my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), which will be heard on 8 March, to give personnel a voice, through an armed forces representative body with a statutory footing?

Mark Lancaster: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave a few moments ago.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Rock2Recovery provides mental health support to service personnel from those who have already served. Does the Minister agree that they can play an important part in solving mental health problems?

Mr Ellwood: I was delighted to meet Rock2Recovery not very long ago and I pay tribute to the work it does, along with all the other charities, as this is so important. No one size fits all in supporting our veterans; there are many avenues by which we can ensure that they get the support and credit that they deserve.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): Is the Secretary of State in favour of other Departments spending a few million so that he can save hundreds of millions from his budget? If he is, will he put the weight of the Ministry behind our drive, with BAE Systems and the community, to make Barrow even more attractive a place to come and stay in, so that we can improve the productivity of the workforce?

Gavin Williamson: Having had the opportunity to visit Barrow a number of times, I know that the town offers so very much. We are very dependent on the residents of Barrow for the amazing work they do in developing our nuclear deterrent. I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss how we can work across the Government to deliver that vision.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Following conversations at the recent Munich security conference, does the Minister believe that all European countries are committed to spending 2% of GDP on defence?

Gavin Williamson: It is fair to say that some are more committed than others, but we have to hammer the message home. We need European countries to be spending a minimum of 2% of their GDP on defence, not because it is an issue raised by the United States, but because they should be spending that money on defence for their security and for Europe’s security. That is the reason they need to be spending a minimum of 2%.
UK Nationals returning from Syria

3.58 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con) (Urgent Question):
To ask the Home Secretary if he will make a statement on Government actions in dealing with UK nationals returning from Syria.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): May I start by paying my respects to the hon. Member for Newport West? Our sympathies are with his loved ones and all those in this House who were close to him.

I welcome the urgent question from my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord). My priority as Home Secretary is to ensure the safety and security of this country. We cannot ignore the threat posed by those who chose to leave Britain to engage with the conflict in Syria or Iraq—more than 900 people took this path. Without the deradicalisation work of our Prevent programme, there could have been many more. Whatever role they took in the so-called caliphate, they all supported a terrorist organisation and, in doing so, have shown that they hate our country and the values we stand for. This is a death cult that enslaved and raped thousands of Yazidi girls and that celebrated attacks on our shores, including the tragic Manchester bombing, which targeted young girls. Now that the so-called caliphate is crumbling, some of them want to return. I have been very clear: where I can, and where any threat remains, I will not hesitate to prevent that.

The powers available to me include banning non-British nationals of their British citizenship. More than 100 people have already been deprived in this way. We must, of course, observe international law, and we cannot strip someone of their British citizenship if doing so would leave them stateless. Individuals who manage to return will be questioned, investigated and, potentially, prosecuted.

Our Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019, which received Royal Assent just last week, provides more powers to prosecute returnees. It extends the list of offences committed overseas that we can act on, and it creates new laws to ban British citizens from entering designated terrorist hotspots without good reason.

Our world-class police and security services closely monitor all who return if they pose any risk. We do not hesitate to use the range of tools at our disposal. That includes using temporary exclusion orders to put in-country restrictions in place, and managing risks through terrorism prevention and investigation measures—so-called TPIMs. Members will have seen the comments that Shamima Begum has made in the media, and they will have to draw their own conclusions. Quite simply, if someone backs terror, there must be consequences.

Dr Offord: There is huge concern in this country about the return of Shamima Begum. This is an individual who willingly travelled to Syria to become a supporter of a terrorist organisation. She has shown no remorse about her decision, and it appears that she wishes to return to the United Kingdom only because of the benefits that this country can offer her. Many people are very angry about that. Her case highlights the problem facing this country and the Home Secretary: as a British national without any form of dual nationality, Begum cannot be refused entry. Does the Home Secretary accept that the removal of citizenship from Britons who travelled abroad to join Daesh is prohibited under international law?

Figures from the Home Office show that 900 British nationals travelled to Syria, and up to 400 have returned. On 11 June last year, the Minister for Security and Economic Crime told the House that of those who had returned from Syria:

“Approximately 40 have been prosecuted so far”.—[Official Report, 11 June 2018; Vol. 642, c. 666.]

That is a reduction on the 54 that, in May 2016, Lord Keen advised had been prosecuted, and it is still only 10% of those who went to Syria and returned.

How many British nationals have returned from Syria? How many have been prosecuted for offences? What offences were they charged with? How many have been convicted? If we do not address this issue, not only do we risk the security of the United Kingdom but we put into doubt the safety of thousands of our Muslim constituents and we put them at risk of discrimination, abuse and violence. I make a great distinction between my hard-working, law-abiding Muslim constituents and the actions of a reckless child from east London. I ask the Home Secretary to take action on this vital matter.

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the important questions that he has just put to me. He asked me about the case of Shamima Begum, and I hope he will understand that I am not at liberty to discuss the case of any particular individual. As I have just said, however, we have all seen and heard the remarks that she made in the media, and we can all draw our own conclusions.

My hon. Friend went on to ask me a number of related and important questions. He said that in some cases we can remove British citizenship. That is what I have referred to as deprivation. As I have said, the Government have done so on more than 100 occasions. If someone who has more than one nationality—British nationality plus another, or perhaps more than one other—is deemed a threat, and I consider this to be conducive to the public good, we can deprive that individual of their British nationality, and thereby prevent their return to the United Kingdom.

My hon. Friend mentioned some numbers. From the best numbers we have available, we estimate that, in recent years, 900 people who have been deemed of national security concern in some way or another went to Syria or Iraq to join terrorist organisations. Of those, we estimate that 20% have been killed in the battlefield, and around 40% have returned, leaving about 40% still somewhere in the region.

My hon. Friend asked about those who have returned in recent years. In all those cases, we would seek to make sure, first, that that individual is questioned, investigated and, where there is enough evidence, prosecuted. We would seek to manage that return, so even if they are a British citizen, we can issue temporary exclusion orders. That will remove their passport and require them to travel on a specifically issued designated travel document into a specific port of entry. At that point of entry, they are monitored by police and face a number of other restrictions. If appropriate, we can also use TPIMs to place further restrictions on them while we...
may or may not be waiting for prosecution. Of course, we will also work with authorities, particularly if young children are involved, to make sure they get the mental health, psychiatric and other types of help that may be necessary.

Finally, my hon. Friend rightly mentioned communities and making sure that, whatever we do, we work towards building more cohesive communities and winning the understanding of all communities, and that is something we always try to do.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): May I begin by joining the Home Secretary in his tribute to the late Paul Flynn? Paul was the first person to show me around the House of Commons, and he was an inspiration to me and many others in terms of entering politics. My thoughts today are with his wife, Sam, and all his family and friends.

The public have a right to protection from anyone thought to pose a threat to this country, and paramount for any Government is the security of their citizens. Will the Secretary of State confirm, first, that UK citizens are entitled to return to this country under international law but that they should be held to account on their return for their actions?

Under international law, as the Home Secretary said, the Government cannot make people stateless, but they can sensibly take a number of practical steps to safeguard people in line with our respect for the rule of law. The designated areas offence introduced by the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act has received Royal Assent in recent days. The Opposition worked with the Government on developing that mechanism, which provides the legal framework to deal with the issue of returning so-called foreign fighters. However, the Government now need to designate areas to ensure that those returning face justice and due process. Is the Home Secretary considering designating parts of Syria in line with that legislation?

Recently, attention has focused on those who have travelled to Syria to join the so-called caliphate. Given that people may start to return to the UK and will face legal proceedings, I will not comment further on individual cases. However, will the Home Secretary confirm that anyone returning to this country as a UK citizen should expect to face justice for their actions, in a legal process in which our police, our prosecutors and our courts will take into account the individual circumstances of each case?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend speaks with experience of fighting terrorism and he is right. The issue of foreign fighters is faced by several countries, including our European allies, our American allies and others. We are working closely with them to see what more we can do to ensure that in every case justice is done and, where possible, is done in the region.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): With regard to those terrorist fighters suspected of the most barbaric crimes, does my right hon. Friend agree that if we are to avoid British or other nationals ending up in a new Guantánamo, we may need a new international agreement about how such cases are to be handled, and perhaps even an international terrorist court to make sure that they are properly prosecuted?

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I echo the comments that have been made about the sad death of Paul Flynn: he was a one-off and will be missed by all of us.

The SNP share the concerns of everybody else in the House and the country about the terrorist threat from Daesh and other extremist ideologies. Nevertheless, the UK still has a responsibility to UK citizens who left to join Daesh and, as the Home Secretary said, the UK is obligated under international law to allow re-entry to UK citizens without claim to another nationality. Shamima Begum, whatever her degree of culpability, was a child when she left the UK and is thought to have been a victim of a grooming campaign, like many other UK children at the time. She is a vulnerable young woman with a newborn child, and the Government should follow international law and allow her to return to face the consequences of her actions.

By showing our commitment to the rule of law, we demonstrate the strength of the democratic system and help to prevent others from being radicalised. Can the Home Secretary confirm whether Shamima Begum was a target of Daesh grooming and whether he has information on the number of UK children targeted by Daesh? I have a particular interest in the issue after meeting Safaa Boular on a visit to Medway secure training
centre: what steps is the Home Secretary taking to ensure that a similar wide-scale Daesh grooming campaign could not happen today or in the future?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman has asked me about a particular individual and it would not be appropriate for me to be drawn into that.

On a more general note, if individuals have left Britain to join Daesh or other terrorist organisations in that region, we can understand why they are considered a threat to individuals and to our values in this country, and to our allies across the world. Those individuals have made that decision, and the Government's first priority is to protect this country and do whatever is necessary. If those individuals have more than one nationality—again, I will not be drawn on a particular individual—we have the ability where appropriate to strip them of their British nationality. I have done that on several occasions and will continue to do so where I deem it appropriate. If that is not possible, we have other ways to manage the risk.

The hon. Gentleman asked specifically about the grooming of young people by extremists and terrorist organisations, which sadly we have seen in this country and elsewhere. The Government are working with other public bodies to try to stop that, for example through the Prevent programme, which has been very successful to date. It is about safeguarding vulnerable young people who are susceptible to extremists.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): This is a controversial area for our constituents, but surely the Home Secretary has got the balance right in what he has said today. It is important that these people are not left stateless in ungoverned spaces, floating around or consorting with those of ill intention. We have in this country courts and judicial structures, the rule of law and the security institutions of the state. Will he confirm that we have to take responsibility for dealing with these people, and that we cannot just close our eyes and pull up the drawbridge?

Sajid Javid: I thank my right hon. Friend for making that point. Of course it is very important that we take responsibility for doing what we can to reduce the risk to Britain and our people, but we also work with our allies to reduce the risk to them, for example through our deradicalisation programmes, and indeed through the work done internationally by the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development to help stabilise those regions.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Not all UK nationals trying to return from warzones in the middle east have been consorting with terrorists; some are trapped there through no fault of their own. Will the Home Secretary work with his Foreign Office colleagues to make sure that people like my constituent, who is being held by Houthis in Sanaa and is a UK national, can get back to Britain as easily as possible, even though they do not have documents?

Sajid Javid: Obviously, each case is dealt with on a case-by-case basis and we must consider the individual issues raised. It is important to note that, as we have heard with other cases raised in the House, the travel advice for all British citizens is not to travel to Yemen or Syria. It is important that people realise just how dangerous those areas are. Even if they have some benign intent, they should really think twice about going into a danger zone. But if someone is not connected to terrorism or is not deemed a danger in any way, we should absolutely look at what options are available for offering assistance.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Although the law on treason is antiquated, the act of treason most certainly is not. From what the Secretary of State has been saying, it is quite obvious that there will be many people coming back for whom it will not be possible to establish by normal standards in a court of law that they committed crimes while volunteering and spending time in the so-called caliphate. I draw his attention to the recommendation by Professor Richard Ekins of Oxford University, published yesterday in The Sunday Telegraph, that Parliament should “restore the law of treason, specifying that it is treason to support a group that one knows intends to attack the UK or is fighting UK forces.”

Will he seriously address that point?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point. This is a complex situation and we should always be looking to see what tools we have at our disposal to ensure that those who are guilty of terrorism, or of supporting terrorist groups, are brought to justice. That means ensuring that we have the right laws in place. I referred earlier to the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act, which received Royal Assent only last week, which gives the courts more powers. There are already powers in existence, including those covering extra-territorial jurisdictions. He made another important point about something else we could look at. I have read that article and heard what Professor Ekins has said in the past, and I think that it is worth considering it carefully.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): May I pay my party’s respects to the late Paul Flynn, whose contribution to this House and to British politics will be sorely missed?

Does the Home Secretary agree that our country’s long-term security is best served by understanding precisely why a young British girl would go to Syria in the first place? Is it not therefore better for UK security to interrogate and investigate this British citizen in the UK, rather than waste this opportunity to learn incredibly valuable lessons?

Sajid Javid: Again, I cannot speak about a particular case or an individual, but I do not agree with the right hon. Gentleman that it is better in every case to talk to someone who has left to join a terrorist group to try to find out why; I do not think that that is the case. The driving factor on every occasion should be what is best for the security and the national interest of this country. He is right to point to the issue of why so many people—as I said, it is approximately 900 over a number of years, and many of them are British—have been drawn to leave these shores to go and join such a vile terrorist organisation. We at the Home Office and our partners in the police, the security services and others take that work very seriously. When we start to understand more why that happened, we must use those lessons to safeguard more people, especially young people.
Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: It is time we heard from a Berkshire knight—I call Sir John Redwood.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): How will the UK authorities go about finding the evidence concerning those UK citizens who went abroad to join a terrorist organisation and to fight or intervene in acts of brutality or support those who did?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend highlights an important issue. Members will understand why it is very difficult to gather evidence when someone has gone to a completely ungoverned space where we have no consular presence and no diplomatic relations of any type, and nor do our allies.

That said, we put a huge amount of effort—I take this opportunity to commend our security services, the police and some of our international partners—into gathering battlefield evidence and having that ready to use whenever appropriate. If we can supply that evidence in some cases to our partners for cases that they wish to bring in front of their courts, we will try to work constructively with them. The UN has also been looking at this. New measures are being considered on battlefield evidence conventions, and Britain, through the Ministry of Defence, is making an incredibly important contribution to that.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I completely understand that the Home Secretary wants people who have gone abroad to commit terrible crimes to face the full force of the law, but if they are British citizens, they have the right to be brought back here. So too do their offspring. What steps is he taking to recover, safeguard and protect the newborn baby, who I believe may be a British citizen, now languishing in a refugee camp?

Sajid Javid: I am sure the hon. Lady will understand that I cannot get drawn into a particular case, but I will respond to her general point. As a father, I think that any parent would have sympathy for a completely innocent child who is born into a battle zone or even taken there by their parents. But ultimately, we must remember that it is their parents who have decided to take that risk with their child; it is not something that Britain or the British Government have done. They have deliberately taken their child into a warzone where there is no British consular protection, and there is FCO advice that no one should go there.

Furthermore, if that person is involved with a terrorist organisation, they have gone to either directly or indirectly kill other people’s children, and we should keep that in mind. Lastly, if we were to do more to try to rescue these children, we have to think about what risk that places on future children in the United Kingdom and the risk that they may be taken out to warzones by their parents.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): The armed forces of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria have done most of the fighting and dying, as our allies, in liberating parts of their territory from ISIS. They now have custody of many foreign fighters, including British citizens who found themselves in those ISIS areas. What is our obligation to the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria?

Sajid Javid: We work closely with our allies in the coalition forces in northern Syria, and both through the Ministry of Defence and other means, wherever appropriate and sensible, we provide support. There is limited information exchange on detainees, but where we are supplied with information, we would of course look at that and try to use it to bring about justice and make sure justice is done. Our priority will always be to see whether justice can be done in the region.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Home Secretary for his strong stance and leadership. I have been contacted by a large volume of constituents on this matter—probably because I am a tender-hearted person, I believe. I usually believe that if people have made a mistake and are repentant, we should be forgiving. However, in this case there is no repentance and certainly no apology, and someone who is “unfazed” at decapitated heads in a bin shows no remorse whatever. This is not a mistake; it is a matter of national security. She married a Dutch national, and if we strip her of her citizenship, she will have weight for her and her child in that nation and will therefore not be left stateless. Will the Secretary of State outline his opinion on this case?

Sajid Javid: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, but I cannot speak about an individual case—it would not be appropriate for me to do so at the Dispatch Box—although I do understand the points that he has made. As I said earlier, many people, including course the hon. Gentleman, will have heard the comments of Ms Shamima Begum and they will be drawing their own conclusions.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): On 1 September 2014, I raised the question of returning jihadists with the then Prime Minister—after the murder of Lee Rigby and before the murder of many other people in Manchester, Westminster and elsewhere. I did say that I thought this was not something that might happen, but would happen. I mentioned article 8(3) of the 1961 United Nations convention on statelessness, which does provide the tools to which my right hon. Friend has referred, if the Government are prepared to take them up. It says that a person may be rendered stateless if he has acted “inconsistently with his duty of loyalty”, behaved in a way “prejudicial to the vital interests of the State”, or declared “allegiance to another State” and shown evidence of repudiation of allegiance. Will my right hon. Friend be good enough to look at that again? I have raised it several times, including with the present Prime Minister when she was the Home Secretary. Will he take another look at this because I do think the situation is now becoming more than critical?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend, as we have heard, has long taken an interest in these issues and has contributed greatly in so many ways in trying to fight terrorism. He has raised another important point. In the past, our lawyers have looked at these issues, but he has asked me whether I would be willing to look again. I will certainly do that, and I will write to him.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): When will this Government stop maintaining that they cannot liaise with British citizens until they leave Syria? They know
that there are many British citizens, including one of my constituents, who cannot leave Syria because their jailers will not release them unless it is to the home country of that captive. Ultimately, these individuals should surely be taken back to the UK, where they can face justice in our courts, rather than our Government totally absolving themselves of any responsibility.

Sajid Javid: First, it is worth pointing out again that the Foreign Office’s advice when it comes to Syria, for many years now, has been that it is very dangerous. No British citizen should be travelling to Syria. If a British citizen has ignored that advice, they will know that there is no consular support there and that we have no diplomatic relations with Syria. If the individual concerned is a foreigner who went to join a terrorist organisation to kill, rape and cause enormous damage, there is no way that this Government will risk the lives of British personnel—British soldiers, Foreign Office officials or others—to go and rescue such a person. No way.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): When we cannot prevent their return, what about internment until they have been sufficiently quarantined?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend might be reassured to know that when we cannot prevent someone’s return, we will in all cases seek to question them, investigate them and, where appropriate, prosecute them. Even if they are mono-national, if they are British citizens, we can strip them of their passport, have temporary exclusion orders and manage their return.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): Wonderful tributes have been paid to Paul Flynn, and few things demonstrated his place as a wonderful contrarian so well as the fact that he lent his support to my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) in the 2015 leadership contest despite the fact that he seemed to disagree with all her major policy points. Amid those tributes, I am sure that the House will want to register its thanks to Sir Charles Farr, the head of the Joint Intelligence Committee, who passed away last week.

The Home Secretary talks about people facing consequences for supporting terror, but he knows that far too many of them do not face consequences. He talks about doing whatever it takes to bring people to justice, so why is he not making the very valuable designated area offence, for which many of us campaigned, retrospective? Does he really think that the law as it stands, under which people can go to Syria, make themselves jihadi brides and offer their support to foreign fighters yet not have their prosecution guaranteed, is strong enough? Surely it is not. What measures will he take?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to mention Charles Farr, who has sadly passed away, and to point out the huge contribution that Charles made to the security of this country, both at the Home Office and as the chairman of the JIC. I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman mentioned that, and he was absolutely right to do so.

The hon. Gentleman talks about the laws that are available and the tools for prosecution, and particularly about the new powers in the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019. These are far-reaching powers, and we tried to prepare a Bill that had the support of the House while being well balanced and offering due process. As for the designated powers procedures, as I said earlier, we started work on that in anticipation of Royal Assent, which has now happened. We hope to bring an order to the House as soon as possible.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): In the European Court of Human Rights, the case of K2 v. the United Kingdom was about taking away nationality in the context of terrorism, and that was found to be manifestly ill founded. Why does that not apply here, since the defendant in that case had only one nationality at the time?

Sajid Javid: I am not familiar with the details of that case, and I do not have them to hand, but if my hon. Friend wants to send me more details I will give a more detailed response. As I said earlier, the tools available to us to remove someone’s British nationality—to deprive them of it—can be used only when they have more than one nationality.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Thames Valley police has lost several hundred officers thanks to Government cuts. Will the Home Secretary tell the House how he thinks such cuts will affect the police’s ability to monitor returnees from Syria?

Sajid Javid: On security, the hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue of resources for our world-class police, including those in Thames Valley. That is why I am sure that he would welcome the record increase of up to £970 million in England and Wales for the police. It is a shame, given his concern, that he actually voted against that increase.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): With the collapse of ISIL we are going to see more cases like this. Could the Home Secretary remind us of how many fighters, whether male or female, have returned to this country already, and how many are being observed by our security services?

Sajid Javid: What my hon. Friend highlights is that this is not a new problem. We understand why it is so prominent right now in the press, but people have been going to join terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq for a number of years. He is right to point out that with the weakness of Daesh at the moment it is possible that more will seek to return. He asks me how many. We only have estimates. There is no accurate information, but as I mentioned earlier we think approximately 40% of the 900 who we estimate left the UK to join those groups have returned. In every case, we seek to manage that. He also asked me how many are under certain measures, such as TPIMs. That is not something that would be appropriate to discuss.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The case of Shamima Begum is of course highly emotive and any of us who have read the interview will find it difficult to be sympathetic. However, I have grave concerns that vulnerable young children or vulnerable young people who have been groomed by extremists could be left stateless. Can the Home Secretary assure us that
that will not happen? Will he also detail to the House the steps his Department is taking to tackle online grooming by extremists?

Sajid Javid: I can assure the hon. Lady that we would not knowingly make anyone stateless.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): The sight of decapitated heads lying in a rubbish bin did not faze Ms Begum. Should the British people be fazed if this individual is left to reap what she sows? No taxpayers' money should be used in any way to repatriate this individual.

Sajid Javid: Again, I hope my hon. Friend understands that it would not be appropriate for me to talk about an individual or an individual case, but he makes a very important and powerful point. In many cases, the people who left Britain knew exactly what they were doing. They were full of hate for our country and hate for our values. They went out there to murder, to rape, to support rape and to commit many violent and vile acts. We can absolutely imagine why hardly anyone among the British public would have any sympathy for them.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): I speak from the Back Bench because of the inimitable Paul Flynn, who in his superb book “How to be an MP” advised that one’s profile is best displayed from the Back Bench. May I ask the Home Secretary how many returning combatants have been prosecuted and how many are subject to TPIMs?

Sajid Javid: A number of people have returned from the wars in Syria and Iraq. We have been able to gather evidence through questioning and other means, and they have been prosecuted for a number of offences. A number of TPIMs have been issued; I would not want to get into the exact numbers at this point. There are concerns about what might happen if we publish some of those numbers so readily, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that where we can, we do prosecute and will continue to prosecute individuals.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): How effective has the Prevent strategy been in dissuading British people, especially young people, from travelling overseas to join organisations such as ISIS in the first place?

Sajid Javid: The Prevent programme is working; it has been successful. Since 2015, some 780 vulnerable people have been successfully supported away from terrorism. It is worth pointing out that the programme is voluntary and confidential. Over 180 grassroots projects support the Prevent strategy. The Channel programme, which is part of the Prevent process, supports those projects. If it is helpful, I should say that in 2017-18 over 7,000 people were referred. Of those, just under 400 received support from the Channel programme. If I may, Mr Speaker, it is also worth pointing out that, in the last year for which we have full information, about a quarter of referrals were for far right extremism.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Like the Home Secretary, I have little sympathy for those who headed out to the middle east—to Syria and Iraq—to support a form of medieval barbarism that sought to enslave an entire people and that committed genocide while they were there as well. Does he agree that the important point now is to ensure that those who have survived this murderous campaign are brought to justice either here or in an international tribunal?

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. The overriding aim with all these individuals, whether they are from Britain or have left countries that are our allies, is to work together to make sure that justice is done in every case. As I said earlier, we will seek to work with our allies to make sure, first of all, that justice can be done in the region, but if that cannot be done, we will look to work with our allies on other means.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Is it the case that the lawyer of the individual concerned has described British law as akin to that of the Nazis? If that is how it was described, will my right hon. Friend condemn that because we are a proud country with our traditions of democracy and the rule of law, and particularly given that ISIS itself was a Nazi, medievalist death cult?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that point. There are reports today that one of the lawyers who is representing one of the foreign fighters described British law as akin to Nazism. If that is true, these are absolutely outrageous comments. They will be found to be deeply offensive, for example, by Holocaust survivors and their families here in Britain and elsewhere, and if this lawyer has an ounce of dignity, they should consider apologising for these wholly insensitive remarks.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): We would not want to fall foul of the European Court of Human Rights, would we? However, as a member of the Council of Europe, I refer the Home Secretary to recent judgments of the Council and the Court that one cannot deprive somebody of citizenship in an arbitrary way. Without asking him to comment on any individual cases, surely as a matter of law, it would not be arbitrary to strip someone of a passport if they willingly go out to join the jurisdiction of a terrorist organisation that has beheaded people, and all the rest, so I urge the Home Secretary to be robust on this matter. He will have the support not only of the whole country, but even of human rights lawyers.

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend has raised an important issue, within which there are two separate issues. One is removing someone’s British passport, which is not necessarily the same as removing their citizenship. It is possible—I have done this on a number of occasions, as have my predecessors—to remove someone’s passport using the royal prerogative if that is deemed in the public interest. Separate to that but related, is, under some circumstances, depriving someone of their British citizenship—I mentioned this earlier at the Dispatch Box. In all cases, none of that can be done—or of course it cannot—in an arbitrary way. There is a due process to be followed, but if either of those things are necessary to protect the public, that is exactly what I would do.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I am sure that it is the view of most people—it is certainly the view of the majority of my constituents who have written to me—that when someone has made
their bed, they lie in it, but clearly the course of law must prevail here. My concern is with the children. Since 2013, more than 150 cases of children subject to threats of radicalisation have been heard in the family courts. That figure will rise and our courts are little provisioned to deal with them. What conversations is the Secretary of State having with the family courts and children's services to make sure that suitable and timely interventions are being, and can be, made with similar such children in future?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend rightly highlights the work we do with partners across Government and public agencies through the Prevent programme. That work is all about safeguarding—in many cases, young people and children of all ages—and working with authorities, including social services, local councils, schools and others, to safeguard those children. In terms of deradicalisation, it is one of the most important things we do, and we take it very seriously, which is why I welcome the commitment we made earlier this year to undertake an independent review of the programme to see how we can improve it even further.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that those found guilty of the sort of sick atrocities he described will face a whole-life sentence?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend will know that when someone is charged, ultimately it is for the court and judge to decide any eventual punishment, but he can be assured that we want to ensure that justice is done in every single case, either in the region, by helping our allies or in some other way. Justice will be key in every case.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Will the Home Secretary confirm that the safety of no British officials, civilians or military, will be put at risk in an attempt to extract those suspected of supporting terrorism in countries across the middle east?

Sajid Javid: I am very happy to confirm that to my hon. Friend. As I mentioned earlier, anyone who has gone to Syria in recent years will have known the huge risk they were taking, and we certainly will not risk the lives of any British officials or soldiers, or anyone else, to help or rescue those who went to support terrorism.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What powers and resources does my right hon. Friend have to ensure that any British citizen returning from the so-called caliphate in whose case the burden of proof does not permit a criminal prosecution will face mandatory and robust deradicalisation programmes?

Sajid Javid: As I have mentioned, this is not a new challenge—we estimate that one way or another more than 300 people have returned in the last few years. When someone manages to return, we first make sure, in the interest of justice, that they are questioned, investigated and, where appropriate, properly prosecuted. Where youngsters, in particular, are involved, however, we also make sure they get deradicalisation help through specific programmes; in some cases, through mental health support; and through support in other ways too. In each case, we will work with partners to create a bespoke programme for that individual and do all we can.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Hon. Friends have mentioned the possibility of withdrawing passports. If a minor has been counselled by Prevent or any other authority in this country and is still intent on going to ISIS or some similar organisation, is there not a strong case for withdrawing their passport for their own safety?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Generally in the circumstances he describes, if further action is needed, such as the withdrawal of the passport—other measures are available—we would not hesitate to take it.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Nine hundred British nationals have gone to support Daesh in Syria and Iraq; just 40 have been prosecuted. This simply is not good enough. Daesh may have been defeated in theatre, but Daesh and its sympathisers are in effect tying us up in knots in our own courts, and these people are getting away with it. The Home Secretary has admitted that 360 of these individuals are still at large and likely to return to this country. My constituents do not feel safe with the Government's response to this threat. I urge him urgently to revisit the legal advice he has been given in several areas, because we need to do better, don’t we?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right. We do need to do more to ensure that we have more tools to prosecute people who have helped or supported terrorist organisations, whether they have actually gone to Syria—some examples have been mentioned today—or whether they are in our own country, helping those organisations in other ways. Since I became Home Secretary, I have been determined to provide more of those tools. I was pleased that my hon. Friend, and indeed the whole House, supported the Bill that became the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019, which will give us far more tools that can be used for law enforcement. We have increased sentences in many instances. The Act will also enable us to step up the work that we have been doing with our allies across the world to gather more battlefield evidence, because evidence is also crucial, especially if we are seeking higher sentences.

My hon. Friend is right to issue that challenge and to say we need to do more, and I agree with him.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I, and the constituents who have contacted me, find it hard to understand how someone who has joined an organisation whose aims are to destroy the values that we hold dear can then cite those same values in an attempt to justify being repatriated to the United Kingdom. May I therefore urge the Home Secretary to stand firm and use all possible legal means to keep these people out of our country?

Sajid Javid: I will not talk about a particular case, but I absolutely understand the sentiments that my hon. Friend has expressed, and I think that they are the sentiments of the vast majority of the constituents
whom we are all here to represent. We must indeed use all the legal means that we have to ensure that those who have supported terror groups, either at home or abroad, are always punished for that, and are brought to justice.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): May I pursue the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), and mention another—I would argue—ill-judged comment? In an attempt to build sympathy, the lawyer representing Miss Begum has also compared her to a first world war veteran suffering from shell-shock. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is deeply insulting to many thousands of former servicemen and their families? Those servicemen suffered deep trauma fighting for this country and defending democracy, rather than joining a terrorist group that was out to destroy it

Sajid Javid: That is another of the points that Members have made today about a particular case. Again, the solicitor should be very careful about the remarks that are made, and reflect very deeply on them. My hon. Friend has raised a good example of why that is so important.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): On 16 February British Midland Regional Limited, the east midlands-based airline which operates as Flybmi, announced that it had ceased operations from that date and filed for administration. The group has surrendered its licence to operate in the United Kingdom, which means that it is no longer able to operate flights.

There has already been significant speculation about the reasons behind Flybmi’s failure. Ultimately, this was a commercial matter for the airline. Flybmi operated in a very competitive industry and was exposed to wider pressures faced by the global aviation industry, such as increasing fuel prices. It is very disappointing that it has gone into administration, and we know that this will be a very difficult time for those who have lost their jobs as a result. Many of those affected are highly skilled. We are confident that they will find suitable employment opportunities, and we welcome the moves by the sector to offer such opportunities.

The Insolvency Service’s redundancy payments service is working with the administrators of Flybmi to ensure that former employees’ claims from the national insurance fund, which may include redundancy pay, holiday pay, arrears of pay and compensatory notice pay, are assessed as quickly as possible. However, given that the sector is ready to recruit, I hope that new jobs will be found soon.

I also recognise that this is a disruptive and distressing time for passengers, and the Government’s immediate priority is fully focused on supporting those affected. We are in active contact with airports, airlines and other transport providers to ensure that everything possible is being done to help them. We and the Civil Aviation Authority are working closely with the travel industry to ensure that the situation is managed with minimal impact to passengers.

There are enough spaces on other flights for passengers to return home on other airlines, and we welcome the sector’s move to offer rescue fares for affected passengers. For example, Flybmi has codeshares across the Lufthansa group and passengers on these flights will be subject to the EU passenger protection rules. They will be provided with assistance and rerouted to their final destination. Travel insurance and credit card bookings are worth noting here, and most passengers were business travellers so will be covered through their work. In addition, the Civil Aviation Authority is providing detailed information for affected passengers on its website, including how people can claim back money they have spent on tickets.

The Government recognise the importance of maintaining regional connectivity, which is why we fund a public service obligation route from Derry/Londonderry to London, which was recently extended from 1 April 2019 for a further two years, the norm for PSOs. The chief executive of Derry council has the power to transfer the PSO contract to another airline for up to seven months to allow for a new procurement process to be conducted. Subject to due diligence we expect the council to sign contracts and appoint an
We are fully focused on supporting those affected and routes from Aberdeen, Bristol and Newcastle. Our priority Loganair has publicly announced that it will cover replace routes previously served by Flybmi. For example, airlines have already indicated that they will step in to and while they are disappointed, we are confident that that part; it is its responsibility.

Andy McDonald: It will not have escaped anybody’s attention that the Transport Secretary is sitting on the Treasury Bench yet has not come to this House to make a statement. He seeks to hide behind his Minister; she has been dropped in it. Perhaps he has been dealing with the bombshell dropped by Honda this morning.

Eighteen months ago Monarch Airlines left taxpayers with a bill for more than £60 million. Clearly the Government have failed to learn the lessons from that disaster. In fact, the Transport Secretary has dithered and delayed for nearly a year, allowing Loganair to cherry-pick the profitable parts of Flybmi before putting it into administration. The Government have clearly done nothing to stop a repeat of Greybull’s asset-stripping of Monarch.

Flybmi has been in difficulty for some time, so what plans did the Department for Transport have for an airline’s collapse? Have not the Government left both Flybmi’s passengers and staff high and dry? Why was the airline allowed to sell tickets only hours before administration? Why are the Government not helping people get home this time?

On Thursday last week, the Government agreed to extend the subsidy for Flybmi’s London to Derry route. Was the DfT aware that the airline was about to collapse when it agreed this commitment of public money? What checks did Ministers do on the airline prior to agreeing this? The Government’s aviation Green Paper boasts of growth and connectivity; in reality, Flybmi is the second UK airline to fail within months, while the UK’s direct connectivity has declined.

The Government’s complacency is staggering. Flybmi has said that “the challenges, particularly those created by Brexit, have proven to be insurmountable”, and:

“Current trading and future prospects have also been seriously affected by the uncertainty created by the Brexit process, which has led to our inability to secure valuable flying contracts in Europe and lack of confidence around Flybmi’s ability to continue flying between destinations in Europe.”

So when will this Government wake up to the undeniable truth that their shambolic handling of Brexit is leading our country into an economic disaster?

Ms Ghani: I have never been a woman who has been “dropped in it”; it is my job and I am disappointed that the shadow Transport Secretary wanted to see a he and not a she at the Dispatch Box, but hopefully I can respond to his questions in the best way I can. I am also a little disappointed that the shadow Front-Bench team are all in their seats today considering the bold decisions their colleagues have taken to leave the Labour party because of a number of issues, including leadership and institutionalised antisemitism. We are talking about disappointment, but we should focus on the passengers.

We were made aware of Flybmi going into administration at the weekend. A number of conversations have been taking place. The Aviation Minister has spoken to the Cabinet Secretary responsible for transport in Scotland.

The Secretary of State has spoken to the Northern Ireland Secretary and to the local MP, the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Campbell). Information is being made available on the Civil Aviation Authority website to alert passengers about how they can get home. We must focus on the passengers who may be struggling to get home, but there are lots of alternative flights and that information is being made available. More than 300 staff have been impacted, but it is interesting to note that Loganair and Ryanair are making jobs available and recruiting heavily. The British Airline Pilots Association is also exploring options for pilots with partner airlines.

The hon. Gentleman noted the business case for Flybmi. It was possible to recognise, looking at its accounts, that it had been struggling for a while, including before Brexit and before the referendum. It is not an easy market for airlines to be in, especially regional and local airlines. He mentioned Brexit as a reason for Flybmi going into administration, but it is important to note that several other smaller airlines in Europe have also gone into administration, including Germania, VLM, Cobalt and Primera, and there are lots of different reasons why this takes place. We cannot always blame Brexit when we do not understand the business case.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the public service obligation and wanted to put the blame at the door of the Department for Transport. In case I did not make myself clear in my opening statement, Derry and Strabane Council is responsible for maintaining and managing the contract. We of course support the route via the public service obligation because it is a lifeline route. I know that that reply must come as a disappointment to him, but that is where the responsibility lies. Derry and Strabane Council has made it clear to the press and to us that it is very positive that an alternative airline will be in place soon enough. It is important to note that the aviation sector in the UK is thriving and that passenger numbers have gone up by almost 60% compared with the numbers in 2000, but it is a very tricky sector to be in, especially for the small regional players in this very large market. I hope that those responses will not be too disappointing for the hon. Gentleman.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Is there any known interest from other aviation companies or entrepreneurs in buying assets and taking over the staff in greater numbers, rather than in just cherry-picking the routes?

Ms Ghani: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. The staff are all highly skilled and very professional, and it is important to note that Loganair has already made it clear that it is keen to recruit. I also believe that Ryanair has set up a stall in some of the regional airports to try to bring some of those professional staff on board. We are very positive that they will be able to secure jobs, although this must be a very distressing
time for them, as it must be for the passengers. A number of airlines are showing interest in the routes, and Derry Council has made it clear to us that it has some interested parties lined up to take on the route from Derry airport. It will make that information public as soon as it can.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Our thoughts at this time are with the staff, whose future is uncertain, and with those who have had their travel plans thrown into disarray, who are out of pocket or who are stranded as a result of the collapse of Flybmi. I am pleased that Loganair has announced that it is stepping in to cover the routes from Aberdeen to Bristol, Oslo and Esbjerg from 4 March. At a time when Aberdeen is feeling the impact of the loss of easyJet flights, the news of Flybmi going into administration is deeply worrying, particularly because it explicitly mentioned Brexit uncertainty as one of the reasons for this happening. Recent studies have shown that Aberdeen is set to be the UK city that will be the hardest hit by Brexit. It would be helpful if the Minister told us what the Government are doing to protect slots at Aberdeen and other regional airports after Brexit and what they are doing to ensure that airlines are encouraged to use those slots and that our regional airports have access not only to hub airports but to destinations.

Ms Ghani: The hon. Lady makes some important points, focusing on passengers and ensuring that they can continue their journeys and on the staff involved. One of Flybmi’s issues was that its flights were not always full, but the number of people who could have been impacted has been reduced as result. However, everyone whose journey home or to work has become difficult must be taken care of, and I ask them to pay attention to the CAA website for further information. Flybmi’s business model was just no longer working in a competitive market. Its public accounts show that it was in trouble before the referendum, so putting the blame on Brexit really does not wash. The hon. Lady makes a powerful point about Aberdeen, and we will do what we can to ensure that we support all our regional airports.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): While the failure of Flybmi’s business model and the loss of 100 jobs in my constituency is a setback causing obvious distress for employees and disruption for passengers, it comes at a time of considerable growth and development in and around East Midlands airport, with over 7,000 new jobs being created over the next two years. Will the Government do all they can to ensure that Flybmi’s highly skilled employees are returned to employment as soon as possible, just as they did in 2012 when Flybmi’s parent company, British Midland, ceased trading with the loss of 1,100 jobs in my constituency?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend is a powerful advocate for his constituency and makes some valid points, particularly about the loss of skilled jobs. We were only made aware that Flybmi was going into administration over the weekend, and it is interesting to note the number of other airlines that have nipped in to see who they can recruit. I am confident that jobs will be found. My hon. Friend refers to passengers. The UK has a healthy aviation sector, and we must not dwell on undermining it. We had 284 million terminal passengers in 2017—an increase of 6% on 2016—so the market is healthy.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): The Government have been consulting on arrangements for airline insolencies for almost a year, so will the Minister explain how yet another UK airline can fail without the Government taking any action? Can I press the Minister to explain why the airline continued to sell tickets just hours before going into administration?

Ms Ghani: An independent review of airline insolvency by Peter Bucks is due to report, and it will make clear what happens to airlines when difficult decisions are made. There is an interesting point to note about how airlines can continue to sell tickets when they are struggling, which is one of the peculiar things that happens in the sector. If an airline were to stop selling tickets, that would make it clear that it was about to go into administration, so airlines do keep selling tickets quite close to the point at which they are about to go into administration. The Peter Bucks review will no doubt examine that point.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s restated commitment to the PSO in relation to Derry and Stansted. Given this latest news, what further assessment is necessary of the long-term viability of Derry airport and of the welcome improvements to the A6 between Londonderry and Dungiven, which will increase connectivity to Belfast International airport? What further support does the Minister anticipate in the light of the Derry City and Strabane regional city deal?

Ms Ghani: It is good that my hon. Friend notes the importance of Derry City and Strabane District Council’s role in procuring and maintaining the contract, and it is interesting to note the council’s positivity about other airlines taking on the route. I noted over the weekend that Ryanair was offering flights for less than £10 for those who wished to travel from Belfast, although that means making another journey. We are obviously committed to supporting our regional airports, to holding the CAA to account so that it monitors what airlines are doing when they are struggling and to examining what we can do to help passengers to continue their journeys across the UK.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): It is quite frankly astonishing that the Minister did not mention Brexit in her initial comments, because the company certainly did. Flybmi said that uncertainty around Brexit and the possible costs of needing both UK and EU licences in the event of a no-deal Brexit were factors in its decision to go out of business. Will the Government do all they can to ensure that airlines are planning for a no-deal scenario and looking at how to get dual licences?

Ms Ghani: The EU has been very clear that the UK aviation industry can continue as it is. We have been having good conversations with the EU on this, and we have tabled a number of statutory instruments and regulations to make sure we can continue flying. I just do not buy the argument that planes will not fly.

Mr Betts: These won’t fly anymore.

Ms Ghani: No, but Flybmi’s accounts show that, as far back as 2014, it was not as healthy as it could have been. If a company undertakes flights that are barely at 50% capacity, it is making a loss. To make an assumption that it is all down to Brexit just does not wash.
Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): As the Minister mentioned, Loganair has picked up many of the routes from Aberdeen International and is owned by the same holding company as Flybmi. Airline Investments. Will she join me in encouraging Airline Investments to give regional flights priority at this time? Will she reaffirm her commitment to regional airports? And will she make sure the slots are not reassigned to other routes, so keeping these vital regional routes open?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend makes three powerful arguments, and I agree with him. The Department, under my noble Friend the Aviation Minister, is undertaking the “Aviation 2050” consultation, which will no doubt reconfirm our commitment to regional airports.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): This is clearly very bad news for staff and passengers. I know the Minister does not like mentioning the B-word—Brexit—but the fact is that Flybmi has said that Brexit uncertainty was a factor. Not the total reason but a factor, as it was for Jaguar Land Rover, Ford and, as we will no doubt find out shortly, Honda. Is it not time for the Prime Minister to do two things: one, rule out no deal; and, two, establish a Brexit redundancy fund to support businesses that have been put out of business as a result of Brexit?

Ms Ghani: If the right hon. Gentleman wants to rule out no deal, he should vote for the Prime Minister’s deal.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): It is welcome news that Loganair is taking on some of Flybmi’s routes, but my constituents want assurances on their new nearest airport in Dundee. We do not want to see the airport taking on other routes and losing the vital routes from Dundee down to London.

Ms Ghani: It is a very competitive market, and no doubt my hon. Friend’s constituents will be well represented here today. If she would like to meet the Aviation Minister, I will ensure that a meeting takes place. We are committed to all our regional airports.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Aerospace is one of the most important and successful of our sectors. Although the Minister may be having lots of good conversations with our friends in the European Union, there is no regulatory certainty. Does she think that is a good thing or a bad thing for our aerospace industry?

Ms Ghani: If the hon. Gentleman wishes to have 100% certainty, he needs to vote for the Prime Minister’s deal. [Interruption.] We have had assurances from the EU that the airline sector can continue to operate in the way it is currently operating. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister is answering the question and there is quite a lot of sedentary chuntering on both sides, and no shortage of gesticulation, either. I am sure that Mr Knight will now behave with his usual statesmanlike reserve.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Minister is clearly deeply concerned about this collapse and the wider issues affecting aviation across Europe. Will she assure the House that she will do everything she can to support our regional airports—Birmingham airport, despite its successes, is running at 35% capacity—because they are so important to our country and our regional economic diversity?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend has my assurance, and I would be at fault if I did not mention Birmingham airport, which I grew up very close to and to which we are obviously committed, as he can no doubt tell by our commitment to High Speed 2 stopping at the airport. We are committed to all our regional airports, which is why we have the “Aviation 2050” consultation under way to make sure we do all we can to ensure the sector continues to remain healthy.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): In the event of a no-deal Brexit, there could be no expansion of airline routes from the UK to the EU. That is what is causing the huge uncertainty for operators in the UK. After two and a half years of negotiation, can the Minister not see the damage being done to the sector?

Ms Ghani: I believe the hon. Gentleman is mistaken, as we are working with the EU to deal with deal and no-deal scenarios: we have published no-deal technical notices; we have tabled a number of statutory instruments, which are progressing well; and the EU has confirmed that it will maintain the connection between the EU and the UK to allow flying to continue. But if he is concerned about a no-deal scenario, he should vote for the Prime Minister’s deal.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The collapse of Flybmi is to be very much regretted, but does the Minister accept that connectivity is about more than one airline and that she should continue to establish growth in airlines across the country?

Ms Ghani: Absolutely. Even though the airline sector is a tricky market to be in and it obviously favours larger airlines—for example, it is a little easier for them to buy fuel than it is for smaller airlines—my hon. Friend is right to say that competition is good and we should do what we can to support not only our airports, but our regional airlines.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): My hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) was in touch with the Minister to seek reassurances about this. Flybmi has said that its decision is predominantly an economic one; it was averaging only 19 people per flight, which is not sustainable for any company or business. The public service obligation air route, the first of its kind in Northern Ireland, has been in place since 2017, and the Minister has referred to it. I am thankful for the assurance that the Government will continue to subsidise the route until 2021. Will she please outline whether provision will be made to expand that commitment for a further two years beyond that to encourage other airlines to take on the contract and the route?

Ms Ghani: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the PSO, but it does run for this specific period, up to 2021. He noted that the Secretary of State has spoken to the local MP, the hon. Member for East Londonderry, and made a valuable point about the number of passengers per flight, which would have had an impact on the airline’s business model.
Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Of course Brexit has been blamed for other ills. Will my hon. Friend confirm that in the three years leading up to the Brexit referendum in 2016, Flybmi was losing more than £25 million and that its failure has more to do with fuel costs, European regulation and market forces?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point. If we look at Flybmi’s accounts, we see that they were not healthy for many years, even before the referendum. Smaller airlines across Europe are also struggling, and I mentioned some earlier: VLM in Belgium, Germania, Cobalt and Primera. So this is not a UK thing; it is tricky for small airlines to operate, especially if they are regional, in a global sector.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): If I was the chief executive of a recently failed business, I would probably blame Brexit, too, but the reality is that Ryanair warned only last month of significant overcapacity in the budget airlines sector. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is far more about competitive markets than it is about Brexit?

Ms Ghani: Absolutely. The reason for Flybmi going into administration is that the business has just reached the end of its road. We have an overcapacity here and the power is with the passengers in the choices they make. Those passengers who are now struggling to get home and in distress must be recognised as well, but that is the market we are in.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I thank the Minister for her statement and the reassurances she has given those who are directly impacted. Does she agree that the UK aviation industry is actually a success story? We have the third largest aviation sector in the world and we would like that to continue to be the case. Will she therefore assure me that she and her Department are working with the industry to make sure that it is planning effectively for all Brexit scenarios? Perhaps the Opposition would like to help out on this by reducing uncertainty by voting for the deal.

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point. People who are nervous about uncertainty need to vote for certainty, which would be the Prime Minister’s deal. We should not undermine the UK aviation sector. It is incredibly healthy, even though there are a number of challenges, especially in respect of how passenger numbers are going up. Interestingly, there is far more capacity than there are passengers, so shopping around for a good deal is important. What has come out of Flybmi going into administration over the weekend is that we should remember to make sure we are securing our tickets in a way that means they are insured, so that we can get compensation or refunds.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Flybmi’s 50-seater planes carried, on average, only 18 passengers per flight. No airline could carry on on that basis. Although Flybmi’s demise is regrettable and very sad, does the Minister agree that it is important to get it into context? East Midlands airport is a huge success story. It has an expansion programme, and passenger and cargo growth is 8% a year. The airport is located in north-west Leicestershire, which has the fastest economic growth of anywhere outside London and the south-east.

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point about his part of the world. He is absolutely right; East Midlands airport is thriving, competitive and nimble when it comes to the changes that passengers require and the kinds of services that they want. Even though it is regrettable that Flybmi went into administration over the weekend, it is important to note that the UK has a very healthy aviation sector.
Points of Order

5 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Following on from your very warm tribute earlier, which I know has been much appreciated, I wonder whether I might be permitted, as a constituency neighbour, to put on record condolences to Paul Flynn’s wife Sam and family following the very sad news of his death yesterday.

Paul was certainly one of a kind, and it is hard to know how to even begin to describe his contribution in this place and in his beloved city of Newport. His representation of Newport West spanned 31 years of unbroken service. He was a ferocious campaigner for many causes, in many of which he was far ahead of his time, and he was a tireless advocate for his constituents. He did so with a wit and a humour that cut through any tendency to pomposity in this place, although it is fair to say that he was not the easiest to whip; I say that having been his Whip.

Paul had a few stints on the Opposition Front Bench, most recently taking through the Wales Bill as the shadow Secretary of State for Wales—a role that delighted him not least because, as he said, octogenarians were under-represented on the Front Bench. His grasp of social media put most of us to shame, particularly his incisive tweets and blogging. However, as you said earlier, Mr Speaker, it was the role of Back Bencher that he loved most.

Above all, Paul was an absolutely passionate Newportonian who took every opportunity to champion our city. I know that this weekend he would have been especially proud of Newport County. Their manager is also a Flynn, which led Paul to declare that Flynns “always deliver for Newport”.

On a personal note, Paul was the most generous of constituency neighbours. He was genuinely the most wonderful company, and he was a huge support to me and others in Newport West, including Welsh Assembly Member Jayne Bryant. I know we will all miss him in this place—in the top corner of the Chamber, looking to catch your eye, Mr Speaker—but I know his legacy will live on through his campaigns, through those he inspired and through his books. We send our love to Sam and family and friends.

Mr Speaker: I must say to the hon. Lady that that was a parliamentarian’s tribute; I do not think I can speak more highly of what the hon. Gentleman has said than to make that observation. I thank both colleagues.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I just wanted to mention that I served on the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe with Paul Flynn, and he was highly respected in that body by people from all the countries represented in it—he was a very active member of it. He also teased me in his book, and we used to laugh about that quite a bit. He was a very nice man and a very effective parliamentarian, and I just wanted to put that on the record. Obviously, our thoughts are with his family at this difficult time.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much indeed.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I would also like to add to the very warm-hearted comments from the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden). I first got to know the hon. Member for Newport East when I came to this House in 2010. We had many issues we agreed on. There were also many things we probably did not agree on, but we agreed on one thing, and that was human rights. Whenever there was a debate in Westminster Hall, or a debate or a question on that in this Chamber, he would be there putting forward his viewpoints in support of human rights. I was always very pleased to be alongside him, taking the same stance on those things, which we agreed on. In later years, I wondered about his incapacity, and I said to one of my colleagues in the Chamber one day, “If that man was not in that chair, he would move this House by himself, such is his energy and his strength.”

The hon. Lady referred—you will know what is coming, Mr Speaker—to the Flynn of Newport County beating this House by himself, such is his energy and his strength.”

Mr Speaker: That was a parliamentarian’s tribute; I do not think I can speak more highly of what the hon. Gentleman has said than to make that observation. I thank both colleagues.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I knew Paul long before he was a Member of Parliament, when he was a county councillor in Gwent in the 1980s. I would just like to add to the wonderful tribute from my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) by saying that all of us fall into different categories as politicians: some are factory farmed, and some are free range, but Paul was the most free range, organic of politicians, and we should all aspire to follow his example.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.
Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he said. I spoke to Paul’s widow, Sam, on the telephone this morning. It is perfectly possible that she has listened live to these tributes to Paul. However, in any event, I hope the House will be reassured to know that I shall certainly be sending her a copy of the Official Report with a covering letter. In these very difficult and harrowing times, I hope she will derive some succour from knowledge of the affection and esteem in which Paul was held across the House of Commons.

5.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I beg to move,

That the draft Armed Forces Act (Continuation) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 24 January, be approved.

It is a pleasure to seek the support of this House for the order. In doing so, may I immediately begin by paying tribute to those who have worn the uniform and who wear the uniform, both as reservists and as regulars? I also pay tribute to those who support those in uniform; it is those in the armed forces community that we must also pay respect to, and we should be thankful for the sacrifices they make in supporting those who serve in the Army, the Air Force and the Royal Navy.

In Defence questions, we spoke about the duty of care—something that is critical to making sure we continue living up to the standards we have shown over the years. We have an enormous standard of professionalism in our armed forces, as a deterrent. Our allies revere us and want to work with us, and our foes fear us because of who we are.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I entirely support what the Minister says about our recognition of those who support members of our armed forces; the armed forces community is very important. I know the Minister has that community very much in his heart and has their best interests in his mind, and he will be as concerned as I am that satisfaction with pay and pension benefits is the lowest ever recorded. What is being done in armed forces legislation and in the policies of the Government to try to increase morale and satisfaction among the people the Minister paid such warm tribute to?

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for highlighting that important point. I will be honest with the House and say that pay is becoming an issue. It was not before—people signed up because of what lay ahead of them, not because of the money. Today, however, the competition that we have in civilian life is such that when people make the judgment as to whether to step forward or not, pay is becoming an issue. We do not want it to be a deterrent to people joining the armed forces.

We are going through the armed forces pay review process, as we do every year, and I will do my utmost to make sure that we are able to pay our service personnel what they deserve, so that it does not become a reason for people not to step forward. I can say the same about accommodation. The reason I articulate these points is that we are shortly to have the spending review. When we talk about the spending review and the armed forces, the immediate assumption is that we are talking about equipment, training and operations. I do not take away from the fact that they must be invested in, but for my part of the portfolio it is critical that we look after the people, and pay is one aspect of that accommodation is another. I am not able to build accommodation fast enough because of limits in funding.

As we make the case to the Treasury for further defence spending, I simply say that welfare issues must be considered in addition to the other big-ticket items that are normally discussed. Is the hon. Gentleman content with that answer?
Toby Perkins: It is the first time I have ever been positively encouraged to intervene—it could catch on.

I share the Minister’s views about the wider issues alongside pay. One of the other issues raised with me by members of the armed forces community is the sense of strategic vision on what the Army is for now. I challenged the Minister on this in Defence questions an hour or two ago and he said that there was a strong strategic vision for the Army in 2019. Can he tell us a bit more about what that is, because it is not entirely understood by some people who serve?

Mr Ellwood: I apologise for intervening on the hon. Gentleman while he was in a sedentary position.

I will come to defence posture shortly, so I hope that the hon. Gentleman will bear with me.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Before my right hon. Friend gets on to defence posture, can he tell us whether he has taken note of the Army Families Federation’s recent report, which suggests that the future accommodation model is a major cause of concern among Army families, and a disincentive to remain in the armed forces?

Mr Ellwood: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s service and the work that he has done in this area. I would not go so far as to say that the new FAM is causing the problems that he suggests. It needs to be rolled out faster. Those who are serving want to be able to get on the housing ladder, for example, and perhaps invest in a property outside the wire. We want to give individuals three options—to stay inside the garrison, which they might want to do when they sign up; to rent a property outside the wire; or to invest in a property, perhaps using the Help to Buy scheme, for example. My hon. Friend is right that it has taken longer than we wanted to roll out the pilot schemes to test the model, and I hope that will happen in the near future.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): My right hon. Friend is right to talk about improving pay, conditions and accommodation. In addition, it is important that we collectively continue to say thank you and appreciate the work that our armed forces do. Will he join me in thanking the Royal Anglian Regiment, which happens to have the freedom of the town of Basildon, and all my constituents who serve in the regiment and across our armed services more widely?

Mr Ellwood: I am more than happy to pay tribute to the Royal Anglian Regiment. I served in the Royal Green Jackets, which was another infantry regiment—it is now the Rifles, I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), who served in the Scots Guards. The Anglians show the benefit of having a local relationship and recruiting from the community. That is how the Army has developed in strength, with reservist communities and so forth. I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to that regiment.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I would just like to dispel some of the gloom that has been spread by the Opposition in relation to the morale of our armed forces. I frequently meet members of the armed forces in my constituency of Aldershot, which is the home of the British Army. I meet fine young men and women from 1st Battalion the Scots Guards, 1st Battalion the Grenadier Guards, 4 Rifles and the Queen’s Gurkha Engineers, and their morale is extremely high because they are involved in an array of operational engagements overseas, and soldiers like to be busy. Young people watching this debate should be reassured that there is no better time to join the British Army, because they will be operationally deployed and morale is extremely high.

Mr Ellwood: I am pleased to hear that, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work he does in his constituency—I have joined him there and am aware of those important contributions. I also speak to the families federations, who ensure that our feet are kept on the ground and that I understand the reality of the challenges. Youngsters joining today expect different standards from those that he and I experienced when we joined—they want single-living accommodation and wireless internet access, for example. They want a different set of standards from those that we appreciated in our time. My hon. Friend makes a very valuable point.
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for what he has said. We are fortunate to have a Minister who has a heart for his job, understands the job and responds to the issues that Members across the House bring to his attention: he does that extremely well. He mentioned accommodation. I gently remind him of the issue of recruitment and the fact that Northern Ireland was able to recruit a greater percentage than the rest of the United Kingdom, which may be an opportunity. Some of the soldiers joining up tell me that they would like the opportunity to train overseas. I want to ensure that that opportunity will be in the strategy, as well as help for the families.

Mr Ellwood: I pay tribute to those who serve and step forward in Northern Ireland. The hon. Gentleman knows that I have visited his neck of the woods a number of times, and I am very grateful for what they offer. He touches on our important commitment to improve accommodation. We have a £4 billion process of upgrade. That requires tough decisions to relinquish some of the armed forces’ assets that we have accumulated over the last couple of hundred years, but it also means that we can regroup and consolidate into super-garrisons, which are fit for purpose and, I hope, will attract the next generation to serve their country.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Stephen Metcalfe rose—

Mr Ellwood: I am pleased that we are holding this debate in the Chamber, because I have never had such interest when we discuss these annual updates of support for the armed forces up in Committee Room 14.

Kevin Foster: I thank the Minister for giving way, and it is welcome that we are talking about the armed forces on the Floor of the House. We have heard in some remarks a focus on how we can encourage people to sign up, but does he agree that it is more about how we retain people, particularly when they get to the stage in their career when they have a family and perhaps need property beyond the barracks accommodation that they were happy with when they signed up?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The chances are that when someone joins the armed forces, they are single and have little responsibility. As they move ahead in life, they are likely to develop a family and so forth, and therefore their accommodation requirements will change. The armed forces must accept and be ready for that. That is the single issue that the families federations state as the reason for people choosing to leave, and it needs addressing; there is no doubt about it.

Stephen Metcalfe: Seeing as we are discussing this important issue on the Floor of the House, it might be worth speaking to a wider audience and reminding people that when they join the armed forces as a young person, the training they receive is often through the formal provision of an apprenticeship. Our military services are one of the biggest providers of apprenticeships in the country, and people leave the services with full and proper qualifications.

Mr Ellwood: I am looking around the Chamber, and I see that there is life after the armed forces, with so many characters who have served and ended up here. That is fantastic. On a more serious note, the skillset that people develop in the armed forces arguably is second to none, compared with other areas of life. Grit, tenacity, determination, leadership skills, commitment and team-working are all transferrable skills, and it is so important to recognise that. If we have a challenge, it is the fact that the cohort of people who are familiar with what the armed forces have to offer is getting smaller, because the armed forces do not have the same direct exposure. Our challenge is to ensure that every HR director, personnel officer and person charged with recruitment in a business is aware of what our brilliant armed forces can offer.

It is worth spelling out the wider aspects of what our armed forces do, because we are here to give consent to their continued existence.

Sir Oliver Heald: My right hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way. Does he agree that the real significance of the order is that it continues the system of command and of justice that applies through command in the armed forces? It is therefore crucial that we renew for another year, so that the system of command and discipline can continue.

Mr Ellwood: I do agree, and that goes to the heart of what we are debating. It is important that the disciplinary aspects of the armed forces continue; because they change, we are obliged to come back to the House and re-confirm them.

It is important to recognise that our armed forces do much more than what we see day to day in the newspapers. As Operation Telic and Operation Herrick are removed from the frontlines, and we see less about this on the front pages and hear less and less about these issues, we should recognise what amazing work our armed forces do in keeping UK citizens safe in this country and, indeed, abroad. We play a leading role in NATO, providing collective assurance and deterrence in the posture that we build. Along with our international partners, we are also conducting and targeting counter-terrorism activity.

We support multinational peacekeeping operations and build stability overseas, which ensures the freedom of navigation and the UK’s access to global resources. We safeguard strategic choke points and protect essential lines of communication, not least across our oceans. We also keep the skies safe—not just in the UK, but in Europe and beyond. Newer to the portfolio, we are ensuring we monitor movements in outer space. The House will be aware of what we do to tackle piracy on the seas and high seas, and to reduce poaching in Africa—we have done much to tackle the illegal wildlife trade in Africa—and we of course assist in delivering overseas humanitarian aid relief during emergencies and disasters.

All that involves a wide variety of skillsets, which our armed forces are expected to understand and execute. It is important that we recognise that these are not things we see every day in the newspapers, but they are things that this House expects them to do when a crisis happens. It is to them that we turn when diplomacy fails and when this country faces challenges.
Leo Docherty: My right hon. Friend is being extremely generous with his time. In describing the expansive nature of our military presence globally, does he agree with me that the new naval facility in Bahrain, and the activities and patrolling carried out by the Royal Navy there, are an important demonstration that we are committed to the security of the Gulf and to providing reassurance about the free passage of trade around the peninsula?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend cites an acute example of exactly what we are doing. HMS Jufair is a fantastic illustration of our having permanent exposure, with a permanent facility, and of our working not just with the Bahrainis, but with others in the middle east. We set standards and values and share tactics and operational capabilities, and we improve governance, the rule of law and so forth in doing so. I pay tribute to those who have made that facility work. If memory serves, I actually visited the facility with my hon. Friend in the recent past.

Leo Docherty: I declare an interest in that we both visited that facility, with several other parliamentary colleagues, on a very useful visit last year.

Mr Ellwood: We have touched on the long-established reputation of our armed forces in defending not just our shores, but our values. At this juncture, I would comment on how the world is changing rapidly. It is getting more dangerous and it is getting more complex. The threats are more diverse than ever before. I would argue that if the instability we are seeing is unchecked, it will become the norm. These are threats not just from a man-made perspective—extremism and resurgent nations, as well as cyber-security—but from climate change. We are reaching or testing the limits of what our fragile planet can actually do, and if we do not act soon, there will be huge consequences with migration, the movement of people and so forth, as well as the stockpiling of food and a threat even to our ability to grow the crops we actually need.

The world is changing fast and it requires a collective effort if we are to meet some of these challenges. Britain has been a nation that again and again steps forward to lead the way—not always to do the heavy lifting, but certainly to show leadership. I certainly believe that, as I say, this is an important juncture at which to regroup and look at the rules—established mostly through Bretton Woods, after the second world war—that are now out of date. They need to be reviewed to recognise the new importance of the fact that we are now threatened with greater human empowerment through technology.

I was talking about the fact that the tried and tested diplomatic instruments and conventions that we have relied on are no longer fit for purpose and about the importance of the fact that we are now threatened with cyber-warfare and a cyber-security attack breaks.

This is more dangerous because, unlike with nuclear weapons, it is not just states that use such attacks—any individual can. That shows the requirements and the pressures of what our armed forces are up against in today’s changing world, with accelerating technological advancement, the increasing environment of stress that I mentioned and, of course, the change in population growths and habitats.

Leo Docherty: My right hon. Friend is painting an interesting picture of our defence requirement. When it comes to cyber-security, both in terms of defence and offence, is he confident and reassured that cyber-capability will be front and centre in the modernising defence programme as it moves from adoption to reality?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend makes an important point. As we discuss upgrading and recommitting the existence of our armed forces, it has traditionally been around those conventional capabilities of Army, Air Force and Navy, and now it must expand to this fourth dimension, which includes cyber and space. These are the volatile and vulnerable areas that we absolutely need to invest more in, and I am pleased to say that that is exactly what is happening.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): My right hon. Friend is articulating a rather alarming picture of the changing nature of the challenges. He has mentioned the resources required. Does he agree that although we are committed to paying 2% of our GDP on defence to make sure that these international threats are adequately attacked, other countries also need to make similar commitments?
Mr Ellwood: I am on the record as saying that we need to spend more than 2%, as that is a very arbitrary target. Ultimately, the important thing is whether people turn up for the fight as well. If we take Operation Ellamy, which was in Libya, as an example, many NATO countries did not bother turning up even though they were NATO signatories. I appreciate the 2% and, yes, we want countries to pay, but ultimately they need to be ready to fight as well.

Toby Perkins: I am very grateful to the Minister for allowing me to intervene again. I just want to take him back to the comments he was making a moment ago about cyber-warfare and hybrid warfare. Does he consider cyber-warfare to be warfare? If so, who are we at war with?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman makes my point for me. There are no accepted rules, and post Brexit Britain and the rest of world collectively need to recognise that. From a NATO perspective, article 5 does not apply. If there are no rules, how can we punish anybody? How can we identify who is responsible for what? This is a whole world that we need to address very soon indeed.

That point allows me to move on to a point about having an honest conversation with the public—this touches on the 2% issue. The general public have a huge admiration for our armed forces, who are the most professional in the world. However, I would also say that there is a collective naivety about what we can actually do. We are facing some very real threats that we need to wake up to.

I do not mean to digress too much, but because this place made so much noise about potholes, which was because local government made so much noise about potholes, the Chancellor then provided the money to address the problem of potholes. We are not making enough noise about our capabilities and where we are versus the threats we actually face.

Our main battle tank is 20 years old. It has not been replaced in that period. Meanwhile, France and Russia have upgraded their tanks two or three times over that period. We have some fantastic kit coming on board, but there are other areas where we need investment. We need to tell the public that if they want Britain to be able to step forward when it is required, we need to pay for that. That is the conversation we need to have, as well as talking about the threats we have touched on and have articulated quite adequately today. As I say, ever fewer nations are willing to step forward.

Toby Perkins: Mr Ellwood: I will try to make some progress if I may, after this last intervention.

Mr Ellwood: I am very grateful to the Minister for allowing me to intervene again. I just want to take him back to the comments he was making a moment ago about cyber-warfare and hybrid warfare. Does he consider cyber-warfare to be warfare? If so, who are we at war with?

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Toby Perkins: Mr Ellwood: I will not give way. I need to make progress because I am getting that look from Madam Deputy Speaker—other hon. Members want to participate as well.

It is important to recognise where we are and to have a more real debate with the public. There is a Russian proverb that says that it is better to be slapped in the face by the truth than kissed with a lie. Without being too provocative, I believe that we are trying to sell a capability of the armed forces, which we are very, very proud of, but that the nation is in denial about the real threats appearing over the horizon. It is our duty as the Executive, as the Government, and as parliamentarians to express that to a nation that, if it fully understood the picture, would be more willing to say, “Yes, let’s spend more money.” I hope that message will come through in the spending review.

I turn to the Armed Forces Act (Continuation) Order 2019. We seek the consent of the House through the annual consideration of the legislation governing the armed forces: the Armed Forces Act 2006. The draft order we are considering this afternoon is to continue in force the 2006 Act for a further year, until 11 May 2020. This reflects the constitutional requirement under the Bill of Rights that a standing Army, and by extension now the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force, may not be maintained without the consent of Parliament.

I am sure the House will be familiar with the fact that the legislation that provides for the armed forces to exist as disciplined bodies is renewed by Parliament every single year. That is what we are doing here today. The requirement for annual renewal can be traced back to the Bill of Rights 1688. Time prohibits me, Madam Deputy Speaker, from going into detail on that, but I am happy to write to hon. Members if they would like further information on that front.

Every five years, renewal is by an Act of Parliament. The most recent was in 2016 and the next will be in 2021. Between each five-yearly Act, annual renewal is by Order in Council. The draft order that we are considering today is such an order. The Armed Forces Act 2016 provides for the continuation in force of the Armed Forces Act 2006 until the end of 11 May 2017 and for further renewal thereafter by Order in Council for up to a year at a time, but not beyond 2021. If the Armed Forces Act 2006 is not renewed by this Order in Council before the end of 11 May 2019, it will automatically expire. If the 2006 Act expires, the legislation that governs the armed forces and the provisions necessary for their maintenance as disciplined bodies will cease to exist. Discipline is essential. It maintains the order necessary for the armed forces to accomplish their mission to serve our country, whether at home or abroad.

The Act contains nearly all the provisions for the existence of a system of command, discipline and justice for the armed forces. It creates offences and provides for the investigation of alleged offences, the arrest, the holding in custody and the charging of individuals accused of committing an offence, and for them to be dealt with summarily by their commanding officer or tried in a court martial. Offences under the 2006 Act include any criminal offence under the law of England and Wales and those that are peculiar to service, such as misconduct towards a superior officer and disobedience to lawful commands. We should not forget that the Act applies to members of the armed forces at all times, wherever they are serving in the world.

If the Act were to expire, the duty of members of the armed forces to obey lawful commands, and the powers and procedures under which this duty is enforced, would no longer have effect. Commanding officers and the court martial would have no powers of punishment for failure to obey a lawful command or other disciplinary or criminal misconduct. Members of the armed forces would still owe allegiance to Her Majesty, but Parliament
would have removed the power of enforcement. Service personnel do not have contracts of employment and so have no duties as employees. Their obligation is essentially a duty to obey lawful commands. The Act also provides for other important matters for the armed forces, such as their enlistment, pay and redress of complaints.

In conclusion, the continuation of the 2006 Act is essential for the maintenance of discipline. Discipline, in every sense, is fundamental to the existence of our armed forces and indeed, to their successes, whether at home in supporting emergency services and local communities and protecting our fishing fleet and our shores; playing their role in counter-terrorism or in combating people and drug smuggling; distributing vital humanitarian aid; saving endangered species; or defeating Daesh in Iraq and Syria.

We owe the brave men and women of our armed forces a sound legal basis for them to continue to afford us their vital protection. I hope that hon. Members will support the draft continuation order. I hope that hon. Members will support the draft continuation order.

5.41 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Before I begin, I echo Mr Speaker’s words from earlier this afternoon, and the very fitting tribute paid by my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), in respect of Paul Flynn, who served Newport West with absolute distinction and tremendous wit. He was also a great friend to many of us and we shall miss him sorely.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Madam Deputy Speaker. Our armed forces represent this country across the world, fighting to liberate civilians from the scourge of Daesh; providing vital training to other nations; serving on peacekeeping missions; and stepping in to provide humanitarian relief in the wake of hurricanes and other disasters. Most importantly, of course, they stand ready to defend this country day and night. Across the House, we are all immensely proud of our personnel and Labour Members will be supporting the order this afternoon. However, I want to press the Minister in greater detail on a number of issues that we touched on at Defence questions this afternoon concerning our armed forces.

I will deal first with forces numbers and the alarming downward trend across each of the services. When Labour left office in 2010, we had an Army of 102,000 regulars, an RAF of 40,000 and a Royal Navy of 35,000. Now they are all substantially smaller. The Army and RAF have been cut by 25% each and the Navy is down by nearly 20%. The trajectory is most worrying of all: every single service has fallen in every year since the Conservatives came into office. The latest figures are due to be published on Thursday and I sincerely hope that they will buck the trend, because at a time when this country faces growing security challenges, it is simply not acceptable for the Government to be failing to deliver its manifesto pledge to “maintain the overall size of the armed forces” year after year.

At Defence questions earlier this afternoon, I asked the Minister for the Armed Forces to confirm that the Government are still committed to a Regular Army of 82,000. While I would not like to suggest that the Minister did not understand that we were talking about the number of full-time personnel, he did seem to get slightly confused and started talking about reservists, so I wonder whether his more courteous colleague, the Under-Secretary, can confirm that the target of 82,000 does still stand.

While I welcome any upturn in interest that recent adverts have stimulated, Members across the House have repeatedly raised the failings of Capita and its botched recruitment contract. It is simply not doing its job of recruiting enough personnel to the Army. I am sure I am not the only Member who has had complaints from constituents because of lengthy delays. I am talking about young people who actively want to join the Army and serve their country but whose enthusiasm is being undermined by Capita’s incompetence.

We have said very clearly that Labour would terminate this contract, and I am glad that the message may finally be getting through. The Secretary of State said recently:

“If it becomes apparent in the next financial year that Capita are continuing to fail in what they do, we are going to have to look at different options in terms of the contract.”

That is welcome, but it does seem to be yet another example of kicking the can down the road in terms of holding Capita to account. It is over a year since the same Secretary of State said he would give Capita a red card if it did not perform. Can the Minister set out what action the Government will take right now to get to grips with the problems?

This is not just an issue of recruitment; it also comes down to retention. The steady decline in service morale is a significant worry. The proportion of Army personnel reporting high morale in 2010 was 58% for both officers and those of other ranks, but that fell to 46% for officers and a mere 36% for other ranks in 2018. As well as it being wrong in principle for personnel to feel this way, we simply cannot afford to have servicemen and women choosing to leave the forces because of their view of service life. What plan does the Minister have to deal with this?

Satisfaction with pay remains at the lowest levels ever recorded, and given the seven years of below-inflation rises, that is hardly surprising. We all welcome the long overdue rise that personnel have received in the current financial year, but that was delayed and paid retrospectively. Will the Minister set out where we are with this year’s settlement?

The Opposition have previously expressed our concern about the future accommodation model and the possibility that it may be used to push more personnel and their families into the private rented sector, with all the uncertainty and added cost associated with that. New research from the Army Families Federation highlights a number of flaws in the information provided on FAM. Forty-eight per cent. of respondents said they had received no information at all about FAM and only 2% said they had received a great deal. Where people had received information, most of it had come from the federation itself, as opposed to the MOD or the chain of command. Uncertainty around FAM was also a feature of the federation’s comments on the covenant report late last year. Will the Minister commit to doing much more to make personnel and families aware of the changes?
Finally, in January, we were all deeply concerned by the report of the Defence Safety Authority that identified serious concerns. Will the Minister update the House on the progress made in implementing all the recommendations in that report?

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. This is a fairly short debate—it needs to finish at 6.38 pm—and the Minister will want to make a short winding-up speech. If colleagues stick to about six minutes, we should get everyone in.

5.48 pm

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): This statutory instrument is vital and not Brexit-related. It is an annual requirement that Parliament restate its approval for the raising of our standing Army, Navy and Air Force in the modern world. Without it, we could not defend our citizens from enemies or send our armed forces to assist our allies around the globe.

We have many dedicated and highly skilled armed forces personnel. Our Royal Marines are working with allies to train in the toughest conditions on the planet hundreds of miles north of the Arctic circle, as our Secretary of State for Defence discovered for himself this weekend—we are all grateful that he did not dive plunging into the frozen ice. As the House knows, I have visited twice to learn about the survival training that our young commandos undergo in order to take on some of the most challenging military tests. We are also training US marines up here and working closely with Dutch forces to build this uniquely challenging skillset. Furthermore, with the approval of this statutory instrument, we hope this year to see the development of the littoral strike group to allow the Royal Marines to go back to sea—back to their roots.

As the defence lead on the Public Accounts Committee, I hope to see the MOD making efficient and value-for-money purchasing decisions for the ships they will be using. Getting the right kit—not necessarily gold-plated—is so important if we are to offer our exceptional Royal Marines the skills that will enable them to cross the globe to where they are needed, whether for military or humanitarian intervention.

As part of our world-class and worldwide-respected Royal Navy, our Royal Marines will also be an element of the carrier strike group which we hope will develop in the coming year. The new carriers, HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Prince of Wales, are world-leading national assets. I look forward to hearing Ministers set out more fully the Government’s strategy for our aircraft carriers. For all the young sailors who are already serving on HMS Queen Elizabeth, it is an exciting and challenging posting, and many will look forward to serving on her in the years ahead. The last commanding officer of HMS Prince of Wales has probably not been born yet, so we will need many more before that last posting is required.

Our Royal Navy reaches across the globe to deter enemies, above and below the oceans, and to keep our sea routes safe for civilian trading traffic. Below the surface, quietly, members of our submarine service are out and about 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. For 50 years this April they have provided a continuous at-sea deterrent to protect our nation, support our allies and ensure that enemies are deterred from taking us on. That is a terribly important part of military procedure, because the nuclear threat is so great. It is, in my view, the greatest weapon of peace that man has ever invented, because it deters—forever, we hope—those who would start world wars.

Those submariners are often forgotten, because they are not seen and we do not generally talk about them, although I do occasionally. We forget, so often, the important and continuous work that they do. While they are under the oceans and the Navy is on the oceans, our own islands are kept safe 24/7, thanks in great part to the quiet but critical work that is done at RAF Boulmer in my constituency. The air defence that is provided by the aerospace surveillance and control system force commander—I had to read that out, because I would never get it right otherwise—is crucial work. It takes place, unseen, in a bunker deep below ground, with remote radar heads across our far northern borders watching the skies.

From RAF Benbecula in the Outer Hebrides—which I was privileged to visit a couple of years ago—to RAF Brizelee Wood, which is in my constituency, to RAF Buchan and the new RAF Saxa Vord on Unst, the most northern of the Shetland Islands, RAF personnel who live in my constituency watch and manage all the data provided by the radar heads, watching for enemy aircraft and so much else. I had the privilege of visiting the bunker recently, and was taught how to identify space junk, the international space station—which comes round twice a day—and much else besides. Extraordinary technicians have learnt to identify those who enter our airspace illegally, and, if necessary, are able to call RAF pilots to challenge them. All that happens quietly underground at RAF Boulmer.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Space junk intrigues me. Does the hon. Lady think that a piece of nut—that big—can be identified from her constituency?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I was not given that much training, but I think it is safe to say that one of the most extraordinary things that was explained to me is that there is now so much space junk—objects that have broken up over the years—that it is incredibly difficult to find a clear route in order to launch any new satellite into space. The ability of our RAF personnel to understand what is there, and to recognise it as it comes round on the radar screens again and again, means that they are vital components, understanding and supporting the civilians who want to work in space and the military who continue to view it as one of the new potential areas of combat. I am enormously proud to represent that team of exceptional RAF personnel, and also to represent their families.

I set up the all-party parliamentary group on the armed forces covenant when I was first elected, because I was shocked by some of the poor housing in which RAF families have to live. I was confused by the fact that the Government had not done more to act on the multiplicity of evidence that clearly exists to show that family comfort is critical to our retention of the highly trained personnel, in whom we have invested so heavily, to serve their country for as long as they want to do so. When the families are unhappy and feel that they cannot cope with the challenges that military life brings, we
I will be brief, because I know that others want to speak. The Minister said that members of the armed forces were not employees. I think that, in the 21st century, for members of the armed forces to be able to call themselves employees and to enter into negotiations with their employer, that is what my hon. Friends, at least, believe, and indeed, during Defence questions, not only my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West but a Labour Member called for it. It would not have the ability to strike—no one would call for that—but it should be possible, in the 21st century, for members of the armed forces to be able to call themselves employees and to enter into negotiations with their employer. That is possible in many of our NATO allied armed forces systems. It is disappointing that that is not mentioned in the statutory instrument—but of course it would not be, because it is an element that has to be gone through every couple of years—but I hope that the Minister and some of his team, and perhaps Labour Members as well, will be in the Chamber on 8 March, when I will present a private Member’s Bill on the establishment of a representative body, thus making a commitment to my party’s manifesto.

I think it important that we recognise the service given by members of the armed forces. As was pointed out by both the Minister and the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), we should recognise that service not only in the context of military capability, but in the context of the assistance that they provide through peacekeeping. I often reminded myself of these words:

“Nothing is lost by peace; everything may be lost by war.”

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and not to be last, which is my usual position in the batting order. I will keep my remarks reasonably brief—I say particularly to those who have had the joy of sitting through my speeches on Fridays—to ensure that the two Members who are waiting get an opportunity to speak in this debate as well.

This order is welcome. It is a practical part of ensuring our armed forces continue and that their structure, law and governance, particularly the court martial system, continue. It is also symbolic, as it is a reminder that the armed forces serve our country—our nation and our democracy. This is not a country where the military can exert power over the institution of the state; it is one where they defend the nation and the democracy that lies at the heart of this nation. Indeed, many people over the past couple of hundred years have sacrificed their lives in doing so, showing the truth of the expression that freedom is not free. Too many times in our history, our military and armed forces have had to be called upon to make those sacrifices.

We must address how we can ensure those in the military today feel that they wish to be doing their job and to give that service. The Minister rightly said people do not just join the military for the salary package or because they think there might be an opportunity for some foreign travel; they join because they fundamentally have a calling to want to serve this nation. That is the case of why people volunteer to serve in the military. Indeed, it is a fact that many volunteer; there has not been conscription in this country for decades. At least two generations of men have not been conscripted into
our forces, yet so many do still want to join, but it is important that we do not just rely on their spirit of service always coming first.

That is particularly relevant to the issue of accommodation. The escalating cost of housing over recent years means we have to be practical about the financial and other packages we offer and also about the lifestyle generally that is offered. Those in Torbay who have served in the military often talk about what life was like when they were commissioned; they would go on tours and their wives—as they would have been at that time—were pretty much expected to follow them. At that time, it was highly unlikely that their wives would have careers of their own, but that is clearly no longer the case, and indeed many spouses will be serving officers themselves with an equal commitment to our nation, given the welcome move to open up all roles in our military to both sexes. It is therefore important that those packages are considered.

The Minister touched on looking at the estate. I grew up in Plymouth, seeing the Royal Citadel there. Ironically, it had more guns facing over the town than the sound. That was because of history: it was built by Charles II and he wanted to remind Plymothians what might happen if they rebelled against him as they had rebelled against his father, who had fled out for Parliament and thereby denying a crucial port to the royalist forces. It is right that 300 years later we move on to having a more modern military estate. Some of my family grew up in Stonehouse and have memories of the Stonehouse barracks. They might be worthy of history, but 300-year-old barracks with dormitory accommodation are not the sort of place where the most elite soldiers we train should be housed in the 21st century.

We must not, however, turn the military into just another form of employment. While I agree with much of what was said by the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), I do not think going down the path of this becoming like any other job is what the vast majority of the military would like to see; nor would it be a sensible decision for our nation. Being in the military is a unique role: it brings with it obligations, but going down the path suggested would be neither useful nor appropriate. Our system has served our forces, yet so many do still want to join, but it is important that we do not just rely on their spirit of service always coming first.

Kevin Foster: No one should feel afraid to contact their Member of Parliament in any scenario. At the end of the day, we are here to act as our constituents’ advocates and champions, and ultimately, if necessary, to do so confidentially. I am always clear that my surgeries are open.

Leo Docherty: I frequently see serving soldiers in Aldershot, the home of the British Army, some of whom were previously in my own command when I was back in the Scots Guards. I am always there to help them, and any serving member always knows that if they have any kind of personal problem, they can go and see their platoon commander.

Kevin Foster: It is great to hear of the service my hon. Friend is still offering to his constituents where he was once their commander but is now offering that as their Member of Parliament. He brings vital experience to this Chamber from his own military experience, representing the home of the British Army.

I have been going on for seven minutes now and am conscious that other Members are waiting to speak. This motion needs to be passed, and I do not think it will attract any particular opposition given that would be rather bizarre, even though there might be one or two fringe views in this Chamber about abolishing our military, which we sometimes hear. This motion has my full support, and it is vital that it passes today.

6.6 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I rise to support the motion, as my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) did. While this is a motion that many might have expected was limited in scope and was likely to be passed without much comment, the Minister, of whom I am a big admirer in the job he does, has broadened its scope and other Members have taken him up on the challenge he posed. He made a remarkable speech; I cannot think of many times where a Minister has stood at the Dispatch Box and been so implicitly critical of the Government they speak on behalf of. I entirely support his call for greater investment in our armed forces and will expand on some of the arguments he made about our investment in equipment.

Mr Ellwood: I would not want the hon. Gentleman to mislead the House and say I was somehow not supportive of the Government. I am absolutely, of course, supportive of the Government—a loyal Minister. I am simply encouraging the advancement of policy; I think that is how I would delicately put it.

Toby Perkins: People will read the right hon. Gentleman’s speech and make up their own minds on whether he was urging the Government to take action in a different direction, but if he wants the advancement of policy, he is in exactly the right place to do that as a Defence Minister. He was right to say that we absolutely recognise the professionalism of those who serve and to point to the admiration he has—and I have, and Members right across the House have—for people who dedicate their lives to our armed forces, but we must
also ask ourselves some serious questions about the way in which we support them, and I will come to those in a moment.

If I was to have an area of disagreement with the Minister, it would be on his challenge to the public about the fact that we need to have an honest conversation with them. It does not seem to me that it is the public who are preventing the Government from spending more on our armed forces or meeting greater than the 2% spending commitment. We had a debate here about having greater spending on our armed forces and there was widespread agreement across the House that that should happen. I have never had a member of the public say to me in my surgeries or when I am out door knocking on a Saturday that they disagree with greater spending on the armed forces. I do not think that we need to convince the public of the need to spend more; in fact, it is the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Prime Minister who need to be persuaded to spend more money on our armed forces.

The Minister spoke about his commitment to the armed forces community and his disappointment that there was such low morale on pay and pensions. He introduced accommodation as another real bone of contention, and I support him entirely on tackling those issues. He and the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) both said that we should not regard a job in the armed forces as being similar to any other job, and I agree with them. Of course there is a level of commitment required from members of the armed forces that is not present in other jobs, but that does not let the Government off the hook when it comes to pay and pensions and to treating people who serve with the respect that they have the right to expect. When it comes to saying to the loved ones of members of the armed forces that we value their support, pay and pensions and accommodation are among the ways in which we can show that we recognise their commitment. I absolutely recognise that working in the armed forces is not the same as any other job, but that does not let the Government off the hook when it comes to ensuring that the pay for members of our armed forces keeps pace with inflation and that they are no worse off at the end of the year than they were at the start of it. That is a very basic commitment.

Another very basic commitment is that we make the necessary investment in equipment, in training, in deployments and in the commitment that we expect of members of the armed forces. We need to pose some serious questions to the Government about those things as well. The Minister said that we had the most professional armed forces in the world, but it is important that we should not be complacent. As he mentioned, the battle tank is 20 years old. As a member of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, I have had the privilege of speaking to members of the armed forces, and they absolutely want me to hold the Government to account over investment in equipment. They share many of the reservations that he has. They also share reservations about the level of experience of some of the people in our armed forces. Huge numbers are leaving, many of whom had been through engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq and were absolutely match fit. The people who are now in those roles, while well trained, are much less experienced than the people who would have been in those arenas eight or nine years ago. I absolutely express our admiration for the people in our armed forces, but we must never be complacent about what we actually have on the ground.

I had the pleasure of going over to Kenya as part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme to visit the British Army training unit Kenya—BATUK—but I know that many training courses have been cancelled over the past year or so and that that facility is being used a lot less than it was previously. That investment in the training of members of our armed forces to ensure that they are used to the different theatres they might face is incredibly important.

My hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) mentioned the Tory manifesto pledge for the Army to be 82,000 strong. Will the Minister give us absolute clarity on whether the Government still consider themselves bound to that commitment, or whether, as it was not featured so explicitly in the 2017 manifesto, it is now more of an aspiration than a commitment? Either way, it is a commitment that is not being met. I entirely support the motion, but I also share many of the concerns that have been raised today. I absolutely pledge my support to the Minister in his campaign to persuade the Treasury to give our armed forces the support that they need and deserve.

6.14 pm

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): I am grateful for this opportunity to speak in the debate today. I am pleased that the Minister chose to use this opportunity to lay out the challenge of transformation that our national defence faces in this era. I have been pleased to see the outline that the Ministry of Defence has given in this in the modernising defence programme, following the doctrine of the need to mobilise, to modernise and to transform. I think we are reassured that this document—the modernising defence programme—is a clear statement of intent that takes us forward to the comprehensive spending review and really goes into battle for a strong national defence. I for one am right behind it, but the proof will be in the pudding when it comes to how much money is secured in the comprehensive spending review. If we want what the document describes as the Joint Force 2025—a maritime task group, a deployable land division with three brigades including a strike brigade, a properly resourced combat air group and a special forces task group—we will have to pay for it. We will also have to pay for the equipment programme, which involves some excellent new platforms but also has some significant financial holes. As I have said, the proof will be in the pudding.

As well as needing to pay for all this, there are other things that we will need to do if we are to make the vision in this document a reality. We must ensure value for money, and that is about ensuring that we use big data to make the management of our military much more efficient, especially in areas such as fleet management and the management of large numbers of people. We have to use big data in order to become more efficient, and we need to reform the way in which we do defence procurement. We also need to win the data war. We have heard from the Minister about the cyber threats that we face, and we need to up our game in that regard. We need to acknowledge that the world is connected in
a way that it has never been connected before. That is not just a matter of defence; it is also a matter of offensive cyber.

We also need to adopt a global posture. The global deployments in Bahrain, in other middle eastern countries and around the world are a force multiplier, and I am proud that soldiers from my constituency are involved. The Scots Guards are deployed in Cyprus, the Grenadier Guards are in Iraq and Afghanistan, and 4 Rifles—a specialised infantry battalion that is absolutely match fit and purpose built for engagements that involve the training of foreign troops—are deployed right around the world. They are a terrific force multiplier, and that is something we should be proud of.

Alarmingly, the document does not mention our defence response to China. That is a central challenge that we will have to grapple with in this new era of transformation. I invite the Minister to mention that in his closing remarks. Whether we like it or not—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Hopefully not, because it is not in the debate. I have allowed the hon. Gentleman to carry on, but he must not drag the Minister into something that is not covered in the debate.

Leo Docherty: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Moving on swiftly—we will also bring our allies with us. We are committed to NATO, but we need to demonstrate that commitment by exercising at scale. Perhaps we could do a “brigade plus” exercise in Poland to show resolve against threats on our eastern flank. We need to nurture sovereign industries, such as the ones in my constituency, which in turn nurture incredible defence innovation. We also need to get the legal framework right for foreign deployments. If we are to have a military that deploys with confidence to inflict violence on our behalf, soldiers need to be able to do that without fear of being pursued through the courts on their return.

I want to turn to the central argument in all of this. It is the argument, which we need to win, about hard power. The Minister mentioned this, and it is the central argument that we will be making as we move forward to the comprehensive spending review. We have been somewhat bruised by the past 18 years of the war on terror, which has informed this generation’s understanding of conflicts abroad, and it is easy to think that the public have a limited appetite for foreign intervention or foreign deployments. However, I actually believe that the reverse is true.

The British military conducted itself in Iraq and Afghanistan with such remarkable professionalism and courage that, whatever one thinks about the politics, there is wholehearted support among the British public and an acknowledgement that our armed forces can and will do a remarkable job on our behalf when deployed. There is absolutely no hesitation at all among the British public when it comes to supporting increased defence expenditure, as the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) noted. That argument is wrong, we need to debunk that myth, and we need a new commitment to a fully funded national defence in the comprehensive spending review. I look forward to making that argument in a clear, resolute and confident manner for the sake of a strong national defence in this great era of transformation.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): The Minister made the point that this renewal—this continuation statutory instrument—is not normally discussed on the Floor of the House, but being able to do so is a great opportunity. The SI goes to the heart of the existence of our armed forces, because the British armed forces quite simply cease to exist without it. The Bill of Rights 1689 contains an assertion that the Army, and by extension the RAF and Navy, cannot exist without the explicit consent of Parliament. Provisions within this SI also enable the chain of command to deliver good governance within the armed forces themselves.

I do not intend to rehearse the arguments that may come about during the proceedings on the Armed Forces Representative Body Bill. It is an interesting idea that has been taken up by other armed forces around the world, but I think that the responsibility and the nature of the relationship between the chain of command in the British armed forces and the soldiers, sailors and airmen and women that they command is dependent on a fundamentally different relationship, which I think a representative body would be in danger of undermining.

Carol Monaghan: I ask the hon. Gentleman to look at how representative bodies work in other NATO countries.

James Cleverly: I have, and I do not like it.

Also inherent in this SI are provisions for enlistment, pay and the redress of complaints, and all those things at heart are J1 considerations, so I intend to restrict my short speech to the people carrying out the J1 function—the men and women who serve in our armed forces—and our responsibility and, as the Minister mentioned during his opening speech, our offer to them.

The armed forces currently face a challenge with regard to recruitment and retention. Ironically, it is a challenge that has been brought about through good news. The British economy currently has record low levels of unemployment, including record low levels of youth unemployment. It is the sad truth that it is a lot easier to recruit into the armed forces when there are few jobs available in the civilian world. Therefore, because actually unemployment is at a record low, the talented young men and women that we seek to recruit into our armed forces have other credible options.

The shadow Minister mentioned that the delay in the processing of recruitment applications through Capita has had a detrimental effect on our ability to recruit the brightest and best young people whom we need and want in our armed forces. People who are credible—people who have other employment options—are exactly the people we want to recruit and exactly the people who will be snapped up by civilian employers, who are currently competing with our armed forces to recruit them. We have a duty to improve and speed up the recruitment process—not just a duty, but a self-interest.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Does my hon. Friend agree that we must ensure that we change part of the medical assessment program for recruitment? Those who are diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder—often Asperger’s—should not automatically be disbarred from applying. We are looking to select young men and women who have that sort of skillset—that particular
unique kind of mind—and we need to find a way to ensure that the system is changed so that those people make it through the system.

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend makes an important point—one that I will touch upon briefly later in my speech—about the changing nature of conflict and the skills mix that we require from young people coming into the armed forces. We need to ensure that we are able to be a meaningful and relevant set of armed forces in the here and now, rather than think about the conflicts that we have had in the past.

Toby Perkins: I agree entirely with what the hon. Gentleman is saying about recruitment, but that is only one side of the picture. The other side is the huge number of people who have left the armed forces in the past few years, and people left because they were kind of encouraged to do so by the Government, who made it absolutely clear that they were looking to reduce the size of the British Army. This is not just about recruitment, but about the skills we have lost.

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the loss of skills, and that is particularly true of what may be thought of as legacy skills. We have been very focused on two main conflicts over the past decade or so—Operation Telic and Operation Herrick—but it is important that we are able to be active in a whole range of future potential scenarios or conflicts. This is not necessarily true of the old cold warriors, but we do not want to lose the skills of people who were trained in a more diverse range of potential conflicts. We must ensure that they are able to pass on that knowledge and experience to new generations.

I turn to recruitment. The British Army advert that was rather lazily described as the “snowflake” advert was greeted with a degree of derision. In my experience, that was unfair, and this goes to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan). There was a time in the not too distant past—about a century ago—when there were passionate advocates for the retention of the horse as the main method of conducting conflict, and they fought hard against the mechanisation of the British Army. We have a habit—this has also happened in militaries around the world and throughout history—of fighting the last war, rather than gearing ourselves up to fight the next war.

Bob Stewart: The definition of a snowflake—I had to look this up—is apparently someone who whinges a lot. I did 28 years in the Army, and I have never known a soldier who did not whinge, so the snowflakes outside will be joining the snowflakes inside the armed forces.

James Cleverly: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for that intervention. I was once told by my commanding officer that I did not need to worry about much, but if my soldiers stopped moaning, I needed to start worrying. However, the point about the recruitment campaign is that it highlighted the need not only for people who are physically robust and self-reliant, but for people who have empathy and are able to develop and deploy soft skills. When the toughest soldiers in the British Army, the Special Air Service, were deployed during the Malaya insurgency, they really understood the requirement for hearts and minds. Winning conflicts through kinetic means—through bombs and bullets, to pick two words at random—is one way to do it, but doing it through hearts and minds really matters.

I am getting those looks again, so I will draw my remarks to a conclusion shortly. We must make sure that the skills of the young people we recruit and retain in the armed forces match the threats and risks presented not just in the here and now but in the timeframe of their service. The people we are recruiting in the here and now have to be ready, able and capable of matching the threats that could present themselves in 10, 15 and 20 years’ time. That means people with adaptability as a core skill and who have the intellectual flexibility to take on new skills. Lifelong learning should not just be available to people in the civilian world; it should be available to people in the armed forces, too.

I am particularly proud of two things that my party has introduced in government. The first is flexible working throughout the armed forces. It would be unacceptable if talented, well-trained, experienced soldiers, sailors and airwomen were prevented from fully reaching their potential because they have taken maternity leave. Soldiers, sailors and airmen who also wish to make good on their family commitments should also have the opportunity to take periods out of frontline service so that they can discharge their familial duties as well as their military duties and not feel that their promotion will be held back because of it. We do not have the luxury of seeing such talented people as disposable items, and we have to make sure they are valued throughout their time of service.

Finally, allied to that is that all roles in the military are now available to any woman who is good enough to discharge them. Quality should be the only metric against which selection is made. The fact that we have now done that and that our armed forces are now gender blind and focused purely on quality is a step in the right direction.

6.32 pm

Mr Ellwood: This has been a far more thorough and wide-ranging debate than I imagined it would be, and I welcome that. I hope that in future years, when we come to update the House on the continuation of the armed forces, we can have the debate in the main Chamber.

I hear what the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) says about recruitment and Capita—she raised the point in Defence questions, too. The Minister for the Armed Forces is better able to respond, so I will ask him to write to her with more details. The future accommodation model is about choice, and I have touched on that.

The hon. Lady also mentioned the Defence Safety Authority and its report, which I take very seriously. I hear what the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) says about recruitment and Capita—she raised the point in Defence questions, too. The Minister for the Armed Forces is better able to respond, so I will ask him to write to her with more details. The future accommodation model is about choice, and I have touched on that.

The hon. Lady also mentioned the Defence Safety Authority and its report, which I take very seriously. I stress to the House that there have been fewer fire issues than in previous years, but the issue is about management, and every effort is being made to make sure we honour the report’s recommendations. Again, I will write to her with more details on how that will be achieved.

My good and hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) made a wide-ranging speech. She underlined the importance of the bond between US marines and the Royal Marines and their work to create a formidable relationship, which has
developed over the years. She also praised the Secretary of State for jumping into the Norwegian sea—he is doing a fantastic job. She also touched on the Kessler effect, and a spiral of junk satellites bumping into each other is a huge concern. It would take us back to the 1950s, and we are working on it.

Bob Stewart: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Ellwood: I am afraid that I do not have time to take interventions.

The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) mentioned peacekeeping, and anyone in uniform will recognise its importance. It is not so much about defeating the enemy as enabling the local population, and nowhere is that more pertinent right now than in Iraq and Syria. Murders are happening every day, and ISIL is still active. ISIL is not in our headlines, but that is not to say it has dispersed. We need to make sure that we help with stabilisation, peacekeeping and rebuilding those nations in whatever way we can, obviously with their agreement.

The hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) spoke about being honest in our conversation with the public. I make it clear that France is about to overtake us in defence spending. We have to make the case to the nation, because we queue up with every other Department in asking for more funds from the Treasury. If we take the nation with us in calling for it, we are more likely to get where we want to go.

I have mentioned tanks, but we had 30 RAF squadrons in Operation Ellamy, and we are now down to seven. We cannot build two new aircraft carriers without extra money and not have an impact on the rest of the surface fleet. These are important issues, which is why the Defence Secretary and Defence Ministers are all making a potent case through the defence modernisation programme, which my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) mentioned, to say that we need to upgrade the defence budget. I am pleased with my hon. Friend’s contribution; he touched on the importance of cyber. If we think the last 10 years have seen a change in our world, wait for the next 10 years. Artificial intelligence, 5G and the internet of things will change our world fundamentally, and I am not quite sure whether we are ready.

My hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) speaks with such experience. He talks about our offer—what is our offer to our armed forces?—and that is so important for us to recognise and understand. More than 20 operations are taking place around the world, and Operation Toral, the continuation in Afghanistan, is just one of them. They do not make the headlines, so they are not the recruitment sergeant that Iraq and Afghanistan have been. Because of the greater employment rate, it is a testing environment to let people recognise how the armed forces can be a fantastic career. He also touched on flexible working, which is important, and how roles have been opened up to women right across the piece.

Following this full debate, I hope the House will support the draft order and recognise its contribution to upholding the constitutional position that the armed forces may not be maintained without the consent of Parliament.

My final words are to anyone thinking of signing up. I could not encourage you more. You will learn things about yourself that you did not know, you will do things that you never thought possible, and you will visit places that you never thought you would be able to visit. When you finally march off that parade square, after you sign up, you will not only be serving your country but you will be making your mum and dad so proud of you.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That the draft Armed Forces Act (Continuation) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 24 January, be approved.
Winning the European Union (Financial Services)

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we will debate the two instruments on financial services together.

6.38 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I beg to move,

That the draft Public Record, Disclosure of Information and Co-operation (Financial Services) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 21 January, be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker: With this we shall take the following motion:

That the draft Money Market Funds (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 24 January, be approved.

John Glen: As the House will be aware, the Treasury has been undertaking a programme of legislation under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 to ensure that if the UK leaves the EU without a deal or an implementation period, there continues to be a functioning legislative and regulatory regime for financial services in the United Kingdom. The two statutory instruments being debated today are part of this programme. The disclosure regulations, as corrected by the corrections slip published on 12 February, will address deficiencies related to the UK’s implementation of EU rules that govern the exchange of confidential information between European economic area and third country regulatory and supervisory authorities. Once the UK is outside the single market and the EU’s joint supervisory framework for financial services, amendments will be needed to these rules so that they continue to operate effectively in a scenario where the UK leaves the EU without an agreement. The money market funds regulations will fix deficiencies in UK law on money market funds and their operators to ensure they continue to operate effectively post exit. The approach taken in these pieces of draft legislation aligns with that of other statutory instruments being laid under the 2018 Act, providing continuity by maintaining existing legislation at the point of exit but amending it where necessary to ensure that it works effectively in a no-deal context.

Let me deal first with the Public Record, Disclosure of Information and Co-operation (Financial Services) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019. As Members across the House will know, an important function performed by financial services regulators is the gathering of supervisory information from firms. Regulators use this information so that they can ensure that regulated firms are operating in a way consistent with regulatory requirements and that they continue to operate effectively post exit. The approach taken in these pieces of draft legislation aligns with that of other statutory instruments being laid under the 2018 Act, providing continuity by maintaining existing legislation at the point of exit but amending it where necessary to ensure that it works effectively in a no-deal context.

In addition, the EU has established the European supervisory authorities—ESAs—which are responsible for co-ordinating the approach of EEA national regulators. Co-operation and sharing of certain information between the ESAs is also mandatory for EEA national regulators. As well as setting out what information should be shared, EU rules also include restrictions and safeguards. In the UK, these rules are implemented in Part 23 of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 and the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Disclosure of Confidential Information) Regulations 2001.

For third country authorities, there are additional restrictions when disclosing confidential information. The UK regulator may need to be satisfied that the third country authority has protections for confidential information in place that are equivalent to those of the EU. There may also be a requirement to enter into a co-operation agreement with the third country authority. In addition, the UK regulator is disclosing confidential information to a third country authority which originated from an EEA authority, the UK regulator may need to seek the consent of the EEA regulator which originally disclosed the confidential information.

If the UK leaves the EU without an agreement, the EU has confirmed that it will treat the UK as a third country and the UK will also need to treat EEA states as third countries. The UK will be outside the single market and the EU’s joint supervisory framework, so references in UK legislation to this framework, and to EU legislation and EU bodies, will be deficient and will need to be corrected so that the UK’s disclosure rules for confidential information will work effectively. In particular, the rules will need to be amended to reflect the third country relationship that will exist between the UK and EEA states. After exit, it would not be appropriate to provide for different rules and protections on the disclosure of confidential information by UK authorities depending on whether confidential information is being shared with EEA authorities or the authorities of non-EEA states. If this is left unamended, the UK would afford additional protections and less onerous restrictions to EEA states compared with other third countries. In addition where there are currently requirements to seek the consent of an EEA authority before the onward disclosure of information, these requirements will be retained only if an equivalent requirement also exists in relation to seeking consent from non-EEA authorities.

This instrument also provides for a transitional arrangement that will ensure that any confidential information received by a UK regulator before exit day will continue to be treated in accordance with the relevant provisions that existed before exit day. While it is necessary to amend the UK implementation of rules around disclosure of confidential information to ensure that they continue to operate effectively once the UK is outside the EU, it must be stressed that these amendments are in no way intended to diminish the level of co-operation that exists between UK and EEA regulators.
The Government and UK regulators believe that effective co-operation and co-ordination is essential for the effective supervision of financial services. UK authorities will be doing everything possible to ensure that effective co-operation continues. UK regulators have always been key players and key voices of sanity in the global supervision of financial services, as is demonstrated by the close and co-operative arrangements we have with regulators in countries outside the EEA. After exit, it will be necessary for the UK regulators to enter into co-operation agreements with EEA national regulators and with the ESAs. These agreements will help ensure that a high level of co-operation and information sharing will continue.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I am seeking some clarity on the first of these SIs and which day the Minister expects the disclosure of information regulations to come into operation. Am I right in thinking that exit day means exit day unless there is an implementation period, in which case it means at the end of the implementation period?

John Glen: These SIs relate to a situation where we have no deal. So if there was not a deal or an implementation period after 29 March, these SIs would then take effect.

Kirsty Blackman: With respect, that is not what it says in the explanatory memorandum for the first SI, which suggests that it is needed in the event of any Brexit and not just in the event of a no-deal Brexit. The second one covers a no-deal Brexit, but I had understood that the first one was needed for any Brexit.

John Glen: I will examine that and, if I may, I will come back to it and seek to clarify it when I wind up this debate.

Both the Government and UK regulators attach very high priority to placing these agreements in place, and I am pleased to report that UK and EU regulators are making good progress in their discussions to finalise these agreements. The Treasury has been working very closely with the Bank of England, the Prudential Regulation Authority and the Financial Conduct Authority in the drafting of this instrument, and there has been engagement with the financial services industry, including the publication of this instrument in draft, along with an explanatory policy note on 9 January. In summary, the Government believe that the proposed deficiency fixes are necessary to ensure that the UK has a clearly defined and operable set of rules for the disclosure of confidential information.

I turn now to the Money Market Funds (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which relate to the establishment, management, and marketing of money market funds. Such funds invest in highly liquid instruments, and provide a short-term, stable cash-management function to financial institutions, corporations and local governments. They are commonly used by investors as an alternative to bank deposits. The regulations formed part of the response to the 2008 global financial crash to preserve the integrity and stability of the EU market, and to ensure that money market funds are a resilient financial instrument. They do so by ensuring uniform rules on prudential requirements, governance and transparency for managers of these funds.

Money market funds can either be structured as undertakings for collective investment in transferable securities—UCITS—or as alternative investment fund. Therefore, they are regulated as UCITS or as an alternative investment fund, in addition to being regulated as a money market fund. The regimes for UCITS and alternative investment fund managers have been separately amended to reflect the UK leaving the EU by the Collective Investment Schemes (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 and Alternative Investment Fund Managers (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were taken through Committee, where I believe I was joined by the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), and have now been approved in both Houses and will be made shortly. In a no-deal scenario, the UK would be outside the EEA, and outside the EU’s legal, supervisory and financial regulatory framework. EEA money market funds, which currently provide the majority of money market services in the UK, would not be able to continue to service UK clients. The money market funds regulation therefore needs to be updated to reflect this and ensure that the provisions work properly in a no-deal scenario.

First, these draft regulations remove references to the Union which are no longer appropriate and to EU legislation which will not form part of retained EU law. These references will be replaced by references to the UK and to relevant domestic and retained EU legislation. Secondly, in line with the general approach taken to the onshoring of EU legislation, the SI will transfer functions currently within the remit of EU authorities; from the European Securities and Markets Authority to the FCA, and from the European Commission to Her Majesty’s Treasury.

As the UK’s regulator for investment funds and the current national competent authority for money market funds, the FCA has extensive experience in the asset management sector, and it is therefore the most appropriate domestic institution to take on these functions from the European Securities and Markets Authority. This statutory instrument transfers all powers exercised by ESMA to the FCA. The FCA will become responsible for technical standards on how funds should stress test their funds, and it will gain two operational powers to establish a register and reporting template for money market funds.

This statutory instrument transfers any power currently exercised by the Commission to the Treasury, in line with the other statutory instruments that we have taken through. Those powers all relate to creating rules concerning standards for money market funds, such as their liquidity and quantification of credit risk.

As I have mentioned, EU money market funds are structured and further regulated as UCITS or alternative investment funds. This statutory instrument makes provision to ensure that EU money market funds can use the temporary marketing permissions regime, as legislated for in the Collective Investment Schemes (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 and the Alternative Investment Fund Managers (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018. Following an assessment by the FCA and the submission of a written statement to both Houses, the Treasury will be able to extend that by a maximum of 12 months at a time. It will also allow for EU money market funds that are currently marketing into the UK, and any subsequent UCITS sub-funds, to continue to market into the UK for up to three years after exit day.
This statutory instrument amends the scope of the regulation to apply to the UK only, with the effect of only allowing the marketing of UK-authorised MMFs or MMFs managed by UK fund managers. However, further amendments maintain the eligibility of EEA MMFs with temporary permissions to continue to market in the UK at the end of the temporary marketing permissions regime if they gain the required permissions to market as a third country fund under the UK domestic framework.

Money market funds that are UCITS will be required to gain authorisation under section 272 of FSMA, while the managers of money market funds that are alternative investment funds will need to notify under the national private placements regime. The UK currently has a very small domestic market that relies heavily on EEA money market funds, so these provisions address the cliff-edge risks that could arise as a consequence of defaulting to a UK-only market. That will ensure that local government, businesses and other UK investors can continue to access their investments and have a choice of money market funds to use for cash management.

As with the previous statutory instrument, the Treasury has been working very closely with the FCA in the drafting of this statutory instrument and engaging with the financial services industry. I would like to put on record my gratitude to TheCityUK for convening appropriate representative bodies throughout the process. In November the Treasury published the statutory instrument in draft, along with an explanatory policy note, to maximise transparency to Parliament and industry.

In summary, the Government believe that the proposed legislation is necessary to ensure that the framework for money market funds continues effectively, and that the legislation continues to function appropriately if the UK leaves the EU without a deal or an implementation period. I hope colleagues will join me in supporting the regulations.

I would like to respond to the point raised by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman). Parliament will amend the regulations as necessary for a deal scenario. If we have a deal, an amendment process would apply to all the regulations that we have taken through. Most of them would need to be repealed, but we would do so according to the terms of the deal. I have nothing more to say at this point, and I commend these regulations to the House.

6.54 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): First, may I associate myself with the heartfelt tributes that have been paid to my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), and I express my sympathies to his family?

We are here to discuss two no-deal statutory instruments appertaining to financial services. Members will be aware that the Conservative Government refused to allow a debate on the Floor of the House about arguably the most significant such SI—the one concerning the markets in financial instruments directive, which was sufficiently complex to require a Keeling schedule. The Government did agree to a recent debate on an SI concerning securitisation, but of course that was not a no-deal SI, and the debate only happened when the Opposition prayed against the SI. Members may be forgiven for scratching their heads about why the Conservative Government have adopted such a different tactic this time; I am sure Members can come to their own conclusions on why this debate is taking place on the Floor of the House today.

These statutory instruments make provision for a regulatory framework after Brexit in the event that we crash out without a deal. The volume of such legislation is deeply concerning for accountability and proper scrutiny. The Government have assured the Opposition that no policy decisions are being taken as part of the no-deal process. However, establishing a new regulatory framework inevitably involves matters of judgment and raises questions about resourcing and capacity. Secondary legislation ought to be used only for technical, non-partisan and non-controversial changes, because of the limited accountability it normally allows; instead, the Government continue to push through far-reaching financial legislation via this vehicle.

As legislators, we have to get this right. The regulations could represent real and substantive changes to the statute book, and as such, they need proper and in-depth scrutiny. I am slightly surprised to see some Government Members shaking their heads at the idea that we need appropriate scrutiny. It is incredibly important, and in the light of that, the Opposition would like to put on record our deepest concerns that the process regarding regulations in the event of no deal is not as accessible and transparent as it should be.

The rationale for these SIs is preparation for a no-deal Brexit—something that continues to be retained on the table by the Conservative Government despite clear evidence of the harm that that is doing to our economy. Last week in this Chamber, I mentioned the concerning slowdown in growth rates and the shift into recession of our manufacturing sector. The financial sector has not been immune; quite the opposite. As many Members will know, Ernst and Young has created what it calls a Brexit tracker, which monitors the public statements of more than 200 of the biggest financial services companies operating in the UK. As of January this year, the tracker showed that more than a third of the financial services companies that were tracked indicated that they are considering moving or have confirmed that they will move some of their staff or operations outside the UK. As we consider these two financial services SIs, we must reflect on why the current Government continue to retain the so-called option of no deal, especially given that the House has emphatically shown its opposition to such an outcome.

The first SI appears to cobbled together three sets of legislative changes to a variety of parent legislation. The Minister, as he always does, made a valiant attempt to present a coherent case, but we are talking about three different sets of changes. As with other SIs that the Opposition have contested, the parent legislation includes primary legislation, not least, as the Minister acknowledged, FSMA. Yet again, we see here the operation of Henry VIII powers.

In connection with that, I note that as of last Thursday, 288 changes have been made to FSMA as part of the preparation for no deal. That is an enormous number of changes to primary legislation, and it has been delivered in a completely piecemeal manner. We have no indication of when Government will present us with a finalised and integrated version of the new no-deal legislation,
coupled with the primary legislation that it amends. Perhaps the Minister, in his concluding remarks, can tell us whether his Department has such an overview and, if so, whether it would be willing to share it with the House and the public so that we can better understand what the financial services regulatory system would look like in the event of no deal.

The explanatory notes for the regulations were truly a masterpiece of the kind we have come to know well from no-deal SIs. I note that Her Majesty’s Treasury uses the crystal mark on some of its documents. I am sorry to speak so bluntly, but HMT would perhaps have done well to use the crystal mark’s drivel detector—its words, not mine—on the explanatory notes. All they did was to list the bits of legislation that were being changed. In no case did they explain why, aside from maintaining that doing so was necessary to address deficiencies. Yet again, we find questionable decisions being taken with no explanation.

Not all the changes in the regulations appear even to relate to the EU. For example, there are changes relating to disclosure requirements and to the Panel on Takeovers and Mergers—in regulation 2—but there is no indication why those changes have been made. Again, definitions are changed, such as that for short selling regulation information, but it is not clear whether that definition will be replaced elsewhere or, indeed, why it had to change in the first place.

Perhaps most worrying, we see yet again a shift away from EU requirements, which suggests that these measures are potentially going beyond direct transposition and instead diluting existing provisions. For example, the wording of one article of the EU regulation on short selling and certain aspects of credit default swaps—sorry, that is not a lovely name to pronounce—is amended from “shall, where possible” to “may”. From my reading, the amended provisions relate to the obligation to liaise with third countries concerning the identification of where shares are traded, but it is not clear why that obligation should be watered down. There is a similar change to the 2014 market abuse regulation, where “shall, where necessary” is altered to “may”. It appears that the UK’s co-ordination with non-EU countries and its relationship with the EU27 are being altered through these measures. The withdrawal Act does not provide the authority to do that.

The Minister appeared to suggest that this was to do with the exchange of confidential information and that we needed to have a different process. Surely, however, there are different ways of responding to the issue: there could have been measures in this legislation to deal with the problems and to ensure that information was appropriately guarded against anybody who might use it in an inappropriate way. However, we do not have that; instead, we have these provisions, with no explanation why.

Relatedly, there is no clear indication of the process to be used to determine which countries might be chosen for the conclusion of disclosure agreements mentioned by the Minister, or of the process required for those agreements. I absolutely agree with the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman). Obviously, she was referring to the overall import of these regulations, but there are other ambiguities about timing. When it comes to the conclusion of disclosure agreements, does the process have to be completed by exit day? If it does, has that process started? If it has started, on whose authority has it started? Presumably, it is not the authority of this House. In addition, it would be helpful to understand why the Government have decided to follow a bilateral approach, rather than one that might have been integrated, with an integrated disclosure agreement that could have been signed with the European Securities and Markets Authority.

Finally, we are again informed that an impact assessment has not been conducted on this instrument, even though the explanatory memorandum states that there has been engagement with relevant stakeholders concerning the SI. It would be helpful if the Minister provided further details about that engagement.

Let me move now to the Money Market Funds (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019. I will just talk about MMFs from now on. Obviously, the regulations are intended to implement the EU’s MMF regulation of 2018. As described by the Minister, that regulation was intended to make money market funds more resilient against disturbances in the financial markets, reduce the risks of runs in the markets, limit cross-border contagion and improve investor protection. That regulation immediately applied to new MMFs, from July of last year, but it came into practice for existing MMFs very recently—just last month. I will not go into all the details of the use of MMFs, but I would just add charities to the list the Minister talked about—there are a number of different bodies that use these funds.

The process of creating the regulation was led by a UK Labour MEP in the European Parliament, Neena Gill. As many Members may be aware, the process was controversial; it was not entirely straightforward, and there was huge debate about whether the UK should exactly follow the US approach or not. There was a lot of scepticism about whether the system of MMFs, in and of itself, should be encouraged. Many have described it as a system of shadow banking, because of its relative lack of transparency.

As with other SIs tabled by the Government, there are a number of problems with this legislation. First, it provides a new definition of money market funds that is arguably circular. It describes them as “instruments normally dealt in on the money market which...satisfy...Article 2a(1)” of the regulation. That is quite a different approach from the one taken by the EU, even back in the days of the Committee of European Securities Regulators. Before ESMA was created, there was an inclusive list of activities that would lead to classification as an MMF. A different approach is taken here.

Secondly, again as with other pieces of no-deal financial services legislation, there is no indication why and how the FCA, in particular, is meant to adopt the regulatory approach suggested in this SI. Regulation 6 provides it with the power to regulate MMFs, but without explaining how that will impact on its existing activities. The Minister intimated the different kinds of activities that the FCA will have to take on as part of this process, but they are very onerous. Just in relation to reporting templates, ESMA produced a 135-page report after consultation with stakeholders about what should go into those templates. I assume that similar levels of detail might be required for the FCA. This will not be a light-touch area to move into. Again, there is a lack of clarity about the extent of industry consultation on this SI.
As has often been the case with these SIs, we have had some rather strange throwaway comments in relation to this SI. The guidance accompanying it states that it does not include provisions that may be necessary to ensure Gibraltarian financial services firms can have continued access to UK markets in line with the UK Government’s statement in March 2018 and other provisions dealing with Gibraltar more generally. It also says that, where necessary, provisions covering Gibraltar will be included in future SIs. Does that mean that provisions for Gibraltar should have been covered but that there just was not time to consider them properly, or is there a procedural reason why they are not covered here? Again, will we need an omnibus SI at some point covering regulatory arrangements for Gibraltarian financial services?

John Glen indicated assent.

Anneliese Dodds: I am really pleased to see the Minister nodding, and I look forward to his explanation of why this has been an issue.

Above all, we see secondary legislation being used expansively here, with no overall indication of how it will interact with other pieces of secondary legislation and, indeed, primary legislation. There appears to be no rhyme or reason why the Conservative Government wish certain SIs to be taken on the Floor of the House and others to be taken in Committee—aside, that is, from a desire to fill the timetable for this week, after their mismanagement of the Brexit process. Issues of such importance as our nation’s financial stability and resilience surely deserve better than this.

7.7 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called in this important debate. I must say that I am at a bit of a loss as to why the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) has such an issue with these statutory instruments. They are simply about bringing current legislation from the European Union into domestic law; there are no significant policy changes. I was also a little mystified as to why she thought this was an appropriate time to take no deal off the table, particularly when this is such a sensitive time in our negotiations.

I would like to raise a couple of points and to take this opportunity, as we bring this legislation back from the European Union, to press for some sensible changes in regulation, principally to make our regulation more effective. Obviously, some of this legislation gives more power to our regulator—the Financial Conduct Authority. As my hon. Friend the Minister will probably recognise, the FCA has had some shortcomings in terms of its regulatory capability. I would like us to move towards having less of an expectation that the regulator will be responsible for all regulation and more towards giving individuals more power to hold our financial institutions to account.

The FCA will always be a watchdog at best, and not a bloodhound—it cannot be in all places at all times. What I have seen in my role as the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking and finance—a role my hon. Friend the Minister is very familiar with, because we have talked about these issues many times—is the abuses of small and medium-sized enterprises, particularly over the last 10 years. Some 16,000 businesses got very poor treatment from the Royal Bank of Scotland, in particular. At Lloyds HBOS, a number of senior managers ended up going to jail, with a collective sentence of 47 years. Other banks were involved—the CYBG and others—in swaps, interest rate hedging products and payment protection insurance on the consumer side of things.

It was not the regulator that brought those matters to light. Incredibly, 3,500 people work at the FCA and its predecessor, the Financial Services Authority, but it was not those bodies that found out what was going on in the banks; it was determined and committed individuals. A guy called Lawrence Tomlinson, who worked for the Business Secretary at the time, first established what was happening in those financial services organisations and banks, and how they were treating our small businesses. Even when these matters were brought to the attention of the FCA, action was not taken for some years. At HBOS, it was Nikki and Paul Turner who established what was happening. The bank tried to repossess the Turners 22 times, but the regulator did not step in to protect them, even though the evidence that they had produced was later verified and crucial in the investigation and subsequent prosecution. Similarly, at Lloyds HBOS the whistleblower Sally Masterton was disgracefully treated when she brought these matters to the attention of the FCA and the bank. Action was not taken to support her.

We have to try to move away from simply thinking that regulation and regulators can solve all the problems, because they patently do not always do so, and move to a situation in which we give individuals tools to hold the institutions to account. The Minister has done a fine job in persuading the banks to bring forward mechanisms to do that in the historical cases review that will hopefully be brought forward in the not too distant future. UK Finance has come forward with a voluntary scheme—it needs to be voluntary, because many of the cases are outside the statute of limitations. As business banking is not regulated, it also had to use a fair and reasonable test that would not apply in a court of law today. That is welcome progress, although we have some distance to go before we get this right. I thank the Minister for his excellent efforts in persuading UK Finance to come to the table.

The Minister knows that I think that we need to make sure that robust measures are in place alongside the regulator—we are not scrapping the regulator—to allow individual voices to be heard. That is why the all-party group thinks that we should have a financial services tribunal. That proposal has support across the House, and I know that the Minister will continue to look at this. We do not want a huge amount of regulation of commercial lending, because we want to make sure that banks are still confident to lend, but it is reasonable that banks treat their customers fairly and reasonably, and that those principles are actionable if things go wrong. That is not the case at the moment, as he knows, but we want to see that simple change to regulation and a tribunal that works similarly to employment tribunals—if employees are mistreated by an employer, they know that they have an affordable mechanism for resolving those disputes, and they can hold the employer to account. Most employers would do a good job anyway, but they are careful to ensure that they adhere to employment law,
because they know that if they do not they could end up at a tribunal. It is pretty easy for an employee to take a case.

We do not need armies of regulators to regulate employment law. In my business, we do not have an employment regulator coming in to inspect our files. We do not need that: we know that we will be held to account if we get it wrong. The same principle should apply in the business banking world, where there is a huge imbalance of power between banks and businesses. If people have the mechanism to be able to hold the bank to account if things go wrong, we will not need armies of regulators. We simply need a simple process. That is far more important than a regulator.

If I had to choose between the FCA—even though some very fine people work there—and a financial services tribunal, I would take the tribunal every time, and I say that as a business person. Many people I speak to who have lost out through the actions of banks feel the same.

I just sound a note of caution, as we bring this legislation back into domestic law, that we should see this as an opportunity to make banks and other financial organisations more accountable, without being overburdensome in terms of regulation. That would have a profound effect on confidence between businesses and banks and, therefore, UK plc.

7.15 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I am impressed by the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) making a valiant attempt clearly not to stretch the time out, but to make an excellent speech. It was unfortunate that he did not listen a little more carefully to the speech by the Labour spokesperson, who raised the issue of powers that were being changed beyond the scope of simply rewriting the EU law into UK law. Powers are being changed in that regard.

In relation to the disclosure of information SI and to be fair to the people who wrote the explanatory memorandum, there are two whole pages on the deep and special partnerships that the UK desires to have with the EU, although not on the substance of the information in the SI. I commend them for including all that information, although it could have been written in any SI, to be honest.

The instrument redesigns the requirements on EU member states in various pieces of EU legislation that are to be read as applying to the UK after exit, according to a line in the explanatory memorandum, which did not make a huge amount of sense to me. The explanatory memorandum seems to suggest that this UK SI is amending EU legislation that applies to EU countries, which it clearly cannot do, because the UK Parliament does not have the power to amend EU legislation as it applies to other EU countries.

The SI contains some interesting stuff about the requirement to seek the consent of EU organisations and countries before disclosing information. There is currently a requirement for the UK to seek the consent of EU countries before passing on the financial data that it may need to pass on. The SI would remove that requirement. How does that accord with the UK being keen to have a deep and special partnership if it is removing the requirement to seek consent? Removing a requirement to seek consent seems like a bit of an odd thing to do, given that the requirement to seek consent presumably ensures that there are more safeguards in place. We seem to be reducing the number of safeguards in relation to EU countries but not in relation to third countries, because currently we do not need to seek that consent. It is a bizarre thing to do.

My other question is whether the EU has announced plans to change its legislation so that it does not need to seek consent from the UK to pass on financial information. I have raised this issue before and the Minister will know what I am about to say. In some cases, the UK seems to be agreeing on reciprocity—my understanding is that it is on a case-by-case basis by whoever happens to be heading the Department’s SIs and there is no overall policy from the Government on whether they will agree EU reciprocity on such matters, but will the EU change its law? Has it signalled its intention to change its law and is that why we are seeking to change our law?

The explanatory memorandum states:

“The UK and the EU have agreed the terms of an implementation period.”

I am little confused about the definition of “UK” in this regard. The House certainly has not agreed to the terms of an implementation period. The Prime Minister’s deal lost by 230 votes, so we cannot say that it has been agreed. It may have been negotiated, but I would not go so far as to say that it has been agreed. The Prime Minister certainly seems keen to reopen negotiations on the withdrawal agreement, so surely it cannot possibly have been agreed at this point.

The explanatory memorandum states:

“The powers in the EUWA—

the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018—

“are not intended to be used to make policy changes”,

yet the powers in both SIs are being used to do just that, by changing how the law operates, and not just replacing EU regulators with UK regulators. They contain more wide-ranging changes.

The explanatory memorandum states that it would be “inappropriate” to continue sharing information. I am not sure how that would be inappropriate. If we are switching from “shall share information” to “may share information”, surely there will be cases in which it would be appropriate to continue sharing information.

I have a question about the co-operation agreements that will potentially be signed for the disclosure of financial information. I am interested to know how much work will be involved in negotiating those co-operation agreements. Clearly we do not have to do any such negotiating with the EU currently because we are part of the single market and of that framework. Brexit will be overwhelmingly bad, whatever happens. Even if we have a deal, we will end up at a huge disadvantage, compared with our current position. On this specific point, how much additional work will be generated as a result of having to negotiate and sign these co-operation agreements, and at how much of a disadvantage will we be put as a result?

I am still dealing with the first SI, on the disclosure of information. The regulations were published in draft on 9 January this year, but the corrections were made less than a week ago, on 12 February. The copy that I got from the Vote Office did not include the corrections, so I had to find them online. I am interested to know why corrections were needed.
John Glen: There were typos.

Kirsty Blackman: If they simply correct typos, that is absolutely fine. I was worried that they might have been the result of concerns raised about the legislation. I welcome that clarification.

The explanatory memorandum states that no consultation was undertaken. Once again, I think that consultation should have been undertaken on the SIs, and particularly the one that makes changes to the legislation. The explanatory memorandum states that no impact assessment was done, but it does say that “a de minimis impact assessment has been carried out.”

This is the first time that I have seen that phrase used in an explanatory memorandum on a financial SI, and I do seem to be spending quite a lot of my life dealing with them—I am sure that the Minister is spending even longer. I do not know what a de minimis impact assessment is, and I do not know where I could find it, because it is certainly not provided on the website. I can find no further information on this thing that has apparently been done to assess the impact.

We have criticised the Government before for not carrying out impact assessments. I think that it would have been useful to have an impact assessment on this. In fact, I fully intend to challenge the Government on this. They carry out an impact assessment only when there is likely to be an impact of £5 million or more on businesses. They do not carry out impact assessments when there is likely to be an impact of millions, or indeed hundreds of millions, on consumers or individuals living anywhere in these islands. It strikes me that, according to the Government’s own better regulation guidance, this process is entirely unfit for purpose, given that it involves literally hundreds of SIs coming through, many of which could do with an impact assessment.

I will move on to the Money Market Funds (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which is a no-deal SI. The Labour spokesperson made a comment about taking no deal off the table. [Interruption.] Mr Deputy Speaker, it would be easier to speak if it was a little quieter in the Chamber. We are not asking the Government to take no deal off the table now—the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton said that we were doing so at a critical point in the negotiations; we have been asking them to take no deal off the table pretty much since the Brexit process started, because it should never have been an option in the first place. We are not asking for it to be done now; we were asking for it to be done almost three years ago.

The regulations also change the powers of the Financial Conduct Authority. I have raised concerns before about the powers of the FCA, and the fact that the Government are making piecemeal changes without any kind of overall strategy on what they expect it to look like at the end of the process. I know that the FCA can request more money from Parliament, and I assume that it will have to do so in order to carry out the additional functions that are being delegated to it as a result of all the SIs coming through.

The explanatory memorandum for the money market funds regulations states that HM Treasury will have “the power to make delegated acts specifying quantitative and qualitative liquidity requirements on MMFs.” I would appreciate it if the Minister could seek some divine intervention on this and let us know how those delegated acts will be introduced. Will SIs be introduced under the affirmative or negative resolution procedure, or will the Treasury simply be allowed to make its own regulations without any recourse to Parliament? It would be useful if Parliament were across this, given that it is an area that Parliament is not in the habit of dealing with, because it has been an EU area. I think that, in the event of no deal, Parliament would benefit from having some input into those requirements on MMFs.

The commencement provisions for both SIs state that they will take effect on “exit day.” Now, I understand that exit day is defined in the European Union (Withdrawal) Act, which sets out a definite date and time. I am told that the SIs that refer to “exit day” mean that date and time. However, the withdrawal Act also gives the Government the power to vary exit day. If the Government vary exit day, presumably the SIs would come into effect only on the day that they have decided is to be exit day.

I want to know what will happen if we approve these SIs. The process is as follows. If an SI is approved, it does not get Royal Assent—that is not something that happens to SIs. Instead, it basically sits in a pile of SIs that are waiting to be “made”, and they are “made” at a date and time of the Government’s choosing. I was unable to get any further information on that, other than that it is the Government who decide—is it the Cabinet Office or the Prime Minister?

When we were asked to approve these SIs, I genuinely thought that the first one was not to do with a no-deal Brexit, because nowhere in the explanatory memorandum could I find the words “no deal”. The second SI, however, is very clearly to do with no deal. We are being asked to approve the money market funds regulations, which the explanatory notes state will come into effect only if there is no deal, but there is nothing to stop the Government from making this SI, or indeed any other, at a time of their own choosing; it would then apply after exit day. The House of Commons is basically being asked to agree to all these SIs coming into force on exit day, and then the Government have carte blanche to make any of them whenever they desire.

The Minister and I were both a little confused about the provisions of the disclosure of information regulations, given that I thought they applied in any circumstance. I am not sure what will happen if there is a deal now, because I do not know how the disclosure of information will work, because we have not been provided with an SI that works in the event of a deal scenario—surely we should have been, because there would be deficiencies in EU law.

What happens in that event? How do the Government decide when to make these SIs? If there is a deal, will they suddenly rush through provisions? The House of Commons has so many SIs in front of it, and we are now only dealing with no-deal SIs. In the event of a deal, will we have a mad situation where the Government decide to make edits to each of these SIs being brought through the House again so that we can approve them, followed by some sort of procedure to put them in place?

There have been screw-ups of monumental proportions in relation to everything to do with Brexit. Specifically, in terms of the SI process, we have not seen all the SIs for a no-deal scenario. Apparently we will not even see some of the SIs for a deal scenario until the Prime Minister
manages to get something through the House, and who knows when that may be? Are we going to continue with this shambles? For people who are interested in House of Commons procedure, it is wonderful to see it not working. It is great to see the millions of places where House of Commons procedure is completely deficient, and it is particularly great to be able to discuss these SIs and raise those issues on the Floor of the House.

I understood that the disclosure regulations were for the event of any deal or no deal. If they are only for the event of no deal, what information will the Minister provide about that? What information will he provide about the powers of the FCA and what it will look like in future? How will he ensure that the FCA is adequately funded to fulfil its obligations? Lastly, these two SIs and all the other financial services SIs we have seen have not been adequately consulted on, and I would appreciate it if the Minister commented on the consultation process.

7.32 pm

John Glen: I have listened carefully to the hon. Members for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) and for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevan Hollinrake), and I will endeavour to respond substantively to their points as succinctly as I can.

Before I get into the detail, it is important to set the context. The Treasury’s role is to take through in the House the statutory instruments, 53 of which relate to financial services, that would be needed in a no-deal scenario, as well as the in-flight files Bill. Those two activities constitute the Treasury’s necessary intervention to ensure that if a deal is not forthcoming—obviously, the Government’s expectation and what we are working towards is that one will be—we will have a functioning regulatory regime in place. These two SIs sit underneath the powers taken in the withdrawal Act, and they do not seek to change the legislative effect. They seek to onshore legislation that already operates through our membership of the EU.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): The Minister has talked a lot about the importance of financial services, and I completely agree with that. There is often a perception that financial services are all London-centric, but the insurance industry, for example, employs 300,000 people, and two thirds of those are around the UK. It is fair to say that getting this legislation right will protect all our constituents across the country.

John Glen: My hon. Friend is right: 63% of the 1.1 million jobs in financial services are outside London. It is important that we have this provision in a no-deal situation.

The hon. Member for Oxford East opened her remarks with concerns about the purpose of a debate on the Floor of the House. I am happy to have a debate on the Floor of the House or in Committee tomorrow morning, tomorrow afternoon, Wednesday morning or Wednesday afternoon, just as I was happy to have the debate last week on securitisation, which was also a business-as-usual SI.

A range of points have been raised, and I am happy to try to tackle them. The hon. Member for Oxford East talked about there being no policy explanation in the explanatory memorandum for the disclosure regulations. The explanatory memorandum clearly sets out the reasons for the amendments, which are essentially to make consistent the safeguards that apply to EEA and non-EEA regulators. It is not normal practice for the Government to provide consolidated text for secondary legislation debates, but I will look carefully at her remarks and write to her if I can give any more clarification.

The hon. Lady asked about the reliance on secondary legislation. As I said, the central objective of the SIs is to provide legislative continuity as far as possible for firms, and the withdrawal Act does not allow policy changes beyond what is necessary to ensure that legislation is operable on day one of leaving the EU. I note the areas where she alleges that there is that effect. I will look carefully at that and give her more clarification if I can, as I have always done in our debates in Committee.

The SIs are subject to the usual scrutiny provided by the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments and the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee. Additionally, in the case of financial services SIs, the Treasury has taken the step of publishing drafts of the legislation in advance of laying, to maximise transparency about the provisions and ensure that stakeholders are aware of the changes. I note the hon. Lady’s comments about the regulatory regime to use that designation.

The hon. Members for Oxford East and for Aberdeen North asked about the impact assessment of the disclosure regulations. The legislation on the disclosure of confidential information primarily relates to how the UK, EEA and third country authorities disclose confidential information with one another. There is nothing in these regulations that will require firms to change how they do business.

The definition of money market funds has been updated to reflect that, in a no-deal scenario, only those funds that have been authorised under this UK regulation at this point may use the strict designation of money market funds—the hon. Member for Oxford East rightly explained the genesis of it—and to allow those funds that are permitted through the temporary permissions regime to use that designation.

The hon. Members for Oxford East and for Aberdeen North also asked about the FCA’s resourcing. For the House’s edification, the FCA has a total of 158 full-time employees working on Brexit; that number increased from 28 in March last year. The hon. Member for Oxford East asked about Gibraltar. The SI dealing with Gibraltar has been laid and will be debated in due course.

I have addressed a number of the common themes raised by the hon. Members for Oxford East and for Aberdeen North. I will now briefly turn to the comments from my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton. He used the debate to rehearse some of his normal themes about bank regulation. I always listen carefully to what he says. We had a conversation last week, and I will write to him on the matter he raised and reflect carefully on his comments.
[John Glen]

These SIs are required to ensure safe disclosure of confidential information in the event that the UK leaves the EU without an agreement, that the regulation of money market funds continues and that the legislation functions appropriately if the UK leaves the EU without a deal. The approach taken in these SIs aligns with other SIs that we have laid and will ensure a smooth transition, to reflect the UK’s new position outside the EU. I hope that Members across the House will join me in supporting them in the Lobby.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 201, Noes 150.

Division No. 334] [7.39 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Afolami, Bim
Adams, Nigel

Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Fys, rh Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garriker, Mark
Gauge, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Henderson, Gordon
Hinds, rh Damian
Hollingbery, George
Holllinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Jack, Mr Alister
Javid, rh Sajid
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea

Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, rh Mark
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Ledwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Granger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Mackinlay, Craig
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
McPartland, Stephen
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Millling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sherry
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Pincher, rh Christopher
Pirsk, rh Mark
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robinson, Mary
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, Alok
Simpson, David
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Rosalyn
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Ian
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Swaney, rh Sir Desmond
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Tohurts, Kelly
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Vara, rh Shalish
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warman, Matt
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Tellers for the Ayes:
Jo Churchill and
Michelle Donelan

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzia, Tonina
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Lucia
Betts, Mr Olave
Blackman, Kirsty
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Cooper, Rosie
Coyle, Neil
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Davey, rh Sir Edward
Davies, Geraint

18 FEBRUARY 2019
Exiting the European Union (Financial Services)

1261

1262
EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES)

Motion made, and Question put,

That the draft Money Market Funds (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 24 January, be approved. —[John Glen.]

The House divided:

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afrinye, Adam
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Argr, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Harry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breer, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brooke, Sir Alan
Bruce, Fiona
Burns, Conor
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carltidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Collins, Damian
Davies, Chris
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Dinenage, Caroline
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garner, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Henderson, Gordon
Hinds, rh Damian
Hollingbery, George
Hollinsrake, Kevin
Hollowbore, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Hustleddon, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Jack, Mr Alister
Javid, rh Sajid
Jenkins, Sir Bernard
Jenkin, Andrea
Jenks, Ian
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczyński, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, rh Mark
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Public Record, Disclosure of Information and Co-operation (Financial Services) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 21 January, be approved.
Exiting the European Union (Financial Services) 18 FEBRUARY 2019  Exiting the European Union (Financial Services)
Exiting the European Union (Mediation)

8.4 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): I beg to move,

That the draft Cross-Border Mediation (EU Directive) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 21 January 2019, be approved.

This draft instrument form part of our ongoing work to ensure that if the UK leaves the EU without a deal our legal system will continue to work effectively for our citizens. It is solely related to our no deal preparations. If Parliament approves the withdrawal agreement, which includes an implementation period, and passes the necessary legislation to implement that agreement, the Government would defer the coming into force of this instrument until the end of that implementation period. Once a deal and our future relationship with the EU had been reached, we would review whether this instrument needed to be amended or revoked.

This statutory instrument relates to mediation. That is a process whereby parties to a dispute attempt voluntarily to reach an agreement to settle their dispute with the assistance of a mediator but without a court needing to rule on it. In the civil and commercial field such a dispute might for instance relate to a contract, a debt or assistance of a mediator but without a court needing to reach an agreement to settle their dispute with the

John Howell (Henley) (Con): As my hon. and learned Friend knows, I am hoping to become an associate of the Chartered Institute of Arbitration. I have spent much of my political life championing mediation as a means of settling disputes. To what extent are the Government committed to mediation for the future as a result of these measures?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend is a member of the Justice Committee and has taken part in many debates on this subject. I know he has extensive experience of arbitration as well as mediation. I am very pleased that he is planning to go further on that. He must rest assured that the Government remain committed to mediation. It is a very important tool in the armoury to help people to resolve their disputes. Outwith this statutory instrument and the EU rules that we already have, as I will go on to explain, we have very strong domestic provisions for mediation, and that will continue. The reason to bring forward this statutory instrument and the approach we have adopted is that the current arrangement with the EU is reciprocal and that following our leaving the EU we cannot rely on any reciprocity. This statutory instrument will therefore revoke the EU legislation.

In 2018, the European Council agreed a cross-border mediation directive which sought to harmonise certain aspects of mediation in relation to EU member state cross-border disputes. The aim of the mediation directive is to promote the use of mediation in such cross-border disputes. An EU cross-border dispute can be one between parties who are domiciled or habitually resident in two or more different member states, or it can be a dispute where judicial proceedings or arbitration are started in a member state other than the one where the parties are living. The UK, as a member state, enacted domestic legislation which gave effect to certain aspects of the mediation directive. I say certain aspects, because in many areas, such as ensuring the quality of mediation or information about mediation to the public, our existing arrangements already met the requirements or standards set out in the directive. However, to implement the directive the UK had to introduce some new rules for EU cross-border mediations involving UK parties.

The new rules first specify that if a time limit in a domestic law during which a claim could be brought in a court or tribunal expired during the mediation process, the parties could still seek a remedy through the courts or tribunals should the mediation not be successful. Secondly, the new rules define the rights of a mediator or someone involved in the administration of mediation to resist giving evidence in civil or judicial proceedings arising from information disclosed during a mediation. Various changes were also made to court rules to supplement the changes and to implement the requirements of the mediation directive relating to enforceability of agreements resulting from mediation.

Under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, the legislation implementing the mediation directive is retained EU law upon the UK’s exit from the EU. However, should the UK leave the EU without an agreement on civil judicial co-operation, the reciprocity on which the directive relies will be lost. Even if we were to continue to apply the enhanced EU rules to EU cross-border disputes, we would be unable to ensure that the remaining EU member states applied the rules of the directive to cross-border disputes involving parties based in the UK or judicial proceedings or arbitrations taking place in the UK that were not otherwise in scope.

Accordingly, and in line with the Government’s general approach to civil judicial co-operation in the event of no deal, this instrument will repeal, subject to transitional provisions, the legislation that gives effect to the mediation directive’s rules on confidentiality and extension of limitation periods. It amends the relevant retained EU law in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland—in so far as it relates to reserved matters. Separate instruments will amend the related court rules in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. There is other legislation implementing the directive that is within the legislative competence of the Scottish Government, and I understand that they have decided to bring forward their own legislation in this area.

Turning to the impacts, this instrument is necessary to fix the statute book in the event of a no-deal exit. We have assessed its impact and have published an impact assessment. By repealing the domestic legislation that gave effect to the mediation directive, we will ensure clarity in the law applying to mediations between UK parties and parties domiciled or habitually resident in EU member states. We will also avoid a situation where mediations of an EU cross-border dispute conducted in the UK are subject to different rules on confidentiality or limitation from other UK mediations.

As I indicated, the instrument will change only the rules applying to what are currently EU cross-border mediations, and only in two respects: time limits and confidentiality. On time limits, claimants involved in such mediations who no longer have the benefit of an extended limitation period would, if they wanted more time to allow for mediation to take place, be able to make an application to the court and ask it to stay proceedings. Overall, this instrument will ensure that, post EU exit, UK-EU mediations are treated consistently.
under the law with mediations between UK-domiciled or habitually resident parties, or UK parties and parties domiciled or habitually resident in non-EU third countries.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): As I read it, fundamentally, for people who are seeking mediation, there will not be much change if the instrument is enacted.

Lucy Frazer: That is precisely the position. All that is happening with this SI is that we are going back to the position before the directive was implemented. It was implemented in 2011, so it has been in place for only a number of years, and we will still have all the rules that regulate domestic mediations, which take place across the country in various jurisdictions. This measure will impact only two very small areas—time limits and confidentiality—and as my hon. Friend highlighted, much will remain the same.

As I have set out, without a deal in place on 29 March 2019, certain EU cross-border mediations involving UK-domiciled parties—except for those that had started before exit—would no longer be subject to the mediation directive rules in EU member states. The Cross-Border Mediation (EU Directive) (EU Exit) Regulations fix that deficiency and ensure that both the courts and UK citizens have clear and effective rules to follow during a cross-border mediation dispute.

8.13 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Across Parliament and throughout the legal sector, there is serious concern that the Government’s inadequate planning for justice co-operation after Brexit puts the most vulnerable people in our society at risk. The Chair of the Lords EU Justice Sub-Committee took the step of writing to the Secretary of State in October to criticise his lack of planning and warned:

“The government needs to wake up to the reality of what having no answers on family justice will mean after Brexit.”

Many people are concerned that the Government’s failure to secure agreement on a form of continued participation in the European arrest warrant will leave us less safe.

We currently benefit from a well-established, frequently updated and comprehensive set of reciprocal justice arrangements with the EU. These cover everything from disputes over child custody to medical negligence abroad. As a recent House of Lords European Union Committee report states, these specific EU regulations provide “certainty, predictability and clarity”. Without an agreement with our European partners on what the future of those reciprocal arrangements looks like after we leave the EU, people who are forced to go to court or mediation to protect their rights could face extremely damaging consequences. Whatever claims the Minister makes about the secondary legislation that the Tories are bringing in, the Opposition need to see concrete action, not words, to defend rights, because we simply do not trust the Government to protect working people’s rights.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): The shadow Minister puts a lot of store in comments made by various House of Lords Sub-Committees on this statutory instrument. Will he tell us whether the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments raised any objections to it?

Imran Hussain: A number of objections have been raised, as I have set out, but the bottom line is that these regulations repeal legislation and mean effectively that the higher European standards will not be followed and that, instead, lower international standards will be.

Bob Stewart: But I thought I just heard the Minister say that in the matter of mediation, there will be very little difference, and that is what we are talking about: mediation.

Imran Hussain: Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman is right; we are talking about mediation. The Minister will know, and rightly pointed out, that there are two issues: time limits and confidentiality. This statutory instrument will repeal legislation that allows for extra time for that mediation, so that is substantially different. Perhaps the Minister can clarify that position in her closing remarks, because my understanding is that there is a substantial difference.

This statutory instrument would revoke and repeal the domestic legislation that enshrined in law the mediation directive. Many Members will be unfamiliar with the purpose of the mediation directive, but it is one of many examples whereby, through co-operation with our European partners, we have raised legal standards and protections across Europe. The European Statutory Instruments Committee—as raised by the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood)—considered whether this instrument could diminish rights. It found that it “repeals legislation that extends the time limit for bringing certain claims in civil courts and employment tribunals to enable mediation”.

Some people may claim that legislation setting out the time limits for bringing civil claims is a minor issue, but it can have substantial real-world consequences. It could mean the difference between people being able to reach a mediated solution to a child contact case or not. The Government’s explanatory memorandum makes it clear that maintaining the standards of the mediation directive was an option available to the Government, but they have not sought to maintain the highest possible standards in all circumstances.

Why has the Minister not sought to maintain the highest possible standards? Can she guarantee today that if the statutory instrument passes and we move away from the high European mediation standards, people who rely on mediation for a family law matter—for example, a dispute over custody of a child—will be no worse off than they would have been had the mediation been conducted under the current European standards? I wait for her response, but she knows that the answer to that question is no.

For decades now, people from across the UK have travelled, lived and done business across Europe, safe in the knowledge that if something goes wrong they will be protected by legal systems that work, and work together. Many people from elsewhere in Europe have made their lives in the UK—some have started families, some created businesses, others are working in the NHS and other vital services—and they, too, trusted that they could rely on cross-border legal co-operation if something went wrong. That is why the Government’s failure to secure full judicial co-operation after we leave the EU is so damaging—it puts people’s rights at risk by lowering standards—and that is why we will vote against the SI. We in the Opposition know the Tories cannot be trusted to defend people’s rights.
Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Since that fateful day in June 2016, the Scottish National party has consistently raised justice co-operation post Brexit. No mitigation can replicate the arrangements we have as members of the EU. On the face of it, this statutory instrument seems less important than the grand examples of fleeing businesses, uncertainty about medicine supply chains and failed shipping contracts with firms with no ferries that result in millions of pounds being wasted, but it remains an important and undeniable example of utterly pointless self-harm. In this SI, the UK is willingly taking a course of action that will put both British and EU citizens in a worse position. Jim Cormack, QC, of Pinsent Masons, has said:

“The significance of the repeal is perhaps more symbolic as it explicitly recognises that Brexit results in the end of reciprocity in this respect between the UK and the relevant remaining member states of the EU”.

Scotland has a separate legal system and approach to justice that is closely integrated with EU law, so the SI applies to Scotland only in a limited way. As the Minister identified, Scotland will legislate separately to repeal the relevant provisions within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, including on court rules. Nevertheless, this is a significant SI, as it flows directly from the UK Government’s decision to leave the EU without showing due regard to the fact to two nations of this so-called precious Union of equals voted to remain—Scotland emphatically so.

Scotland is, then, being ripped out of the EU against its will, and I have serious concerns about the impact this will have on our justice system, which I remind the House has always been separate and distinct—even if the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) was unaware of this fact when he visited Scotland recently. Over the past 40 years, EU law has become woven into the fabric of both Scots and UK law, and this has overwhelmingly been to our benefit, yet, even though these effective arrangements for judicial co-operation benefit victims, families, businesses and communities in Scotland and elsewhere in the EU, they face being repealed or are under serious threat.

What makes this worse is that throughout the whole Brexit process the Scottish Government, the Scottish Parliament and all our civic organisations have been roundly ignored, while the Prime Minister ploughs on with the least popular Westminster initiative since the poll tax. No attempt has been made to win over Scotland or even to listen to any of the concerns expressed in the country, which raises certain questions. For example, what consultation was carried out in Scotland with the Scottish Government, the Law Society or any other civic body?

Lucy Frazer: I thank hon. Members for their important contributions, and I will respond briefly to some of the points raised. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), made broad criticisms of the Department’s justice planning, but we in the Department take our governmental responsibilities very seriously. We have laid before Parliament several SIs for no-deal planning, many of which we have debated and passed; we have the £17 million from the Treasury to prepare; and we are liaising and working with Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service and the judiciary to ensure that we are ready should we leave on 29 March without a deal. That said, the best way to avoid a no-deal outcome is to approve the Prime Minister’s deal. That is why I voted for it. If the hon. Gentleman would like to avoid a no-deal exit on 29 March, that option is open to him as well.

I will deal now with the shadow Minister’s specific points about the SI. We have always had very high mediation standards. Domestic mediations take place across the country in a wide range of jurisdictions; they did so to a high standard before this directive came into force a few years ago; and they will maintain those high standards when we leave the EU. As I said in my opening speech, we are revoking the EU directive because we cannot rely on reciprocity in the future—that is the approach we have taken in our SIs—and where we will not get reciprocity, we are revoking the instruments by which we are currently bound.

Imran Hussain: Will the Minister confirm that as a direct result of the SI standards will be lowered, particularly with regard to mediation, because time limits will be reduced?

Lucy Frazer: If someone wants to stop a time limit running in mediation, they need only issue proceedings before a court, because that stops time running. If someone issues proceedings and asks for a stay of those proceedings, time stops running. That measure is available to people in mediation.

I will respond to the few points made by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands). I recognise that the Scottish system is a distinct legal system, but I challenge his claim that we have ignored the Scottish Government. I was in Scotland—in Edinburgh—two weeks ago sitting with members of the Scottish Government and other devolved Administrations, and I was pleased to hear Scottish Ministers praise my Department for our work at official level liaising with them on matters of justice. We have, then, been working hard to involve the devolved Administrations in these measures.

For those reasons, and because it will maintain clear and effective rules for our courts and citizens to follow during challenging EU cross-border mediations, I commend the instrument to the House.

The House divided: Ayes 198, Noes 137.

Division No. 336] [8.27 pm]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berrill, Jake
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
BURNS, Conor
Campbell, Mr Gregory

Noes

Afriyie, Adam
Amess, Sir David
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Baldwin, Harriett
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berrill, Jake
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Burns, Conor
Campbell, Mr Gregory
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The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): I beg to move, That this House has considered serious violence.

We cannot ignore the rise of serious violence. Already this year we have seen seven fatal stabbings on London’s streets. I have met families of victims and seen at first hand the devastation that brutal violence can cause. I have seen police on the frontline working flat out to make our streets safer, and we must of course all do that we can to help them.

As Home Secretary, my No. 1 priority is to keep Britain safe. To do this, I am tackling serious violence head-on. As the threat has increased, so too has our response. I have listened to expert advice and acted wherever and whenever I could. I have been relentless in this mission so far, but it is clear that more must be done to stop this senseless slaughter; for the sake of all our young people, we are determined to deliver. That is why we published our serious violence strategy last April. We set out a tough law enforcement response that made it clear that this alone was not enough.

The strategy placed a strong focus on prevention and early intervention, preventing young people from being drawn into violence in the first place. It stressed the importance of a multi-agency response, with education, health, social services, housing, youth services and others all playing a part. The strategy also pinpointed the importance of tackling the drivers of serious violence, including the changes in drugs markets. Changes in the way drugs dealers operate and the rise of county lines gangs are fueling the brutality on our streets. Social media also play a part, with gangs taunting each other online and ratcheting up tension and the risk of reprisal attacks. The strategy addressed those and other risk factors, such as exclusion from school. It set out our plans to do all we can to reduce serious violence.

We are delivering on the commitments we made in the strategy, and we are doing much more. I would like to take this opportunity to update the House on some of the progress we have made so far. First, we are tackling the root causes of violence and investing in our young people’s future. Our early intervention youth fund of £22 million is already supporting 29 projects in England and Wales, and more than £17 million has already been allocated to projects delivering interventions to young people at risk of criminal involvement, gang exploitation or county lines. The remainder of the money has been earmarked to help young people over the next two years. Indeed, our investment is increasing, with an additional £200 million for the youth endowment fund.

Secondly, we are taking a multi-agency public health approach to tackling violent crime. Cracking down on serious violence will take the whole of society: everyone has to play a part, so in October I launched this comprehensive new approach. This was underpinned by a package of measures including the youth endowment fund and the independent drugs misuse review. We will consult shortly on a new statutory duty on all Government Departments and public agencies to tackle serious violence. This will ensure that the whole of the public sector is playing its part to the max, working together on serious violence with everyone treating it as a priority.

Question accordingly agreed to.
Thirdly, we have introduced the Offensive Weapons Bill. We are taking a tough law enforcement approach to ensure that those who turn to violence have nowhere to hide. The Bill will close the net around violent criminals by giving the police more powers to tackle knives, acids and firearms. It will make it harder for young people to possess and purchase these dangerous weapons. The Bill will shortly complete its passage through the House of Lords.

Fourthly, I have announced the introduction of knife crime prevention orders. I have been clear that I will not sit back and wait another decade for the current cycle of violence to end. We continue to look at what more we can do, so no options are off the table if they can save lives. The police asked for this extra tool, so I intend to introduce these orders through an amendment to the Bill. Some people have expressed concerns, and I understand that. They have suggested that the orders are designed to criminalise young people, but that is absolutely not the case. The orders will be preventive, not a punishment. They will enable the police and other agencies to help those who are most vulnerable to carrying a knife to escape a life of escalating violence.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): Does this mean that when a person has a knife crime prevention order placed against their name, a police officer will be able to come along and check that they are not carrying a knife, just in a random way?

**Sajid Javid**: I would not quite say that it will be in a random way. The orders can be placed only with the permission of the courts. A police officer will suggest that an order is placed on an individual, but the courts will independently oversee that. The orders can carry a number of restrictions. They will be used, for example, in cases where the police believe there is a high risk of an individual being drawn into carrying knives and even using them, perhaps because he or she has been hanging out with the wrong kind of people, including those who have already been convicted of gang membership, carrying knives or serious violence. The measures will allow the police to ensure that the order is being observed, but I would not use the phrase “in a random way”.

**Bob Stewart**: I thank my right hon. Friend for letting me intervene again to rephrase my question. I do not mean stopping someone in a “random” way, but in a checking way to ensure that the knife crime prevention order is working and that, if the police are worried, they can stop the person and just check him or her.

**Sajid Javid**: I agree. My hon. Friend puts it appropriately. It is worth taking this opportunity to emphasise that the whole purpose of the order is to prevent people, especially young people, from being drawn into a life of crime in the first place. It is a preventative measure. The police have asked for it and it is supported by the Mayor of London. The serious violence taskforce has discussed it with experts, and it should be considered carefully by the House.

Fifthly, we are doing what we can to dismantle county lines—a horrific and often highly violent form of criminal child exploitation. We have provided £3.6 million to establish a new national county lines co-ordination centre. This will enhance intelligence sharing across the country to ensure that vulnerable children are being identified and safeguarded, and we are already starting to see some good results. Since the centre became fully operational in September, it has carried out two separate weeks of co-ordinated national action, resulting in over 1,100 arrests and 1,000 individuals safeguarded.

Sixthly, we are supporting the police response to serious violence. We know that the demands on police are high, and rising violent crime is stretching them even further. That is why we are giving them the support they need, raising police funding by up to £970 million next year, including council tax. I am delighted that police and crime commissioners collectively plan to strengthen their forces as a result and are consulting on plans to use their additional funding to recruit 2,800 officers. This will help to fight serious violence on the ground. It represents the biggest uplift in police funding since 2010, yet it is notable that some Members did not vote for the settlement.

We continue to back Operation Spectre—co-ordinated national police action on knife crime. The results of this latest drive speak for themselves, with over 1,000 arrests and more than 9,000 knives already taken off the streets. In addition, last year I announced £1.4 million to support a new national police hub to tackle gang-related activity online. It will be fully operational from May, focusing on disrupting criminality and referring content to social media companies to be removed. These companies must be prepared to do much more, and I have already been very clear that I am prepared to legislate if they do not play their part.

Finally, we are acting to tackle the drivers of serious violence. As part of our public health package, I launched an independent drugs misuse review to investigate how the trade is fuelling serious violence. Earlier this month I appointed Professor Dame Carol Black to lead that vital work, and I take this opportunity to thank her for her efforts.

I hope the importance that I place on tackling serious violence is very clear. I have no greater priority than saving lives, providing peace of mind that our loved ones will be safe when they step out the door, and making everyone feel secure on our streets. I have set out our approach and the range of work that is under way to try to achieve those aims, how that has been stepped up since I became Home Secretary, and how we will continue to strive to do more. This Conservative Government are clear that this senseless violence must stop, and we will do everything in our power to make sure that happens. I commend this motion to the House.

8.49 pm

**Ms Diane Abbott** (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Few aspects of crime frighten our constituents more than violent crime. The sad truth is that, under this Government, violent crime continues to spiral.

I begin by declaring a personal interest and concern. I have been an MP in the heart of the east end for 30 years. I am immensely proud of being a Hackney MP. It is an amazing community, and we lead the way in tech, fashion, fine art, music and all types of culture, but a person cannot live and work in Hackney for 30 years and not be aware of the harsh reality of violent crime. For my constituents and me, violent crime is not just a newspaper story but the cause of tragic incidents that haunt friends and neighbours and regularly scar our community.

I hope this debate will provide the House with an opportunity to discuss how we can ensure that we keep this incredible community safe for many years to come.
Let me remind the House of the parameters of the violent crime wave we face. The latest data from the Office for National Statistics reveal that violent crime soared 19% to 1.5 million offences in the year to last September. Consider that for a moment: it equates to an average of more than 4,000 offences a day. The ONS also reports that it includes a 14% rise in homicides and an 8% rise in knife crime, which equates to 110 knife offences daily. Murder and manslaughter are at their highest levels for more than a decade.

The Home Secretary sometimes tries to hide behind the fact that the rising figures are the result of better reporting and recording. That may be a factor for some types of crime, but the ONS says:

“We have also seen increases in some types of ‘lower-volume, high-harm’ violence including offences involving knives or sharp instruments.”

To look at the issue of violent crime from another perspective, there has been a 15% increase in the number of hospital admissions in England for assaults involving a sharp instrument. That is not better police recording: it is our A&E units across the country being swamped by the effects of serious violence. In fact, a report published by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary in 2014 found that violent offences had actually been substantially under-recorded by 33% nationally. We are in the middle of a crisis.

Behind the statistics are a thousand personal tragedies: the victims of violence; the people who have been robbed or attacked on the street; the innocent young men and women caught up in the crossfire in a club or on the street where they live; the vulnerable young people caught up in the drugs trade, and possibly the county lines phenomenon; the mothers who lie awake most nights until their son or daughter returns home; the parents who dread the phone call from the police or the hospital to tell them that a family member has come to harm; and the young men who will never come home again.

As the Home Secretary reminds us, almost a year ago his predecessor launched the new Home Office serious violence strategy. The strategy has many theoretical elements that the Opposition would support, but we contend whether the money made available for it actually offsets all the cuts in local government funding that has contributed to the crime wave we now see. I will return to that subject.

Ministers’ responses to violent crime have included calling for more stop-and-search, knife crime prevention orders and asking the internet companies to stop videos that glorify violence. All those ideas have their merits, but I stress to the House that random, non-evidence-based stop-and-search has never worked. Properly targeted stop-and-search can play its part in reducing crime but, to oppose the change in legislation in 2014 that means anyone caught carrying a knife twice would face a custodial sentence?

Ms Abbott: The idea that the answer to knife crime is a simplistic multiplication of the sentence mistakes the drivers behind knife crime, which I will come to later in my remarks.

The new orders stopping young people from accessing the internet appear reasonable at first sight, but have Ministers never heard of young people creating multiple online identities? Labour Members have grave concerns about how these orders will be used, with the possibility that they will target poor communities, and black and minority ethnic boys and girls. We have yet to be given the reassurances that care will be taken to ensure that particular communities and groups of young people will not be unfairly targeted.

I agree with the Home Secretary that the internet giants have a role to play here in the type of material they allow, but, as he will know, that is true in respect of all sorts of crimes, from online fraud to child pornography and terrorism. All of that is too easy online, and the Government must do more than have a cosy chat with the companies that allow it. So I was glad to hear him say that he is actually prepared to act. It is long overdue for the Government to use their powers against companies that fail to act on these issues.

However, the underlying problem with violent crime is that there is also a crisis in policing. It is all very well for the Home Secretary to say that the police are having the biggest increase in grant since 2010, but this Government and their predecessors since 2010 have imposed austerity policies on the police, as they have done in every other area of our public services.

The result is there for all to see: since 2010, 21,000 policemen and women have been axed by Tory-led Governments of one kind or another. That has undermined the entire capacity of the police services in this country to tackle crime of all types, including violent crime. Community policing has been decimated. Every MP in this debate, on either side of the House, will know of the negative consequences that the fall in police numbers has had in their area: the lower police presence; the decimation of community policing; tardiness in responding to 999 calls, with them sometimes not getting replied to until the next day; and the resultant fall in public confidence.

The Home Secretary talks about increasing investment, but the cuts across almost every other area of public spending have helped to fuel the rise in crime, including the rise in violent crime. Those cuts, particularly as they fall on local authorities, have exacerbated the causes of crime. They include the crisis in housing, growing inequality, and the crisis in our schools, including school exclusions. Too many pupil referral units are just academies for crime.
A one-time director general of the Prison Service who went on to head Barnardo’s, Martin Narey, said that on the day when a child is expelled from school, we might as well give them a date and time to turn up at prison. Ministers have to pay more attention to this pipeline from educational failure—school failure—to the world of crime. The other issues that help to promote criminality are the hopeless job prospects for many of our young people, the collapse of the youth service in many areas of the country and the crisis in mental health care.

When we ask senior police officers, as I am sure the Home Secretary has done, they tell us, “You can’t arrest your way out of this”, and of course they are right. Rounding up whole drug gangs, as the police sometimes do, often means simply opening up turf wars as neighbouring gangs move into the vacant territory. Under this Government, the police cannot even make the arrests that they should be making, and arrest and conviction rates have plummeted.

As I said at the beginning of my remarks, all our constituents engage with the question of violent crime with fear and concern. It is one thing to pay lip service to the causes of crime, including violent crime, as the Home Secretary did in his remarks, but the Opposition say that the rise in violent crime since 2010 is connected to the reluctance to give the police the funding they need to fight all types of crime. The violent crime epidemic that we face is at least partly to do with austerity, the policies of this Government and the funding of the police. The Opposition are committed, when the time comes, to taking serious, co-ordinated action to start to push back on this rise in toxic and frightening violent crime.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. There is, as colleagues will see, quite a short time for the debate, but if everybody could stick to about six minutes, that would be helpful in getting everybody in.

9.1 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, which has great significance. The first duty of the state is to protect its citizens; that is why we have our outstanding armed forces, and why we have the police and the criminal justice system. I commend the police officers across my county of Essex. They often put themselves in harm’s way to do the right thing—to protect the public and bring to justice those responsible for serious crime. On that point, I give a special commendation to our police and crime commissioner, Roger Hirst, and to our new chief inspector, B. J. Harrington. Essex borders London and is part of the home counties. We face a range of issues, which the Home Secretary mentioned, including county lines and the home counties. We face a range of issues, which the Home Secretary mentioned, including county lines and the home counties. We face a range of issues, which the Home Secretary mentioned, including county lines and the home counties.

We all know of the heroic acts of bravery undertaken by the police, and we all have examples from our own constituencies. Each and every one of us knows of the sacrifices that our frontline officers make and the threats that they face daily. I also want to comment on the actions of others in our local communities—especially the voluntary sector and community groups, who work tirelessly and with great devotion to steer people away from criminality. They are the unsung heroes in our constituencies who bring calm, and who work with criminal enforcement agencies to prevent crime and steer young people, in particular, on to the right path.

Despite such efforts, there is a sorry state of affairs in our country today. Far too many criminals are walking our streets and acting with impunity. We have heard from the Home Secretary about the individuals who terrorise our communities. They target vulnerable children and adults, and they profit from causing harm and misery. All too often, the criminal justice system fails to stand up for the victims and fails to punish the perpetrators for the crimes that they commit.

We have heard many examples, and I am sure we will hear others from Members today, of cases in which the police have worked hard to gather evidence on offenders so that they can be prosecuted, brought to trial and found guilty, only for the courts to set them free or let them off the hook with soft sentences. That means that the offenders do not spend enough time in jail on rehabilitation, where people can spend time with them and invest in them as individuals so that they do not go back out and commit more offences.

I do not have time to go into all the many figures today, but the National Crime Agency has published a conservative estimate of the number of active county lines participants across the country. Those individuals get caught up in the criminal justice system, and their lives are ravaged by a spiral of drugs, abuse, debt and crime. It is fair to say that we would urge the Government to strengthen the ability of our police to ensure that those responsible for organising criminal acts are subject to the right kind of actions in prison and in the criminal justice system so that they do not go back and destroy other people’s lives. That is something we should not forget.

In the few minutes I have, I would like to give two examples of where my constituents have been betrayed and let down by the justice system. The first involves a lady who was the victim of an abusive ex-partner. He inflicted serious violence on her over a prolonged period and beat her so severely and violently that she was left blinded in one eye. When she worked up the courage to seek justice, she was let down by the criminal justice system.

This vulnerable victim of domestic abuse was tormented over a prolonged period and had life-changing injuries, but the Crown Prosecution Service did not stand up for her and press for compensation or the right kind of justice for her. This is where we must look at not just police enforcement and serious crime, but how the whole criminal justice system stands up for victims. At the end of the day, we as Members of Parliament have a duty to victims of crime and to access justice for them so that they can get the right course of action.

The second case is that of a constituent who came to me recently, who was the victim of a serious violent assault last year in Brighton. He was beaten up and left injured—punched multiple times in an unprovoked attack. His injuries and recovery stopped him from working, and he lost his business. The offender was violent and aggressive. What kind of sentence did he receive? He received a 12-month community order and was made to do 80 hours of unpaid work and five days of rehabilitation, and to pay costs of £85. My constituent was awarded compensation of just £100. He said:
“I now have no job. I couldn’t work for a couple of weeks and because I was self-employed all my customers left.”

He has no sense that justice was done. He was a victim of crime, and he is still left suffering.

That is the point. Where is the justice? It is down to this Government to have a much more integrated approach. In fairness to the Home Secretary, he spoke in his remarks about how the severe problem of serious crime affects communities and individuals. However, we must square the circle: we must not allow perpetrators of crime to go and brag on Facebook, which is what happened in this case. We need to see and show that the Government have the right approach to the criminal justice system and that the punishment fits the crime.

To conclude, if we are to tackle serious and violent crime in our society, we have to use many methods—nobody in this House would dispute that. Yes, we need better education and more support for vulnerable people and those at risk of becoming serious and violent criminals: absolutely. We also need better rehabilitation for offenders. However, we cannot ignore the need to defend victims. That is not what we want. It is down to the Government, through the actions that my right hon. Friend has spelled out, to ensure we have an integrated approach to the criminal justice system and that the punishment fits the crime.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The first responsibility of any Government is, of course, to keep their citizens safe. Much of that responsibility in Scotland falls to the Scottish Government, and it is worth while discussing the Scottish experience with violent crime.

Serious violence is an emotive subject in this Chamber and across the country. The emotive nature of the subject has meant that politicians are too often pushed towards reactionary and populist “tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime” policies without properly addressing the latter sentiment. These mistakes can be made because politicians can too often play into the public’s fears or can perhaps be consumed by their own base instincts. More often than not, taking this tough Old Testament approach is the easy thing to do—it is simply the politically expedient thing to do.

As much as I understand this urge—I am a politician—I believe we can aspire to a criminal justice system that is more effective at reducing crime, as well as to a fairer justice system that encompasses a whole-system approach that sees violent crime for what it is: as a societal disease that can be treated, and as a crime that is all too often based in poverty and that can be, if not eradicated, then reduced with a rational, systematic and evidence-based approach. I am therefore convinced that the public health approach has been proven beyond doubt to work. It saves lives and reduces crime in our society, we have to use many methods—nobody in this House would dispute that. Yes, we need better education and more support for vulnerable people and those at risk of becoming serious and violent criminals: absolutely. We also need better rehabilitation for offenders. However, we cannot ignore the need to defend victims. That is not what we want. It is down to the Government, through the actions that my right hon. Friend has spelled out, to ensure we have an integrated approach to serious crime and tackling the many issues that blight our communities.

9.8 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The first responsibility of any Government is, of course, to keep their citizens safe. Much of that responsibility in Scotland falls to the Scottish Government, and it is worth while discussing the Scottish experience with violent crime.

Serious violence is an emotive subject in this Chamber and across the country. The emotive nature of the subject has meant that politicians are too often pushed towards reactionary and populist “tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime” policies without properly addressing the latter sentiment. These mistakes can be made because politicians can too often play into the public’s fears or can perhaps be consumed by their own base instincts. More often than not, taking this tough Old Testament approach is the easy thing to do—it is simply the politically expedient thing to do.

As much as I understand this urge—I am a politician—I believe we can aspire to a criminal justice system that is more effective at reducing crime, as well as to a fairer justice system that encompasses a whole-system approach that sees violent crime for what it is: as a societal disease that can be treated, and as a crime that is all too often based in poverty and that can be, if not eradicated, then reduced with a rational, systematic and evidence-based approach. I am therefore convinced that the public health approach has been proven beyond doubt to work. It saves lives and reduces crime in our society, we have to use many methods—nobody in this House would dispute that. Yes, we need better education and more support for vulnerable people and those at risk of becoming serious and violent criminals: absolutely. We also need better rehabilitation for offenders. However, we cannot ignore the need to defend victims. That is not what we want. It is down to the Government, through the actions that my right hon. Friend has spelled out, to ensure we have an integrated approach to serious crime and tackling the many issues that blight our communities.
Douglas Ross: The hon. Gentleman mentions future challenges. Does he think it is correct that someone in Scotland could be punched, kicked or even hit with a weapon and it would not be considered a violent crime? If we are going to truly assess this issue, we have to get the criteria correct for what is and what is not a violent crime.

Gavin Newlands: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I am by no means a policing expert, and obviously such crimes are recorded differently across jurisdictions. The fact is, however, that violent crime in Scotland has reduced by 49%, as has been recognised by his colleagues in the Scottish Parliament: Liam Kerr said that we have to recognise that Scotland has turned the corner when it comes to violent crime.

Good policy and effective policing strategy should not be controversial, which is why I am glad that similar initiatives have begun to be rolled out, such as the London violence reduction unit announced by Mayor Sadiq Khan.

In addition, the Scottish Government continue to provide real-terms protection to the resource budget for policing and have committed to protecting that budget for every year of the current Session of the Scottish Parliament. That amounts to a significant increase in investment of £100 million by 2021. As of April last year, the SNP has ensured that the police will also fully benefit from being able to reclaim VAT of around £25 million a year, which for far too long was stolen and kept by the Treasury here in Westminster. [Interruption.] I hear chuntering from the Government Benches that we knew it from the start, but the Scottish Conservatives also knew it from the start, yet it was in their manifesto too.

In England and Wales there are now 21,000 fewer police officers than there were in 2010, which makes it the lowest number since comparable records began. Those figures mean a decrease of nearly 15% from the previous nine years. However, I do not want to be complacent, and I stress that there is still plenty of room for improvement, but Scotland is becoming a much safer country thanks to the public health approach.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the White Ribbon Campaign, I draw particular attention to the importance that domestic violence plays in a public health approach to violence. This is an area where we have much further to go, both north of the border and across the rest of the UK. Gender-based violence is a national shame in every part of the UK. In 2016-17 there were nearly 59,000 reported cases of domestic abuse in Scotland, and in nearly 80% of those cases women were the victims. Although the way the data is collected can differ between countries, it is demonstrably higher than in similar small European nations such as the Republic of Ireland.

Domestic abuse clearly has a serious effect on the mental health and development of future generations. Around 16% of adverse childhood experiences are caused by witnessing domestic violence in the household. The vast majority of this, of course, is perpetrated by men against women. That is the largest contributor to ACEs of any household environmental factors. Compared with someone with no ACEs, someone with four or more is more likely to experience a range of negative outcomes in adulthood. For example, they are 16 times more likely to perpetrate violence, and 20 times more likely to be incarcerated at some point in their lifetime.

The Scottish Government are taking action to reduce domestic violence in households through an increase in health visitor numbers and the roll-out of family nurse partnerships, and through targeted investment in projects and services that support parents and families to cope better, keep children safe and prevent children from going into care. Although that falls outwith the Scottish Government’s policing strategy, it is steps like this that help people participate in society, tackle serious violence at its root cause and stop the cycle of violence perpetuating itself on and on.

In conclusion, the most compelling stories are the ones that are true. Over the past decade we have seen Scotland go from being called the murder capital of Europe to being the safest nation on these islands in which to live. I fear that in many crucial ways the serious violence strategy for England and Wales was a missed opportunity to tackle the problem in a completely objective and holistic manner, as we have done in Scotland. I implore Members across the House to see violence for what it is: a resilient societal disease. Although the symptoms must be appropriately punished, the root causes also deserve to be treated. We can no longer waste time and human energy trying to deal with the symptoms of generational violence.

While Scotland is enjoying lows in recorded crime that have not been seen for decades, violent crime in England and Wales is rising to deeply worrying levels. Thanks to the Scottish Government, and particularly the violence reduction unit, Scotland is becoming a safer country. I urge that a similar approach be tried and tested across the rest of the UK so that we may learn from each other. We need to understand better why violence happens, we need to be as objective as possible in tackling it, and we need to be mindful of the many forms that it comes in. We need an all-encompassing public health approach to violent crime.

9.18 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I shall be mentioning policing in Scotland, so I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. My wife is a serving police officer, although she is actually in her final week of work before taking maternity leave as we prepare for the arrival of our first child in a few weeks’ time.

Much of my remarks, while focusing on some elements that are devolved in Scotland, will be based on my experience as a member of the Home Affairs Committee, because we are currently undertaking an inquiry into serious violence. I have to say that the evidence session we had last October with parents of children who had died as a result of serious violence was one of the most compelling I have sat through. I feel it appropriate to repeat some of the evidence that we heard in the Committee, because it really puts into perspective what we are discussing this evening.

Philippa Addai’s son Marcel was stabbed 14 times by a gang of seven in September 2015. Yvonne Lawson’s son Godwin was stabbed while trying to break up a fight involving some of his friends. Yvonne’s testimony about her reaction on being told what had happened to her son was compelling. She said:
Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the Home Secretary for that.

This is a very serious issue. Over the almost 20 years that I have been in public life, very sadly, I have had to comfort far too many parents who have lost their children to violence. In fact, when I reflect on my career one day, and this is an apposite day on which to say this, as a member of the serious violence taskforce moves off in a different direction—I am of course thinking of the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna)—it is right to say that two cases stand out in my mind. The first is the young woman, Pauline Peart, who, at the beginning of my political career back in 2003, was shot in a car in my constituency and lost her life. The other was on bank holiday last year, when a young woman, Tanisha Melbourne-Blake, was also shot and killed.

It is right to say that that event sparked the current national concern about violent crime in our country. At that point, there was a lot of comment about the murder rate in London overtaking that of New York. I do not think we are quite in that place, but it nevertheless caused tremendous alarm. I think it was because it was a young woman who found herself in those circumstances, just having walked out of her home with a friend to go to a newsagent’s, and lost her life, that it caused such concern on that public holiday.

I guess the important thing in such a debate—this subject is probably the one I have spoken about more than other subject in this Chamber and in this House—is to ask: is the situation getting worse, is it stable or is it getting better? My judgment is that we have not got over the problem, and the situation feels significantly worse over the last period than it has done in the past. I have seen other spikes. I recall the spike back in 2008, and I remember that Ken Livingstone was the Mayor of London, but lost his post in part because crime became a very central issue in the campaign. There have been spikes over this period, but we are clearly in the grip of something at the moment.

I want to reflect briefly on some of the contexts of this spike and the national concern. The first is that, once upon a time—when I started, we talked about yardie gangs and Operation Trident had just been set up—I really thought this problem, which we had imported almost from downtown America, would go. It does not feel like that today; sadly, it feels almost a permanent feature of our urban life, and of course it has spread to areas that are very different from my own constituency. That is the first context that is very disturbing.

Why is that? We tend to focus on the violence and on the knives and the guns, but the real issue that drives much of this is not the knives or the guns. It is drugs,
money and demand, as well as the increasing quality of cocaine across our country and the drop in price of that product. It is prolific, and I was first struck by how prolific it is when sitting in Highbury magistrates court behind a young man—I think he was 17—who had been arrested for trafficking that drug on county lines, and I was staggered that he had been arrested in Aberdeen. What was my young constituent doing in Aberdeen, when I have never been to Aberdeen? I wish that I had been to Aberdeen, but I have not been there. I thought, “Why was he there?” He was there because it turns out there is quite a rich market for cocaine in Aberdeen. There is a middle-class life, with some money and some spend, and like a lot of places here in London and a lot of parts of our country, cocaine is particularly rife.

I welcome the review by Dame Carol Black that has been announced. This does open broader questions about drugs in our country, about the war on drugs and its failure, about our position and the repositioning of public policy on drugs, and—I have to raise this with the Home Secretary—the successive cuts in our Border Force. If we want enforcement on drugs and not to relax our position—although I think that is highly unlikely for cocaine—we have to police our borders.

When I met people at the National Crime Agency recently, they explained that they cannot possibly prevent the vast majority of drugs from coming into this country, although they do their best. Our Border Force is seriously stretched to police the market that is coming across the Atlantic, up through Spain, or across from Holland.

Drugs are the first major issue, and then it collides. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), the Opposition spokesman, has raised this, and I hate it being such a partisan issue, but there are real issues at a local authority level. Local authorities set the strategies for youth. They set the strategies for youth violence. They do it alongside the police—we turn to the police so often—but much of this falls to local authorities. My sense—I got around a lot when I was doing the review for the Government on the disproportionality of the criminal justice system for black and ethnic minorities—is that it is patchy across the country. It is not just patchy in terms of strategy and approach, but in terms of resource to address some of the problems, so investment in new services is important. It certainly means that issues such as how the pupil referral units are working and how alternative provision is working are central to this discussion.

The subject has come up in the serious violence taskforce and I remain concerned about the amount of young people who are effectively excluded from school, who are not getting an effective education and who are falling into the hands of adults who are exploiting them. That takes us to another issue: how do we address not the young people but the grown men who are exploiting them and trafficking them across the country? Is the law robust enough to send the message to these modern-day pimps—because that is how we should describe them—who are exploiting these young people in this way? The frustration is that we can go back quite a number of years, back to Dickens, and there will always be adults there to exploit young people. We have to bear down very hard on them.

The other colliding force affecting all young people across our country is of course social media and technology and, in this context, some of the rabbit holes into which young people can go in relation to particular types of music and particular types of violence. My concern is that much of that remains heavily unregulated and voluntarily policed by the industry. We have to do more to protect young people. It affects all young people. We see it in terms of suicide, anorexia, bulimia and those sorts of mental health issues among young people. In this area, it has a bearing on some of the increase in violent crime as well. I look forward to continuing to work with the Home Secretary, but there are issues with funding. It does not all fall to the police. The local context is important, and I am very concerned about the rise in drugs in this country, the rising market and the need to fully grip what we, as a nation, are to do about it.

9.33 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and to hear him explain the work he has done, as well as his experiences. I commend him for his knowledge of the subject and his contribution to trying to make things better.

This is a very timely debate, not because crime is increasing or decreasing in Erewash but, because we see serious violent crime in Erewash, but because there appears to be an increase in the use of cheap synthetic cannabis in our market towns as well as in our cities and because it appears so invasive. The issue has been highlighted to me by my constituents over recent weeks, as they have shared their concerns about visible drug dealing, mainly in synthetic drugs such as Mamba and Spice, and the resulting zombie state that is so distressing for my constituents to see, especially when young children see it as well.

It is completely unacceptable that the day-to-day lives of residents are being disrupted by people taking drugs. I have personally spoken to the local police inspector. As a result, the presence of uniformed patrols has increased in the area where it is happening. I would like to take this opportunity to commend my police officers across Erewash for their work, not just on this issue but day in, day out tackling everything that comes up. They never know what will be around the next corner.

Sadly, many of those targeted by the dealers are those who are the most vulnerable. I am also concerned that the dealing and use of drugs can so readily lead to more serious crimes. That is why I welcome the serious violence strategy published by the Government last year, in particular the action to tackle county lines, which other hon. Members have spoken about, and the misuse of drugs. I look forward to the Minister, in responding to the debate, providing an update on the progress being made to tackle the county lines issue. Work on intervention and prevention is vital if we are to get a grip on the pervasive use and abuse of drugs. For too many young people, their involvement in county lines and the resulting involvement in violence has, as we have heard, resulted in lives being lost and young people being seriously injured in gang attacks.

On a recent visit to one of the hospitals that serves my constituency, the Queen’s Medical Centre in Nottingham, I was able to see at first hand the work of
the charity Redthread, which is supported by the Home Office. It runs a youth violence intervention programme in the hospital’s emergency department, in partnership with the major trauma network. It is having a real impact, changing young people’s lives and moving them away from crime.

Redthread and other such charities provide the evidence that if we are to be successful in tackling all types of crime, we must understand that partnership working has the most success. It is not just about what the police do; it is also about collaboration with a wide range of statutory bodies and agencies. It is only by working together that low-level and more serious crime and violence will be tackled effectively.

9.37 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. Serious violence is an issue that we in Northern Ireland know better than most, but tonight we are discussing a different kind of serious violence. I would first of all like to welcome the Home Secretary’s commitment and the important measures he suggested to tackle knife violence. Many right hon. and hon. Members have referred to county lines and the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) referred to drugs. Drugs seem to be the key issue for most of what is happening.

I want to make a quick comment on firearms. The statistics show that those who have the legal right to have a firearm, through licences and firearm certificates, are the most law-abiding people in the land. It is therefore important that the focus is put on those who have illegal firearms and on deactivating firearms. I am reminded of a slogan I saw in Canada many years ago, which said “When all the guns are outlawed, the only people who will have guns will be the outlaws.” The message is clear: those who want to have guns illegally will find a way to do so.

In the short time available, I want to refer to serious domestic violence. Like other types of violence, serious domestic violence is about the psychological, physical, sexual, financial, emotional, controlling and coercive behaviour that can lead to a pattern of threats, humiliation and intimidation to harm, punish or frighten the victim—all serious violence. The level of domestic violence has dropped slightly in the past few years. That is good news as it shows that some things are working. At the end of the day, however, there were still 1.2 million female and 713,000 male victims in 2016-17. Also, 26% of women and 15% of men aged 16 to 59 had experienced some sort of domestic abuse since the age of 16. That equates to some 4.3 million female and 2.4 million male victims, which again, indicates the immensity of domestic violence and why it is important that it is addressed.

The Government have brought in a number of methods to address the issue, including domestic violence protection orders whereby a perpetrator can be banned from returning to their home and from having contact with the victim for up to 28 days. That is good stuff—the right sort of thing that we need—but again, it is important that victims are given the time and space to access support and consider their options. The domestic violence disclosure scheme—Clare’s law, which many will be aware of—has been rolled out across England and Wales since March 2014. The scheme means that an individual can ask the police to check whether a new or existing partner has a violent past. I wish that we had some of that legislation in Northern Ireland—it is the sort of legislation that we would like. The police will consider disclosing the information under the “right to know”.

The Government rightly committed some £80 million to a strategy on ending violence against women and girls. They have committed another £20 million to that as well, so some £100 million has been committed in total. In the Queen’s Speech of 2017, the Government promised a courts Bill that would “end direct cross examination of domestic violence victims by their alleged perpetrators in the family courts and allow more victims to participate in trials without having to meet their alleged assailant face-to-face”.

Will the Minister tell us what is happening in relation to that?

A couple of very helpful recommendations, again, came out of the Home Affairs Committee inquiry—a comprehensive review of funding of support for survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence, and the suggestion that the proposed domestic abuse commissioner should instead be established as a violence against women and girls and domestic abuse commissioner. I believe that that recommendation reflects, importantly, the gendered nature of domestic abuse and its links to other forms of gender-based abuse.

I want to finish with something that it is important to put on record. Today, one of my constituents contacted me—I am not going to mention her name; I am just going to tell her story. She said: “I have been the victim of domestic violence. In August 2017 my husband tried to strangle me and he set fire to our home. My 3 and 5 year old girls witnessed the abuse and my now 6 year old is still experiencing flashbacks, nightmares and dealing with panic attacks due to the trauma. Social services have said my ex husband is still not safe to have direct contact with my children however he is still seeking access through the courts. Next month I face being questioned by my ex husband in family court. This is a man who has a suspended jail term due to his abuse of me, a non molestation Order to stop him harassing me and the judge gave a 2 year restraining order due to the level of abuse I have suffered and then next month he will be allowed the opportunity to have direct contact with me. The domestic abuse bill introduced in the first Queen’s Speech in 2017 never materialised. We do not have it yet, as she and I would like. I know that it is not your responsibility to do that, Minister—[Interruption.] It is not your responsibility either, Mr Speaker—I am sorry, I do that all the time. I was trying to get away from using the word “you”. I apologise—when we are in the middle of all this EU stuff, it is very hard to distinguish the two.

I am sure that the Minister has been touched, as I was, by that heartfelt plea from a lady who has been through nightmarish scenarios to get safety for her children and is begging for us to make a change so that other people do not have to go through this. Again, for the record, we need the domestic abuse Bill and these proposals to be put forward here in the UK mainland and in Northern Ireland—I wish we had them.

9.43 pm

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): Thank you for giving me time to speak in this very important debate on serious violence, Mr Speaker. As many Members have
said before me, we are seeing a dramatic change in the type of violence that takes place in our country.

As a statistician, I go back to the statistics, and it is interesting to see that while the level of knife crime is increasing, just recently the level of gun crime seems to have come down. The level of homicides is also increasing, but I was comparing the statistics with those in other European countries and I noticed that our homicide rates are actually well below those of the Netherlands, Belgium and Scandinavia—less than half of the rates in those countries—and well below countries like Germany and Italy.

However, when it comes to violence, lives are not statistics. Violence has a real impact on communities and families, and I have been very pleased to see the Government working to address these issues not only through the serious violence strategy, but by looking at how to address the changing nature of online crime. On the Science and Technology Committee, we recently took evidence on the impact of social media on young people's lives. We heard chilling evidence of how serious gangs use online tools, such as YouTube, to seduce young people to get involved in their gangs, resulting in young, especially vulnerable, teenagers taking part in criminal activity. Last Saturday night, Essex police saw two people running from a vehicle when they spotted the police. The police gave chase and apprehended them. The car contained drugs and knives, and the number plates were false; the driver was 16.

When it comes to fighting crime, our police are on the frontline. Ten days ago, I attended the passing-out parade of 55 new police officers in Essex. They are in addition to the 150 extra officers who joined the force last year and are part of the 240 joining this year. They are vital to our police's future and are proudly funded by the Essex taxpayer. It is beyond belief that the Labour party refused to vote for the funding that made those police officers available. I spoke to every one of the new recruits. Many were on the fast track to become detectives under a programme established to bring new skills into the modern force, many were women, and many had experience in the armed forces or other civil occupations.

In Essex, our police have been working hard to target knife and drug-related crime, and stop and search is a vital part of their toolkit. In the last three months of last year, Chelmsford police undertook about 500 stop and searches—compared with only 80 the year before—and it works. One third resulted in a positive outcome—finding that the person was carrying something they should not have been, such as a weapon or a drug. This visible, pro-active work on the streets has resulted in many arrests and a tougher approach to fighting crime. I am pleased that stop and search has been extended to people suspected of carrying corrosive substances or acid in public places. Many young people in my constituency have raised with me the fear of acid attack.

Fighting crime is not just about the police, however, but about partnerships. Our excellent police and crime commissioner in Essex, Roger Hirst, who has been mentioned before, asked me to mention the violence and vulnerability strategy, which we have had in place since last summer, and which brings together partners to work on prevention and intervention. It was the first framework of its nature in the country. I also thank the Home Office for the £664,000 it invested in the early intervention youth fund, which was matched by £500,000 from the county council. Such measures are positive incentives to getting partners aligned and have a positive impact.

In Essex, our children's services have just been rated outstanding by Ofsted and No. 1 in the country. The joined-up work of the gangs intervention team was particularly praised.

Mr Speaker: Order. I have allocated six minutes to each Front-Bench spokesperson, so last sentence please.

Vicky Ford: In conclusion, this joined-up approach to early intervention does work and should be a focus of the upcoming spending review.

9.48 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part in this debate, although I do not plan to go through all their contributions because time is so limited.

As my right hon. Friend the shadow Home Secretary pointed out, this seems like a very rushed debate. It has been rushed forward with no indication that any action will follow. Based on the contributions, the Government's continued inability to tackle the rise in serious violent crime seems unlikely to alter. It is clear from today's debate that right hon. and hon. Members are deeply concerned about the rise in serious crime, and the Government's lack of decisive action is also concerning. Ministers have failed to tackle the underlying causes of crime. In fact, their policies have made them worse.

Ministers are relying on eye-catching initiatives designed to achieve good headlines, but these do not amount to a strategy, or even to effective initiatives. The latest are their knife crime prevention orders, for which there is no evidence, and these follow Ministers' support for more random stop and searches, more Tasers, more spit hoods, and so on and so on, none of which measures is supported by evidence.

Ministers have still failed to answer some basic questions about the knife crime prevention orders. They have failed to explain on what evidence the Home Office has based its new policy; if there is evidence, it should be made available to the House. They have failed to explain what oversight of the orders there will be, and what review or appraisal will be made of their effectiveness or otherwise. It is hard to see how, without evidence, the Minister can reasonably expect the orders to have any appreciable effect in reducing knife crime. There has also been no indication of what safeguards have been introduced to prevent the issuing of incorrect or inappropriate orders, and of whether we shall see any report examining the subjects of the orders by region, locality, family income and, of course, ethnicity.

This is all of a piece with the Government's previous announcements. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) has pointed out, the evidence does not support an increase in stop and search. In November last year, researchers from the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies examined data including a study commissioned by the Home Office, and concluded there was "limited evidence of the effectiveness of stop and search in reducing crime".

In conclusion, this joined-up approach to early intervention does work and should be a focus of the upcoming spending review.
That is absolutely in line with the Home Office’s own research, and with separate analysis conducted by the College of Policing. There is a similar absence of evidence to support the use of spit hoods, which are almost designed to humiliate those who are stopped, and the same is true of Tasers.

However, the Home Secretary and the Government do not seem to operate on the basis of evidence at all. In fact, their assurances about their own policies do not bear scrutiny. At the beginning of October last year, the Home Secretary announced that the Government were taking a dramatic turn towards the adoption of a public health approach to tackling violent crime, including knife crime. If that statement was not made simply as an irrelevant soundbite, can the Minister tell us, even now, how the new policy on knife crime prevention orders accords with the previous announcement of a public health approach?

The truth is that since 2010 the austerity policy as a whole has had the effect of worsening the causes of crime, and that since that year, successive Tory-led Governments have axed the jobs of 21,000 police officers. This is the real record on serious violence: it is a toxic cocktail of failure. Moreover, nothing has changed. Austerity continues in all areas of social policy, and it continues in policing. The latest police settlement is a cut in real terms, once the funding for police and it continues in policing. The latest police settlement is a cut in real terms, once the funding for police officers. This is the real record on serious violence: it is a toxic cocktail of failure. Moreover, nothing has changed. Austerity continues in all areas of social policy, and it continues in policing. The latest police settlement is a cut in real terms, once the funding for police officers.

The Government continue to operate as though it were possible to have safety and security on the cheap, but their own record shows that it is not. A Labour Government are needed to end this failure.

9.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I thank all Members who have spoken for their passionate and moving speeches, although I note—as I often need to—that the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) has perhaps misjudged the tone of the debate.

Across our country, serious violence is robbing people of their futures, families of their loved ones, and children of their lives. My hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) spoke of the experiences of the families of Marcel, Godwin, Jay and Kenichi, and also spoke movingly of the work that their parents are now doing to try to stop knife crime. The right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) spoke compellingly, as he always does—particularly about Pauline and Tanesha, two women who were killed in his constituency some 20 years apart.

This issue transcends party politics. Serious violence is a matter of grave concern to all of us, and to those whom we represent. If we in this place can be united in our anger, we can also be united in our efforts to tackle violent crime. As the Home Secretary said at the start of the debate, tackling violent crime is an absolute priority for the Government, but just as there is no one cause of serious violence, there is no one solution. It can only be effectively tackled though the combined efforts of Government, law enforcement and civil society—and, crucially, through a coherent short, medium, and long-term approach.

Through our serious violence strategy and our serious organised crime strategy, we are tackling those who ensnare young people in criminality, while intervening earlier to prevent them from being drawn into these terrible webs of violence. With immediate effect, the Government have set up the national county lines co-ordination centre. We are taking the Offensive Weapons Bill through the House. We are also introducing knife crime prevention orders at the request of the police because they believe that this is one way to help prevent young people from being drawn into criminality. We have also handed out money through the anti-knife-crime community fund; I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) and my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), who spoke about the contributions made by the voluntary sector in their constituencies. This has all been overseen by the cross-party serious violence taskforce, which includes the right hon. Member for Tottenham, for whose attention we are most grateful.

In the medium term, we are investing in our early intervention youth fund across the country to work with children and young people and steer them away from gangs and crime. We know of the link between drug markets and serious violence, so the news of a major independent review into drug misuse has been welcomed by hon. Members, including the right hon. Member for Tottenham and my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash, who spoke about the impact of synthetic cannabis in her constituency. The Home Secretary has announced £1.4 million to enhance the ability of the police to tackle gang-related activity on social media. Colleagues across the House have spoken about the impact social media can have on gangs, including through bragging, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham mentioned, and the chilling evidence heard by the Science and Technology Committee, as set out by my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford). The new social media hub will help the police and the tech companies bear down on those who would use social media to spread their criminality.

Our long-term strategy seeks explicitly to identify and tackle the root causes of violent behaviour. The only solution is prevention. That is why we are carrying out a consultation on a new legal duty to underpin a multi-agency public health approach to tackling serious violence. In practice, a duty would mean that police officers, education providers, local authorities and healthcare professionals would all have a legal responsibility to act to prevent violent crime.

A new £200 million youth endowment fund, delivered over 10 years, will support intervention with those children and young people most at risk and provide interventions to deliver long-lasting change. It is only by reaching out to the most vulnerable that we can combat violence now and in the future.

Members mentioned the role of exclusions in the vulnerability of children to being drawn into violent crime, or indeed being victims of it. The Home Office is working with the Department for Education on this issue, and alongside the exclusions review the Department...
for Education is providing £4 million through the alternative provision innovation fund to improve outcomes for children in non-mainstream education.

I am also grateful to colleagues who raised the role of adverse childhood experiences, as the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) mentioned, and in particular the role that domestic abuse plays, sadly, in the lives of children drawn into violence. My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) both raised the issue of domestic abuse. From the work I have done in visiting youth workers and speaking to former members of gangs, it has been clear that domestic abuse is a theme that runs constantly through these young people’s lives. That is why the Domestic Abuse Bill will, as well as tackling domestic abuse, have huge positive impacts on the life chances of children who live in abusive households. I know there are colleagues across the House, including in the Opposition, who will be helping the Government bring that very important piece of legislation through. I hope the hon. Member for Strangford will forgive me if I promise to write to him rather than addressing the particular points he raised about domestic abuse in this debate, because we are, sadly, running short of time.

We are working to tackle the threat of county lines, to impede the supply of weapons and to identify those young people most at risk of violence, but I join all colleagues across the House who tonight have thanked their police officers working in their constituencies on the frontline, including the 55 new officers in Essex.

I was delighted to see the video on the social media pages of my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford. I also want to thank the police and crime commissioners and those in the voluntary sector who do so much work with these young people. We heard tonight about the great work of Redthread, and there are many more charities that help us in this sphere. No one should have to face the pain and devastation that violent crime can cause a person, a family and a community, and by working together we will stop this—

10 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Business without Debate

Mr Speaker: We now come to motion 6, on the Joint Committee on the draft Registration of Overseas Entities Bill. Motion not moved. We now come to a series of motions, and for the convenience, and with the agreement, of the House, I propose to take them together. I am fairly confident of what is going to happen, but we will see. I ask the Whip to move motions 7 to 17. Motions not moved.

FINANCE COMMITTEE

Ordered.

That Helen Jones be discharged from the Finance Committee and Bambos Charalambous be added.—(Mark Spencer, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

Stirling and Clackmannanshire City Region Deal

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

10 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I am delighted to have secured this Adjournment debate on the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city region deal. I am proud, too, that this Conservative and Unionist Government have made it possible for every single one of Scotland’s cities to have a city deal, adding up to billions of pounds of public investment unlocking many billions more in private investment. It is a Government record that all Scottish Conservatives can and should be proud of, and one that will bear fruit for Scotland’s economy and Scotland’s people well into the future. City deals drive investment in infrastructure. A city deal sends a strong signal from the Government that they have confidence in the future of the city and the region and that they are prepared to commit public funds to make that future a reality. City deals are designed with the intention of transforming the local economy and creating a landscape in which individuals, communities and businesses are enabled to explore their full potential.

The genesis of the Stirling city deal was the realisation that Stirling’s economy had several structural weaknesses that needed to be addressed. First, while Stirling is the best place in Scotland for people to set up and start a business, and the best place in Scotland for a large established business to continue its journey—

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. He is of course speaking about the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city region deal, and Clackmannshire shares the accolade of being one of the best places to start a business in Scotland.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his well-intentioned correction.

While Stirling is also a great place for large established businesses to continue their journey, we have a real issue locally when it comes to small businesses scaling up to become successful larger businesses. The lack of scale-up businesses is due in part to a shortage of the right kind of business space and a shortage of the skills most needed by employers to grow their businesses. The situation is not helped by a shortage of housing of all types in Stirling, and the need for microbusinesses to be given the practical business support they need to help them on their commercial journey. Secondly, Stirling’s economy is held back by wealth inequality. We have some of Scotland’s wealthiest and poorest postcodes, and we need a more inclusive approach to economic development.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the good work that he does. He is a very assiduous Member for Stirling, and this is an example of just how hard he works. Well done! My constituency will gain from the Belfast city region deal, and I am grateful for that, but does he agree that local councillors are looking at lists and could perhaps think of better projects to fund? Does he agree that more weight should be given to the development departments in local councils? I certainly do.
Stephen Kerr: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. City deals are nothing if not a partnership between all levels of government, and their success will depend on the ability of all those levels of government to work together successfully.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this excellent debate. I hope he will allow me to make one further correction to his speech. As well as city deals, there are also general growth deals. Moray might not be a city, but we are well on the way to securing the Moray growth deal, which will unlock great untapped potential in our local economy.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention, but the debate, of course, is about the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city region deal.

Many of the good, well-paid jobs in Stirling are located outside the local area, while many of the jobs created within Stirling are filled by commuters. Access to the local job market is too limited for many people in some of Stirling’s most deprived areas, particularly in rural Stirling, due to skills shortages, the lack of high-value pathway jobs and entry-level positions, and basic transport infrastructure shortcomings.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this important debate to the Chamber. City deals are a fantastic way for the UK and Scottish Governments to work together, which all our constituents want. He mentions rural initiatives, and the Tay cities deal included broadband funding in Angus. The Scottish Government’s roll-out has been slow, and we have seen extra investment from the UK Government, so city deals can bring such important initiatives.

Stephen Kerr: Again, I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. I know Angus really well, and I concur with what she says about the importance of broadband in revitalising Scotland’s rural economy, and I will come on to that later—should I be able to.

The deal needs to tackle the issues that I have tried to describe and deliver inclusive economic growth and opportunities right across the district. We need to build a confident future in which businesses can grow, people can access good employment, young families can own their own homes, and young people can have a bright future, without having to leave the area.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and congratulate him on securing this debate. Does he agree that city deals also provide a fantastic opportunity for local employment and for local small businesses and contractors to get involved in bids for carrying out city deal work, both in the original design-and-build phase and in continuing employment on projects?

Stephen Kerr: I completely agree. There would be little point in city deals, with the investment that comes with them, if the work was not done by businesses and people who live in that area. If we did not take that approach, the whole thing would be rather pointless and unsustainable.

The deal is now at an advanced stage. We have the signed heads of agreement, which demonstrates the commitment made not only by the UK Government, but by the Scottish Government and the local council.

The University of Stirling is a major partner in much of this, as is Forth Valley College. Both institutions benefit from having visionary leadership. The university is likely to be a major beneficiary of the city region deal, as much of the investment is aimed at promoting the commercialisation of the university’s research and development capabilities. The good name of the University of Stirling will only continue to increase in esteem.

The city region deal sets out several commitments that have already been made. The international environment centre will be based across the region but centred at the university, where a new research and policy centre will bring in dividends from the environment sector. It will become a catalyst for the set-up and scale-up of new environmental companies, building on the international reputation our area already has in this field. The new institute for aquaculture and global food security will also secure Stirling’s worldwide reputation as a centre of excellence for research and breakthrough solutions in the sector. Existing business interests in the sector will be supplemented by new ventures.

The national tartan centre will be a significant economic asset. I often feel I must remind colleagues about the global importance of tartan not just to Scotland’s traditional heritage sector, but as a part of today’s global fashion industry. Stirling is perfectly positioned to take up the mantle of hosting the national tartan centre as Bannockburn was a centre for manufacturing and design of tartan for much of its history. The tartan centre will become the UK-wide showcase for tartan and help to launch new design and fashion houses, building on its iconic global reputation. It will also become a hub for family history research, attracting new businesses into the growing global phenomenon and fascination people have for discovering their ancestry.

The Ministry of Defence has agreed to hand over the land at the recently vacated Forthside—a military base specialising in the maintenance of Army equipment. The site is of key importance because it sits between the river and our industrial estate and will become a grow-on space for businesses right in the heart of the city. It will combine with work that is already under way to host a third sector hub and a public sector innovation hub, creating a corridor of opportunity for public, private and third sectors to innovate and share ideas well into the future.

There will be a comprehensive regional energy masterplan, which will see new investment in schemes and projects to harness the power that can be generated from our natural resources in Stirling.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): I compliment my hon. Friend for securing this debate and for sharing his enthusiasm for the Stirling and Clackmannanshire growth deal. Will he join me in commending the hard work of the teams at the three Ayrshire councils that have come together to drive this forward?

Stephen Kerr: I absolutely commend the council teams, and I will talk about Stirling Council if I have time.

We have natural resources in Stirling and Clackmannanshire, and the masterplan is already delivering a combined heat and power project in the city centre that derives heat from our sewage treatment works to warm commercial and public sector buildings throughout
Stirling. Beyond that, geothermal, wind, hydro and solar will all play a part, and the opportunity for innovation and commercialisation is unlimited. Skills and innovation go together not only in ensuring the creation of job opportunities that can be accessed by all but in specific schemes in the neighbouring area of Clackmannanshire. The skills that businesses need can be delivered in the local area, and everyone can benefit. This joined-up working between the two areas allows capital sums to be best utilised across Stirling and Clackmannanshire, recognising how interconnected the two areas are.

I now come to the meat of what I want to say. Stirling is ready to go. We have an engaged and energised private sector that is ready to invest, and we have a local authority that stands ready to deliver. All the local parties in Stirling share a commitment to delivering the city region deal. We just need to sign off on the business case. The individual projects are well thought out and planned, and I am sure the Minister will want to assure the House tonight that the UK Government are fully energised behind the Stirling and Clackmannanshire deal.

Waiting for perfection and for everything to be planned out across all areas of the deal will only delay the creation of jobs and prosperity in Stirling. There is no perfect slate of projects, and it is essential that we get things moving so that we can deliver. We need to see hi-vis jackets, hard hats and cranes on Stirling’s skyline. It is time for us to start the work.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making a great case for his local area. Will he join me in welcoming the £5 million top-up that is coming from the Scottish Government, in addition to the city deal funding? Will he also join me in pressing the UK Government to match the Scottish Government’s funding for city deals across Scotland?

Stephen Kerr: I have no hesitation in doing so, and I was challenged on this earlier. Do I welcome the positive actions of the Scottish Government? Of course I do, and I welcome the additional investment that the Scottish Government promised for the city deal. It is targeted, and I support the Scottish Government’s utilisation of public funds in that way.

We need the MOD land at Forthside to be released. The site needs to be decontaminated and handed over as soon as possible. How soon can that be done?

The new-build tartan centre will bring additional private sector investment almost immediately. We must start on the national tartan centre soon, and I would love to see one of my right hon. Friends on the Treasury Bench coming up to Stirling with spade in hand to turn the sod and start the construction. Why not?

Luke Graham: I look forward to those same Ministers coming across to Clackmannanshire to help start the international environment centre in Alloa west. Does my hon. Friend agree that the £8 million capital fund set aside by the UK Government for a centre in Clackmannanshire, which had less regional assistance spending to develop its business cases, is unprecedented? It is a first for any city deal in Scotland and has enabled us the time and space to develop new projects that will benefit Clackmannanshire in the short term and for many years to come.

Stephen Kerr: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work in securing that unprecedented amount of money for an untagged project. He and I have had long discussions about the importance of the UK Government being active in the Scottish economic scene. I will come on to say something more about that, with which I hope he will agree.

We need to make sure that all parts of Stirling, whether geographic or social, can benefit from this deal. In rural Stirling, we want to see financial and other practical support for rural business hubs. Some of these are already delivering for their communities, and the businesses that will be located there will grow and diversify the local economy—that is badly needed. We need them in other areas of Stirling, especially in the eastern villages of Cowie, Plean and Fallin.

Digital connectivity was mentioned earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) and it is important, and our bid should be to ensure there is digital connection that these villages in rural areas can benefit from. No area should be left behind. We need to build a digitally connected district beyond the city centre. Local full fibre networks are a great way to do this, and we have commercial investment happening in Stirling though CityFibre. This fantastic investment will make Stirling truly a digital city, but in rural areas, including the eastern villages, we need this investment. I call on the Government, who have responsibility for connectivity, to make direct investment in these areas and make that a reality.

We need government, especially the Scottish Government, to get serious about rural infrastructure. Whether we are talking about getting a new bridge for Callander, which would transform the economy there, or turning the A811 Stirling to Balloch road into a trunk road, the needs are there to be seen. I would like to see these projects treated as major upgrades to the national infrastructure, because of the positive economic benefit they would bring far beyond the communities where those items of infrastructure would be constructed. These benefits would be real, impactful and immediate. It is imperative that all levels of government pull together in such areas.

Today, I ask the Minister to comment on what additional support could be given. We have the commitment for funding on the projects, but what I feel is lacking is a stronger overall commitment from the UK Government to get more heavily involved in promoting and investing in the Scottish economy; I am concerned about a lasting thought of “devolve and forget” in the UK Government. I want to hear assurances from Ministers that the UK shared prosperity fund will be used for this purpose by the UK Government in Scotland.

There are very few UK Government departmental offices in Scotland, with the only significant presence of any Department being that of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy in Aberdeen, where an office is dedicated to promoting the oil and gas industry. The Scottish economy is more varied than that, and the case for a UK Government presence in central Scotland is compelling.
Patrick Grady: (Glasgow North) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman will of course be aware that the Department for International Development has a significant presence in East Kilbride, so I will be taking this opportunity to confirm, as perhaps the Minister might, the Government’s commitment to retaining DFID as an independent Department? I hope that you do not mind, Mr Speaker, but as everybody else has mentioned their city deals, I should ask: is there not a lot to learn from the Glasgow city deal as well?

Stephen Kerr: Oh, there is a great deal to learn from the Glasgow city deal. Of course I acknowledge the existence of DFID in East Kilbride and the amazing work it does. As the hon. Gentleman knows, I am a great supporter of the work of that Department, and I would hate to see it absorbed into the Foreign Office, for example. Whether the Treasury, BEIS, the Department for International Trade or the Home Office, these Departments serve the purposes of the wider Union, and Scotland needs to see that it is part of the United Kingdom. London must not be the be-all and end-all when it comes to sharing out UK Government functions and personnel, and the city deal in Stirling and Clackmannanshire offers us an opportunity, not only to see the Union flag flying on projects in Stirling, funded by taxpayers from the whole UK, but to see that commitment made real on the ground, with Departments of the Union there supporting, and not remote and distant.

I mentioned the work of Stirling Council earlier. I will close soon, so that the Minister can reply, but I should mention the excellent work done by the officers of Stirling Council, who have shown themselves to be skilled and able to punch well above the weight one would expect of a council of that size.

Luke Graham: My hon. Friend is making an excellent point about how different levels of our government work together. Having been part of two city deals, it has been clear to me that we need to use these deals as a learning point. Both the central Government in Westminster and the devolved Administration need to look at how they work with each other and to find methods that are more transparent and effective at delivering for our constituents.

Stephen Kerr: I agree with my hon. Friend. He and I have the scars from our learning experience with the city deal we are discussing tonight, and the learning from Glasgow and Edinburgh needs to be taken on board. There are better ways to do the things that we do. There is always room for continual improvement.

Jim Shannon: It is obvious from what the hon. Gentleman is saying that this is about Westminster, the Scottish Parliament and the councils together. Does that not underline the fact that we can do much better if we are all together as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—and that includes our good friends the Scots nats?

Stephen Kerr: The hon. Gentleman sums it up beautifully. One might say “better together”, and that is exactly the case. The council officers at Stirling Council have done an incredible job of pulling together the city deal, and I give them credit. Knowing their tenacity and their entrepreneurship, I have every confidence that they will deliver on the outcomes predicted for the city region deal. Would it not be great if the council could point to UK Departments—on the ground, right next to it—and know that it has their backing, that they share its ideals and goals and that they are as close to the detailed delivery as it is? Can we have a BEIS taskforce assigned to Stirling and Clackmannanshire to help with the execution of the city deal? I have asked for that before, and I would really like the Government to make a practical and real commitment of that nature.

Our Stirling economy—the Government have demonstrated that they have confidence in it—can be a shining beacon of how different levels of government can work together to attract and retain high-quality business investment. It will be a place to which business from around the UK and the wider world will flock when they see how government at all levels devotes itself to the development of the area. I want nothing less than for this city region deal to be the engine that drives the whole of central Scotland forward. Stirling is a burgh that received royal recognition some 900 years ago, and this city region deal will build on that long and illustrious history. It will build a future in which innovation and investment are harnessed to create good, well-paid jobs and to bring better life prospects to all people in all parts of my constituency.

10.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Nigel Adams): I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city region deal. I pay tribute to him and to my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) for their role in advocating for this deal across the Government and securing investment for their constituencies. We were delighted that the £45 million UK Government investment was matched by the Scottish Government.

I am pleased that we are committed to funding deals in each of Scotland’s seven cities, including Stirling and Clackmannanshire. That represents a total investment of £1.2 billion by the UK Government. With contributions from our friends in the Scottish Government and other partners, the total figure is even higher. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland has further commitments, and that is why the Government are rolling out deals beyond the city regions in areas such as Ayrshire, Moray and the borderlands. With further investment from other public and private partners, the total value of these deals amounts to several billion pounds. They represent a fantastic opportunity to give local and regional economies across Scotland a significant, real and transformational boost.

Douglas Ross: Will the Minister confirm that although it is important that the city deals are taken forward, it is right that the UK Government have committed to extending such deals across Scotland? Moray, which does not have a city, could benefit from a Moray growth deal in the same way as the cities have done.

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend is absolutely right in that regard. We are committed to having 100% coverage of Scotland. As he will be aware, a commitment to the Moray growth deal was announced at the Budget. It involves some very exciting projects, including an energy pipeline, employability programmes for service families and a college hub looking at innovation in manufacturing. While the figure has not yet been clarified, the Treasury
I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire on everything he has done to help secure that additional money from the Treasury. It is no easy feat wresting money from the Treasury, so he should be commended.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland is planning on announcing more details on that deal shortly. As part of the deal, we are pleased to be releasing some surplus MOD land for development in the centre of Stirling, and the Department for Work and Pensions is running a bespoke scheme in Clackmannanshire to help lone parents return to work.

Let me quickly refer to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling about the MOD land. At first sight, the land is due to be made available under the defence estates review in 2022, which is well within the 10-year scope of the deal. The office of the Secretary of State for Scotland and the MOD are working together to ensure that the land at Forthside is ready to be released in a fit state.

On my hon. Friend’s other very valid point, I would just like to politely remind him that the UK Government are committed to Scotland—it is not a case of devolve and walk away. As I have said previously, the UK Government have committed over £1.2 billion to support development in Scotland through the city and growth deal programme. That is what I call real commitment.

These investments represent a significant package that will help to transform the economies of Stirling, Clackmannanshire and Scotland. Growth deals should be transformational and show the real benefits that can be brought about when Scotland’s two Governments work together instead of pulling apart—[Interruption.] I agree with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that we are much better together.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland signed the heads of terms for the deal in May last year and expects to agree the full deal in the summer. That will herald a 15-year programme of investment and growth that will bring real and tangible benefits to all those who live and work across the region. My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling is right. He wants to see hi-vis jackets and spades in the ground: I am happy to go up there with a spade and break the ground myself if necessary. In my view, the deal will be the engine that drives the whole of Scotland forward.

Question put and agreed to.

10.30 pm

House adjourned.
The Secretary of State was asked—

**PrEP Impact Trial**

1. Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): What discussions he has had with (a) NHS England, (b) Public Health England and (c) local authorities on ensuring that the Government’s commitment to double the number of places on the PrEP impact trial can be implemented in all trial sites as soon as possible.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): On 30 January, we announced that we will increase access to PrEP, doubling the number of people who can receive this potentially life-saving HIV prevention drug.

Peter Kyle: Funding for HIV prevention has become quite complex, with a complex mix of central funding and local authority funding. Cities such as Brighton and Hove still have the highest contraction rates outside London. Will the Secretary of State meet me and the Terrence Higgins Trust to understand how that is impacting us on the frontline and tell us what more can be done?

Matt Hancock: Of course I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss this matter. In the long-term plan, we made it clear that we are looking at commissioning arrangements for sexual health services. I am delighted that the number of new cases of HIV has been falling and that we have been able to declare that by 2030 we want the UK to have zero AIDS. That is an achievable, but hard, goal, and I will work with anybody to make it happen.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Does the Secretary of State share the widespread concern about the variation in availability of PrEP treatment, which is surely an unacceptable situation?

Matt Hancock: There is a variability in availability. Of course the current model of delivery is a trial—we have doubled the size of that trial but it is still a trial that runs until 2021. I am very happy to work with my hon. Friend as well as with the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) to try to make sure that it is as available as possible.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Hammersmith is one of the sites that is now closed. When will PrEP be made freely available? Here we have a drug that has almost 100% effectiveness and that will save money for the NHS through HIV protection. When will we see it available to anyone who needs it?

Matt Hancock: As I have said, last month we doubled the availability of PrEP, which is an important step in the right direction.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): Colchester is one of the sites that is now closed to men who have sex with men who want to access the HIV prevention drug PrEP. When will the Government’s commitment, made almost three weeks ago, to double the number of places on the PrEP trial be implemented across all trial sites?

Matt Hancock: It is being implemented as we speak. I am very happy to talk to my hon. Friend about when it will be rolled out in Colchester.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I welcome the Government’s commitment to end the transmission of HIV in England by 2030. However, HIV reduction was not mentioned in either the prevention plan or the long-term plan. How will the Government reach that ambitious goal without a concerted and fully costed strategy?

Matt Hancock: We do have a concerted and fully costed strategy. Indeed, I have given the commitment of ending new AIDS cases by 2030 with a plan around that. The long-term plan goes into detail about new ways of commissioning sexual health services. This is a very important area, and, as the hon. Lady says, it is an important part of the prevention agenda, and we will make sure that we get it right.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before we proceed further, I hope that colleagues on both sides of the House will want to join me in extending a very warm welcome to Democratic New York State Assemblyman Sean Ryan, who is with us today. Welcome to you, Sir: we are delighted to have you.

**Future of the NHS**

2. Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What steps he is taking to secure the long-term future of the NHS.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): We are increasing the NHS budget by £20 billion, or £33 billion in cash terms, over the next five years. This major investment will support the NHS to continue to deliver world-class care. The long-term plan set out a vision for the NHS, ensuring that every penny will be well spent.
Jeremy Lefroy: I thank the Secretary of State very much for his answer. Local accident and emergency departments, such as at County Hospital in Stafford, are absolutely vital for the long-term plan of the NHS. What can he do to ensure that funding is there for these departments because they need an awful lot of block funding and not so much payment by procedure—or payment as you go?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend, who is an advocate for Stafford beyond compare and an advocate for its A&E—he has personally put much effort into saving it and ensuring that it is in good shape—rightly makes the point that paying per person who comes through the door does not accurately reflect the costs of providing A&E, so we are moving to a much greater proportion of block funding for A&Es, with a smaller element that varies according to the costs of serving everybody, to ensure that the finances follow the need.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): The latest figures show that more than one in five patients visiting Leighton Hospital A&E in Crewe has had to wait for more than four hours, yet instead of receiving support, the trust has been financially penalised, unable to access capital support to fund improvements to its A&E, while at the same time losing out on the performance element of the provider sustainability fund. Can the Minister explain how the Government are supporting Leighton Hospital?

Matt Hancock: We are supporting Leighton Hospital through the delivery of the long-term plan and the extra £20 billion—£33 billion in cash terms—the first £6 billion of which comes on stream in April, in two months’ time. It is true that a record number of people are going to A&E. We have to make sure that the record numbers being treated within the four-hour target are supported, but that we also support hospitals to do yet more.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): In Telford, we have been waiting five years for the chance to ask the Secretary of State to call in for review a highly controversial plan called Future Fit. We now have that chance, and the Secretary of State has been really generous with his time in listening to MPs’ concerns. The local council, however, has still not yet made any submission to the Secretary of State. Can he confirm that without that submission he cannot call in that scheme for review?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend has made the case very powerfully for the future of Telford Hospital, and I have enjoyed working with her, but it is true that the call-in powers that I have as Secretary of State can be exercised only when a scheme is referred to me by a local council. Should that happen, I will consider it very carefully.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State now come clean with the House and admit that the Lansley Act, which fragmented the NHS into tiny pieces, caused huge inefficiencies; and that successive Governments, including the one of whom he is a member, have starved the NHS of resources, which has caused a lot of the problems that our constituents face in increased waiting times and increased pressure on staff?

Matt Hancock: We care about securing the future of the NHS. That is why we are putting £20 billion extra into it over the next five years—£33 billion extra in cash terms. Yes, we will consider proposals being made for legislative changes, but what we care about is making sure that the NHS gets all the support it needs, and not just political nonsense.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the vital components to ensure the long-term future of the NHS is community hospitals? Will he meet me to discuss what can be done to recruit more qualified staff, so that beds at the Portland Community Hospital can be reopened?

Matt Hancock: I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that, because community hospitals have a vital role to play in the future of the NHS as more care is delivered close to home.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): It was not insignificant, what happened between ’97 and 2010 under a Labour Government. They trebled the amount of money going to the national health service. It was a system of hypothecation, whereby a 1% increase in national insurance went directly to the national health service, and nobody else fiddled with it.

Matt Hancock: It is unusual, but I am delighted to be able to agree with the thrust of the hon. Gentleman’s question. As he knows, we both come from Nottinghamshire mining stock, and it is surprising that we do not agree on more, but we do agree on the importance of having a properly funded NHS. That is why we have put the largest ever, longest ever cash injection into the NHS, because we care that it should be fit for the future.

Toxic Air and Children’s Health

3. Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): What assessment he has made of the effect of toxic air on children’s health. [909302]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): Poor air quality is the largest environmental risk to public health in the United Kingdom. Long-term exposure to air pollution can cause chronic conditions, such as cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, as well as lung cancer, leading to reduced life expectancy. It has a particular impact on children as they grow. There is evidence to suggest that the process of normal lung function growth in children is suppressed by long-term exposure to air pollution.

Christine Jardine: In Edinburgh West we have two of Scotland’s most polluted roads, St John’s Road and Queensferry Road, according to recent figures. Studies show that if someone lives with 75 metres of any major road as a child, they have a 29% increased risk of lifetime asthma. Given that across the country there are 2,000 nurseries close to roads with dangerously high levels of pollution, what action can the Minister assure us is being taken, along with counterparts in Scotland and in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, to tackle this on a UK scale?
Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Lady will be aware that we have a clean air strategy, which, as she rightly says, is led by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We have a number of measures designed to improve air quality, such as reducing all pollutants, getting more diesel and petrol cars off the roads, and tackling wood-burning fires. We also need to be much more vigilant in advising the public about the risks, and that includes on how they use their cars. Time was when I went to school we used to walk, but too often we see parents dropping off their kids with idling engines, and that causes pollution.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister is very good at warm words. Why does she not talk to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, because his Department’s plan is to tackle the poisonous air that our children and pregnant women are breathing by 2040? The fact is that children are being poisoned now. Get on and do something about it.

Jackie Doyle-Price: To be frank, I am not often accused of using warm words, but I will take the compliment. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are working very closely with DEFRA, but ultimately we need to encourage the public to change their behaviour, and we need to have a much more open debate about the consequences of bad air.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Young Bridgen was a bit slow to stand but, now that I have seen him, let us hear from the fellow.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will the Minister join me in welcoming the work of UK researchers to develop a new protocol for managing asthma, such as a pill to reduce the number of attacks by targeting airway muscles, developed in partnership with researchers in Canada?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I will always welcome any research designed to improve the treatment of asthma. Certainly, from a public health perspective, we must do much more to prevent asthma and reduce the likelihood of life-threatening attacks.

Mental Health Provision

4. Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to improve mental health service provision.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): Under the NHS long-term plan, there will be a comprehensive expansion of mental health services, with at least an additional £2.3 billion in real terms by 2023-24. That builds on our ambitious targets for improving community and crisis care, with extra treatment for 370,000 adults per year, and for 345,000 children and young people by 2023.

Mr Speaker: Yes, but I think that the Minister is seeking to group this question with that of the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham). Am I right?

Jackie Doyle-Price: Yes, indeed. My apologies Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I would not want the hon. Gentleman to feel any sense of social exclusion.

Craig Mackinlay: One of my constituents, Mark Verrion, is a patient of Kent and Medway NHS and Social Care Partnership Trust. He was first admitted on a temporary basis following an unfortunate but mild episode. He has now been institutionalised for 11 years, and he has been moved over 100 times during that period, often out of area. The trust has 289 out-of-area placements for adult mental health services, which is an increase of 100 over the past year, and the cost to local health budgets is obvious. Does my hon. Friend agree that my constituent and all the other out-of-area patients deserve local health provision to enable them to remain within the trust area?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I quite agree with my hon. Friend. Frankly, I am horrified to hear the account he has just given. We have made a priority of getting rid of out-of-area placements, because we know that patients do better when they are among family and friends. Clearly the case he has just outlined, which has lasted the past 11 years, is totally unacceptable. I will give it my personal attention and meet him to discuss it.

6. Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): What UK-wide steps is my hon. Friend taking to ensure that Scotland is not left behind in mental health provision, especially given that only two thirds of young people are referred within the 18-week timeline, against a 90% target?

Jackie Doyle-Price: As my hon. Friend knows, health is a devolved matter, but I am keen to share best practice with colleagues in Scotland, who face many similar challenges. In England, we will test four-week waiting times for access to NHS support in the community and we are committed to sharing that expertise, as we often do, with colleagues in Scotland.

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): In the Government’s 10-year plan for the NHS, the growing share of the budget is promised for improving mental health services in the coming years. The mental health services in Wolverhampton are in a desperate state of underfunding now. I am receiving letters from my constituents telling me how they have to wait over a year or more to be treated. One woman told me: “I personally know people who have attempted to take their own lives, thankfully unsuccessfully… but… aftercare once discharged from hospital” is non-existent. When will people see the benefits of the 10-year plan? By the time the uplift takes place, it will be too late for some of them.

Jackie Doyle-Price: As we outlined in the 10-year plan, we fully recognise that there needs to be much more investment in community and crisis care, including direct access via the 111 service. By April, we will be able to put more flesh on the detail of how we will roll that out. I assure the hon. Lady that I am in no way
complacent about the challenges we face in ensuring that our mental health services are what people should expect of them.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Last week, The Guardian revealed that hospital admissions for eating disorders have surged in the last year. Meanwhile, the number of children and young people with urgent cases of eating disorders who are treated within a week has fallen, and the number of those waiting between one and four weeks has risen. If prevention is better than cure, why do so many children and adolescents with eating disorders end up in A&E?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Lady is right in the sense that we have waiting targets for eating disorders, whereby the most acute cases should be seen within a week. We have seen very good progress—indeed, in most areas those targets are met. I will look into the cases that she has highlighted because we need to give attention to where the targets start to be missed. However, I assure her that we recognise that tackling eating disorders among our youngest people through early intervention must be done because prevention is always better than cure.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): On Friday, I joined the brilliant A&E team at the James Cook University Hospital in Middlesbrough for a night, and it was an insight into just how lucky we are to have our NHS staff—they are fantastic. On the subject of mental health, one of the key themes that recurred in the night was the problem of drug addiction and its impact on A&E pressures. What action will the Minister take in the long-term NHS plan to ensure that we can tackle addiction?

Jackie Doyle-Price: We are aware that substance misuse and addiction have a massive impact on mental health. Again, I point to the fact that we have objectives in the long-term plan, including joining up more effectively with local authorities’ work on mental health. Tackling addiction and substance abuse is very much a priority.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Minister will be aware of the high prevalence of mental health issues among ex-service personnel, particularly people who served in Northern Ireland and the middle east. What provision is she making for those who suffer unduly on the mental health front?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the matter. Through the military covenant, we have an absolute duty to provide the best possible care to those who have made that commitment to service on our behalf. Through NHS England’s commissioning of specialised services, we are determined to ensure that we have the right provision for all our veterans and servicemen. I am in contact with the Ministry of Defence to ensure that we do all we can for them.

Children’s Hospices

5. Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve the provision of care and support to children and their families in children’s hospices.

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): In December, NHS England announced plans to increase funding for children’s palliative care services to as much as £25 million a year over the next five years through matching funding investment from clinical commissioning groups.

Martin Vickers: St Andrew’s children’s hospice, based in Grimsby, which serves my constituency and the wider Lincolnshire area, is greatly valued and much treasured by the local community. Will the Minister clarify exactly how the funding will be delivered and how St Andrew’s can benefit?

Caroline Dinenage: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his local hospice. We all have wonderful stories about the fantastic care delivered by hospices, particularly children’s hospices, in our local area. NHS England will match fund clinical commissioning groups that commit to increase their investment in all children’s palliative and end-of-life care services by up to £7 million a year by 2023-24. This, added to the children’s hospice grant, which is currently £11 million a year, could therefore more than double NHS support to a combined total of £25 million.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): But the fact is that, even with those significant investments, most children’s hospices will still be reliant almost exclusively on fundraising and philanthropic donations. Does the Minister agree that, for there to be a proper footing for children’s hospices, there needs to be a much quicker move towards significant support from the state for these important facilities?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Gentleman talks about how children’s hospices, and indeed hospices, have traditionally been funded, but what we are looking at is an incredible commitment by NHS England to the value that hospices, and particularly children’s hospices, deliver not only in end-of-life and palliative care, but in respite care breaks and the immensely valuable outreach services that so many of them offer.

Jack Breerton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Will the Minister join me in thanking the Donna Louise children’s hospice for its hard work in my constituency—it does incredible work—and in welcoming the new facility for young adults that it is hoping to open in the spring?

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this. When children’s hospices expand and include facilities for young adults, it can make such an immeasurable difference in their local area. In my area, the Naomi House children’s hospice has opened Jacksplace, which has been such a valuable resource. Hospices should be incredibly celebrated for all such facilities they offer.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister take this opportunity to guarantee that the £11 million children’s hospice grant will be protected for children’s hospices, and indeed further increased as a result of the long-term plan to reflect the growing demand and the complexity of care provided by these lifetime services?

Caroline Dinenage: Yes. I think this is a really strong signal to clinical commissioning groups about how the NHS values the services provided by children’s hospices—not just end-of-life and palliative care, as I say, but the
other respite and outreach services they provide. That is why giving them access to up to £25 million will make an immeasurable difference.

**Leaving the EU: Contingency Planning**

7. Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on contingency planning for the UK leaving the EU without a deal.

17. Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on contingency planning for the UK leaving the EU without a deal.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Leaving the EU with a deal remains the Government’s top priority, but we are preparing for every eventuality. I am confident that if everyone does what they need to do, the supply of medicines will continue unhindered.

Nick Smith: Will the Secretary of State say how much has already been spent since the NHS no-deal contingency plans were active, and what the overall bill will be?

Matt Hancock: Yes. About £11 million has been spent already. The NHS is not generally buying the extra medicines that are going into the elongated stockpiles, but the pharmaceutical industry is. We will of course eventually buy most of those medicines for the NHS. There have been costs to the pharmaceutical industry as well, but the cost so far to the taxpayer is £11 million. I expect it will remain at about that level, or a little higher.

Vicky Ford (Chesterfield) (Con): Some of my constituents with diabetes have contacted me about supplies of insulin. Will the Secretary of State give us an insulin-specific answer?

Matt Hancock: Yes. Whereas across all medicines we have requested that the pharmaceutical industry has an extra six weeks of supplies in case of a no-deal Brexit, in the case of insulin the two major providers have already made stockpiles of at least double that. That shows that those with concerns about access to insulin can know that the plans we have in place for insulin are being enacted even more strongly than elsewhere.

Ian Murray: But the Secretary of State is refusing to provide any reassurance to constituents up and down the country, and particularly to my constituents. I got an email yesterday from a constituent—I have no shame in quoting this—who said:

“I have type 1 diabetes, as does Theresa May, and the supplies of insulin, needles and blood testing equipment all come from Europe. Insulin is perishable. Without it, so am I.”

Will the Secretary of State come to the Dispatch Box and say to my constituents that, whichever disease they have and whichever medical supplies they require, they will get them even if we leave the European Union with no deal? Would not the best thing to do be just to rule out no deal?

Matt Hancock: I have already given the assurance that if everybody does what they need to do, I am confident that supplies will be unhindered. In the case of insulin, the stockpiles are already double what we requested. However, on the point about the deal, the hon. Gentleman has a really important point about ruling out no deal being the best thing for people’s supply of medicines. He knows as well as I do that if we want to rule out no deal, we need to vote for a deal, so he and everybody in this House should vote for the deal.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The serious shortage protocol statutory instrument would allow pharmacists to dispense alternative drugs when there is short supply, but, crucially, without consulting a GP. The problem is that they cannot access patients’ records and might dispense a drug that has previously caused serious side effects. Is the Secretary of State really expecting such extensive shortages that phoning a GP will be impractical?

Matt Hancock: This change is to respond to the shortages that happen from time to time regularly in the NHS. Given that the supply of 12,300 drugs is typical across the NHS, there are always some logistical challenges. This protocol is to try to ensure that we can respond to those challenges as well as possible. Pharmacists are highly trained in what they do and perfectly able to carry this out as proposed.

Dr Whitford: The problem is that the key issue is not consulting the GP. The medical legal responsibility for any problems normally lies with the prescriber, yet the General Medical Council was not even consulted on this SI. Does the Secretary of State really think that such a significant change should be pushed through with a negative resolution and no scrutiny and debate?

Matt Hancock: Well, it is getting scrutiny and debate now. The change that is being proposed is about making sure we can get people the drugs they need. Of course the responsibility is on the pharmacist to ensure that it is the appropriate drug and, if necessary, that the GP is involved. However, it is absolutely right that we make changes to ensure that we have an unhindered supply of medicines whenever there are shortages—whether that is to do with Brexit or not.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of the State spoke with his characteristic self-confidence about the supply of insulin, but at the end of last week Diabetes UK said that “despite reaching out directly to the Department of Health...we still have not seen the concrete detail needed to reassure us...we cannot say with confidence that people will be able to get the insulin and other medical supplies they need in the event of a no-deal Brexit.” Why is Diabetes UK wrong and the Secretary of State right?

Matt Hancock: Diabetes UK is not a supplier of insulin. Of course, it plays an important role in representing those who have diabetes. We have given Diabetes UK reassurances, including, for instance, that the stockpiles we have for insulin are more than twice as long as we proposed and as required. That is an important assurance.

Jonathan Ashworth: I hope the Secretary of State will contact Diabetes UK to give it those reassurances directly. On the various no-deal medicines statutory instruments that the House will debate today and on other occasions, the Government’s own impact assessments say that, in a
no-deal scenario, the NHS will pay more for drugs, UK firms will face more red tape, and NHS patients will go to the back of the queue when it comes to international innovation. Given that the consequences of no deal would be so devastating for the NHS, will the Secretary of State—as, apparently, the Justice Secretary will—resign from the Government if it means blocking no deal?

Matt Hancock: If the hon. Gentleman really cared about stopping no deal, he would vote for the deal. There is something else that is worth saying about this shadow Secretary of State. He is a reasonable man—he is a sensible man—and I like him. My politics are probably closer to his than his are to those of the leader of his party, so why does he not have the gumption to join his friends over there on the Back Benches in the Independent Group, instead of backing a hard-left proto-communist as leader of the Labour party?

Acquired Brain Injury

8. Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support charities and other organisations working on treating acquired brain injury.

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): Everyone who has an acquired brain injury deserves to receive the best possible care and rehabilitative service. To ensure that, the NHS long-term plan included £4.5 billion of new investment to fund primary and community health services over the next five years.

Bim Afolami: I thank the Minister for that answer. The NHS has a good strategy on community-based care. On acquired brain injury, will the Minister advise me and Headway Hertfordshire, a brilliant local organisation, on how we can be more proactively involved with the strategy and attract more funding from local clinical commissioning groups? Will she meet me and the organisation to discuss this matter further?

Caroline Dinenage: I am delighted that my hon. Friend mentions Headway, which is a fantastic organisation that does great work. I meet it regularly in my own constituency and I would be more than happy to do so with him. The partnership boards of local integrated care systems, which will plan and shape those services, will include the voice of voluntary services and the voluntary sector in their area. His local Headway branch would be well advised to engage with that group.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Some 1.3 million people are living with traumatic brain injury and related disabilities. Brain injury can be caused by excessive alcohol consumption, particularly among young people. What support will the Government be giving to local health services to increase the use of technology, particularly using creative industry developments, that can help rehabilitation for those with brain injuries?

Caroline Dinenage: There are several points here. On local community services, as the hon. Lady heard, we are putting an extra £4.5 billion into community and local health services. Through the National Institute for Health Research, we fund brain injury research into how technology and other innovations can be used to better support people.

Dementia Care

9. Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): What plans he has to ensure that improvements to dementia care are included in the forthcoming Green Paper on social care.

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): The social care Green Paper will bring forward proposals to ensure that all adults, including those living with dementia, receive high-quality care whenever they need it. The Government also remain committed to delivering Challenge on Dementia 2020, making dementia care in England the best in the world.

Ms Rimmer: Sadly, there are an estimated 3,000 people over 65 living with dementia in my constituency. It is clear that the social care crisis is a dementia crisis. Alzheimer’s Society research shows that dementia care providers often charge a premium rate of over 40% more than the standard rate. Will the Minister consider introducing a new dementia fund, as part of the Green Paper process, to end the unfairness facing dementia patients and their families?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise dementia. It is a massive issue in everybody’s constituency and there is hardly a family that is not affected by it in some way. We are on track to meet our pledge to invest £300 million in dementia between 2015 and 2020. We continue to fund research for dementia treatments and cures. The Care Act 2014 introduced a national threshold that defines the care needs local authorities must meet, eliminating the postcode lottery of eligibility across the UK.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): When the Minister of State looks at the proposals for the Green Paper on social care reform, will she consider the German system of compulsory social care insurance? The rate has increased by only 0.94% since its introduction in 1994, while delivering care for dementia and other impacts that were not assessed back in 1994.

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend tempts me to do some big reveals about the contents of the Green Paper. I will say that it will look at a number of different funding options.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): On dementia in the community, many people with low-onset or mid-onset dementia can, with the right social care, stay in their home. The crucial part is to have the funding necessary to allow people to get social care support. Will the Minister, in the Green Paper, commit specific sums for social care to keep people with dementia in their homes?

Caroline Dinenage: The adult social care Green Paper will look at the long-term sustainability of the funding of the adult social care system. In the meantime the Government are investing by giving councils access to up to £10 billion over the current three-year period, to
help to address some of the shortfalls in adult social care funding and to ensure that people have the right services in their local areas.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The best way to help dementia patients is to have joined-up NHS and social care provision. Will my hon. Friend work with the Secretary of State to take advantage of local government reorganisation in Northamptonshire to develop a combined NHS and adult social care pilot?

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this point. Integrated health and care systems are very much the way forward if we are to deliver the future of adult social care that we all want. The long-term plan for the NHS was developed in tandem with the adult social care Green Paper and has already shown some of the innovations that we think will make a massive difference, such as the roll-out of the enhanced health in care homes model.

Social Care Green Paper

10. Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): When his Department plans to publish the Green Paper on social care.

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): The Green Paper on adult social care remains a priority for the Government. We will shortly be publishing this document, which sets out proposals to reform the adult social care system.

Giles Watling: I thank my hon. Friend for her answer. This issue was raised with me recently by Councillor John Spence of Essex County Council. I am concerned that two years later, we are still waiting for the publication of the Green Paper. Of course, we must get it right, but people need change to the social care system and they need it now. What further steps can she take to speed up this process?

Caroline Dinenage: I understand that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has met the gentleman my hon. Friend refers to. I understand and share my hon. Friend’s frustration. We need to ensure that the social care system is sustainable in the long term and we have taken some time to get these big decisions right, but I can assure him that the Green Paper will be published at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Blackburn (Kate Hollern) could very legitimately shoehorn her inquiry on question 18, which might not be reached, into this question, which has been. It is not obligatory, but don’t be shy—get in there.

18. [909321] Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): Perhaps the Minister can respond about her failings with regard to Government cuts and local government, and particularly the impact on social care, because the Government have created a postcode lottery on the quality of care that residents face, particularly in Blackburn. The Secretary of State spoke about political nonsense to my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle). What is a political nonsense is that Blackburn has faced a 60% funding cut from this Government, whereas Windsor and Maidenhead has had only a 19% cut. The Government are creating a postcode lottery for adult social care in particular, and it is not acceptable. What is the Minister going to do address the inequalities between areas?

Mr Speaker: Nobody can accuse the hon. Lady of failing to take full advantage of my generosity.

Caroline Dinenage: I do not agree with the hon. Lady. What the Government have done is try to tackle the geographical inequalities in care across the country. We have increased councils’ access to funding by up to £10 billion. That is a 9% real-terms increase in funding, but in addition to that, we have established a national threshold that defines the care needs that local authorities must meet under the Care Act. That has really started the work of eliminating the eligibility postcode lottery across England.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Ind): It is two years since the Government promised the social care Green Paper. In that space of time, we have had a lot of words from the Government, but we have also had a lot of neglect from them on this particular issue. Does not this delay, this prevarication, putting long-term issues to the back burner, typify what is wrong with the broken politics in this country?

Caroline Dinenage: First, I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new location in the Chamber. From that location, he might recognise that actually, there has been a failure of successive Governments to get to grips with this very thorny issue of the long-term funding of adult social care. We are the Government who have decided to tackle the issue. We will no longer put it in the “too difficult” pile, and we will be publishing this document shortly.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure a sustainable future for the health and social care sector.

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): The long-term plan explicitly recognises the importance of the workforce, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has commissioned the chair of NHS Improvement to work closely with the chair of Health Education England in leading detailed work programmes to deliver
an implementation plan. Social care plays a vital role in the forthcoming adult social care Green Paper, in which we will set out our plans to recruit, train and retain good people.

Gavin Newlands: The Minister is right about the workforce challenge for all four health services in the UK, but the number of students in England taking nursing degree courses in the past two years has dropped by 90%; and at over 11%, NHS England’s nursing vacancy rate is more than twice that in Scotland. With a 90% drop in the number of EU nurses coming to the UK because of Brexit and fewer students starting degree courses because of the cost, is it not time to follow Scotland by reintroducing the nursing bursary and ending tuition fees?

Stephen Hammond: I am sure the hon. Gentleman wants to recognise the latest UCAS data for this year’s application cycle, which shows that, compared to the same time last year, there has been a 4.5% increase in the number of applicants for undergraduate nursing and midwifery courses. This is a significant improvement. He will also want to recognise that the loans system provides an extra £1,000.

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Luke Graham, calm yourself. You aspire to statesmanship, and I wish to cultivate and hone that legitimate aspiration—calm, Zen, statesmanship!

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): On Friday, I was privileged to take part in the launch of the health and social care academy in Cornwall. Cornwall NHS and social care providers have come together to train local students, including mature students, within the local health and social care provision without student tuition fees so that they can secure a job in Cornwall. May I invite the Minister to come and see the work we are doing and welcome this local innovation that is helping to address the NHS workforce challenge?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend rightly points out that there are several routes into healthcare professions, and I am delighted by what is happening in Cornwall. I understand that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be visiting him in the very near future.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): We are in the midst of the worst-ever NHS workforce crisis, with more than 100,000 vacancies. The situation is unsustainable. Well-respected think-tanks say the figure could rise to 350,000 vacancies within a decade. What does the Minister consider a sustainable vacancy level both now and in a decade’s time?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Gentleman will recognise that the £20.5 billion in real terms that we are investing in the NHS under the long-term plan will make a significant difference. He will also want to recognise the roll-out of medical places, the fact that more people are applying for nursing places now than they were last year and the detailed implementation plans that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has commissioned. These will deliver a sustainable workforce.

Sudden Cardiac Arrest

12. Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve survival rates from sudden cardiac arrest. [909314]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): NHS England announced in the NHS long-term plan that it would work with partners to improve the community first response and build defibrillator networks to improve survival rates for out-of-hospital cardiac arrests. A national network of community first responders and defibrillators will help to save up to 4,000 lives each year by 2028. This will be supported by educating the general public, including young people of school age, about how to recognise and respond to out-of-hospital cardiac arrests.

Maria Caulfield: I thank the Minister for her response. Currently, 12 young people a week die from a sudden cardiac arrest, but 80% could be saved if those around them had access to a defibrillator. Will the Minister consider supporting the installation of defibrillators in all schools in England and Wales?

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the 12 deaths from sudden cardiac arrest in the young. Although the purchasing of a defibrillator is a matter for individual schools, the Government would encourage schools to buy them. The NHS supply chain is engaging with school networks to get good prices for these defibrillators, and the Department for Education has published on the Government website guidance for schools on buying and installing an automated external defibrillator. In addition, in January, the DFE announced plans for all children to be taught basic first aid in schools, including how to do CPR and use a defibrillator.

Mental Health Patient Waiting Times: North-West

13. Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to reduce waiting times for mental health patients in the north-west. [909315]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): National waiting time standards for early intervention in psychosis, improved access to psychological therapies and services for children and young people with eating disorders are already being met, or are on track to be met by 2020-21, in the north-west. We will introduce new waiting times and targets under the NHS long-term plan, and we have an ambition to deliver many more treatments for all who need them.

Alison McGovern: Adult waiting times in Wirral for talking therapies to treat anxiety and depression are some of the worst in the country. The average waiting time between referral and first treatment is 48 days, and between referral and second treatment, when we know that someone needs help, it is 159 days. Will the Minister thank all the volunteers in Wirral who are trying to help those who are suffering from anxiety and depression, and will she explain to me what she is going to do to stop this crisis?
Jackie Doyle-Price: First, I certainly thank all the volunteers who do so much to support people in mental ill health. It is worth emphasising the role of the voluntary sector in that regard, and I encourage clinical commissioning groups to consider commissioning additional services form the sector, because so much of that wraparound care is as important as clinical intervention to repairing mental health.

There have been problems with the improving access to psychological therapies programme and with recovery targets in the past. The Wirral CCG has told me that the backlog of more than 1,000 patients has been cleared after it provided additional funds and that the IAPT targets are now being met, but obviously I will keep the position under review, and I thank the hon. Lady for raising the issue.

**NHS Hospital Parking Charges**

14. Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): What plans he has to allocate additional funding to NHS hospitals to replace revenue raised by car parking charges. [909316]

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): My right hon. Friend is aware of—and, indeed, welcomes—the Government’s commitment to providing an extra £20.5 billion in real terms for patient care over the next five years. Car parking charges are a matter for local NHS organisations, but most hospitals give concessions to some groups of users, such as patients who need extended or frequent access to hospitals.

Robert Halfon: Last year, the brain injury charity Headway said that it had paid a family £374 for hospital car parking charges. These charges are unacceptable. They are a stealth tax on patients, a stealth tax on the vulnerable and a stealth tax on staff. Will my hon. Friend scrap them once and for all?

Stephen Hammond: I commend my right hon. Friend for being a tireless campaigner on this matter. We have always made clear that staff, patients and their families should not have to deal with the stress of complex and unfair charges, and we introduced tougher guidelines in 2014, but I must stress that this is a local matter.

**Topical Questions**

T1. [909324] Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock):** To provide the best care, the NHS needs the best technology, and we are therefore bringing together leaders of the digital agenda across the NHS under a new organisation called NHSX. We are also publishing a new code of conduct for the use of artificial intelligence in the NHS. NHSX will report jointly to the NHS and to me, and it will lead this vital agenda so that the NHS can be a world leader in emerging technologies that help to cut costs and save lives.

Tommy Sheppard: Meanwhile, in the real world, Scottish Care reports that 30% of social care staff in the highlands are nationals from other European countries. They are paid the real living wage of £9 an hour as a matter of public policy, but that is well short of the Government’s proposed limit of £30,000 for new immigrants in the future. Will the Secretary of State fight in the Cabinet to change that policy, or is he content to let these new immigration policies choke off the supply of labour to our social care sector?

Matt Hancock: We welcome people working in social care from the EU and from the rest of the world, and we need to ensure that that can continue, but we also need to ensure that we can train people locally to work in social care. That is incredibly important.

T2. [909325] James Heappey (Wells) (Con): GP surgeries across the Wells constituency are innovating with the employment of nurse practitioners, paramedics and other types of clinician to fill vacancies when recruitment of GPs has not been possible. While this often works well, we still have too many vacancies for doctors. What steps will my right hon. Friend be taking to encourage the thousands of GPs in training to consider practice in rural and coastal areas like mine in Somerset?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. As important as new technology is and new ways of working and nurse practitioners are, we still need more GPs, and we need more GPs especially in rural and coastal areas. The targeted enhanced recruitment scheme offers a £20,000 salary supplement to attract GPs to parts of the country where there are serious shortages, including in Somerset.

T5. [909329] Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): The Terrence Higgins Trust has made it clear that men are being diagnosed with HIV as a direct result of the limited number of places on the current PrEP trial. The Secretary of State has already said this morning that the doubling of the places on that trial is being implemented now, but that commitment was made over three weeks ago; when will implementation be completed across all trial sites including Burrell Street in my constituency?

Matt Hancock: I want to see this being implemented as soon as possible. It has already started, but we need commitment from local authorities as well as the NHS to deliver. I am very happy to work with the hon. Gentleman and all other interested Members to see it happen.

T3. [909327] Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Key parts of our NHS workforce are registered and regulated by the Health and Care Professions Council. Does the Minister share their concern about the steep rise in professional fees that they face—in particular, the loss of the 50% discount that applied to graduates within two years of qualifying—and will she look again at whether anything can be done to assist this key group of our workforce?

**The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage):** My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the need to support and enhance the protections for allied health professionals. One of the recent planned HCPC increases was to raise its annual fees by £16, but it would still remain one of
the lowest of any of the UK-wide health and care regulators. It is also important to remember that regulation fees are tax deductible.

T6. [909330] Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): The head of NHS Improvement, who is also a Tory peer, has said the biggest problem facing the NHS is that not enough people want to work in it. How did the Secretary of State take Britain’s best-loved institution and turn it into something nobody wants to work for?

Matt Hancock: Thankfully, the recruitment both of nurses and doctors is going up, which demonstrates that people do want to work in the NHS, and so they should because it is an amazing place to work and it has a great mission, which is to improve the lives of everyone.

T7. [909331] Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): A huge number of GP surgeries are struggling to recruit, and meanwhile lots of locums are making a lot more money being locums than working on permanent GP contracts. Will the Secretary of State consider offering his state-backed indemnity to those who commit to being on a permanent contract with a GP surgery?

Matt Hancock: Of course the nature of being in a GP practice is changing. For a long time practices, which are essentially private businesses, also had the benefit of rising property prices that brought additional income on top of their income from the NHS. That is no longer the case because property is so expensive, so many people are changing the way that GPs are employed, so they are directly employed rather than through practices. That move is happening, but it is just one of the many changes we are seeing to try to make sure that being a GP is sustainable, and clearly things are starting to improve because a record number of people are choosing to become GPs.

T8. [909332] Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Mr Speaker, you will be aware of the fantastic work by the Edenbridge War Memorial Hospital in the town just near me, and you will also be aware of the fantastic news that we are having a new clinic built there. Does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that the money from the initial site, which was given by public subscription 100 years ago in memory of the young men who died in the first world war, should now be spent on medical facilities in the town?

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): My hon. Friend has been absolutely passionate about securing the best possible outcome for his constituents. As he knows, the Edenbridge War Memorial Hospital is held by NHS Property Services on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. Local NHS bodies in Kent are considering the future of services in the Sevenoaks area, including their nature and possible funding. I am sure that my hon. Friend will recognise that I cannot intervene directly, but I would be happy to meet him to discuss this further.

T9. [909333] Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Central and East London breast screening service was performing well until last April, when it was transferred from Barts Health NHS Trust to the Royal Free London NHS Foundation Trust, even though the Royal Free and did not have enough staff. The number of women invited plummeted from 3,000 a month to 1,000 a month. Why was that transfer allowed to go ahead, given the clear warnings about what the consequences would be? Who is responsible for this failure?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): The award of the contract for the Central and East London screening service to the Royal Free was approved by both NHS England’s London region and NHS England’s commercial executive group. An agreed recovery plan was put into place to address the various issues. While the service did plummet to 1,100 in April 2018, it is currently inviting 3,000 women per month, which has been the normal monthly invitation rate for the service for the past three years. Women are currently being offered appointments in line with the agreed recovery plan and with the national breast screening standard, with 90% or more being invited within 36 months of their previous screening by October 2019.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): The internet and social media have provided huge opportunities and positives for our young people, but we have been far too slow to react to the negatives, including cyber-bullying and issues around body image. Will the Minister responsible for suicide prevention, or my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, confirm that they are taking a truly cross-Government approach to this issue and that they will seriously tackle the role of the tech companies?

Matt Hancock: Yes; my hon. Friend is dead right to bring up this subject. The rise in material promoting self-harm and suicide online is dangerous, and it needs to be stopped. I am delighted that, under pressure from this House, Instagram has now decided to take down self-harm and suicide content. The rise in material promoting self-harm and suicide online is dangerous, and it needs to be stopped. I am delighted that, under pressure from this House, Instagram has now decided to take down self-harm and suicide content. The rise in material promoting self-harm and suicide online is dangerous, and it needs to be stopped. I am delighted that, under pressure from this House, Instagram has now decided to take down self-harm and suicide content.
the damage caused by alcohol can take place in the earliest part of pregnancy. Anyone seeking to get pregnant should be monitoring their alcohol intake, and in fact withdrawing altogether. It is important that we make the public aware of this, not least because of the rate of unplanned pregnancies, which continues to rise.

Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): Southampton is above the English average with nearly 6% of GP appointments being missed. Nationally, missed appointments cost the NHS more than £200 million a year. Does my right hon. Friend agree that a standardised online booking system featuring a reminder function with the option of cancelling or rescheduling an appointment would save money and reduce waiting times? Does he have any plans for such a system?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I do. This is one of the sorts of things that NHSX will drive forward. A decent IT system can reduce missed appointments in GP practices by a third. [Interruption.] So, while Opposition Members snigger about using modern technology and want to go back to the past, over here we are providing the best technology for the NHS for the benefit of patients.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): A recent answer to a parliamentary question from my hon. Friend the shadow Minister confirmed that in nearly half of cases of mental health crisis, it is not NHS staff but the police who are conveying people hospitals. Will the Department conduct a review into the impact that this is having on people in mental health crisis?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Lady raises an important point. This is something that I am taking forward with the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service. We are acutely aware of the impact that this is having on policing services, and that is one of the reasons why, in the forward plan, we have directed so much support and priority to ensuring that the NHS 111 service works and that we have the community and crisis care services to back it up.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): A report in *The Lancet* in March 2018 found that most drugs and injections are useless for lower back pain. What will my right hon. Friend do to find alternative treatments?

Matt Hancock: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her courageous campaigning on this issue. There have been several reports looking into the events at the trust, and we understand that further detail would be helpful to realising her wish that those in senior positions be held accountable. I hope she agrees that the Kirkup report has provided the basis for that, and I am happy to meet her to discuss how the matter may be advanced.

Stephen Hammond: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her courageous campaigning on this issue. There have been several reports looking into the events at the trust, and we understand that further detail would be helpful to realising her wish that those in senior positions be held accountable. I hope she agrees that the Kirkup report has provided the basis for that, and I am happy to meet her to discuss how the matter may be advanced.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): We all want a pipeline of talented staff entering our NHS. In many areas, the health service is a key local employer. Would the Minister welcome proposals for a specialist school in Mansfield, run in conjunction with our hospital trust, to ensure that we equip young people with skills and an aspiration to join our health service? May I meet him to discuss the matter further?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend will have heard the answer that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State gave about missed appointments, and I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the situation in Mansfield. We encourage everybody to use technology to ensure that cancelled appointments are used for the benefit of others.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): Mental health services need proper staffing, but 2,000 mental health staff are leaving the NHS every month. How do the Government expect to achieve any ambitions in the long-term plan without adequate staff?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman is right. When we put a large amount of money into a service, we of course need more people to deliver it. That is most acute in mental health, which is getting the biggest increase in funding—£2.3 billion of the £20.5 billion overall. I assure him that the Minister responsible for mental health and suicide prevention, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), is working night and day to ensure that we attract the people we need to deliver the services that our people deserve.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): May I ask a question in memory of my late friend Stephen Horgan, who died a few years ago from a rare form of blood cancer with just a few months’ notice? In his memory, I am a now a supporter of Bloodwise, an excellent charity that raises awareness of rare cancers. Asking on the charity’s behalf, will the new workforce plan for the NHS include clinical psychologists, particularly those with cancer knowledge, to make the absolute best use of the welcome new resources, which I am sure Stephen’s family also welcome?

Matt Hancock: Yes, my right hon. Friend puts it extremely well, because he reminds us of who we are here to serve when discussing questions of health and of cancer. He is right to raise this matter, and I can absolutely confirm what he asks for: we will deliver in Stephen’s memory and in the memory of others who have died. That is what gives us the strength to carry on and try to deliver and improve services for everybody.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The Secretary of State talked earlier about a six-week stockpile of medicines, but radioisotopes for cancer diagnosis and treatment cannot be stockpiled. I have asked many
times about the future arrangements for radioisotopes post-Brexit, so will the Secretary of State detail them now?

Matt Hancock: In the event of a problem at the Dover-Calais strait, we will bring in radioisotopes by air, and we have already contracted an aircraft to ensure that that happens. That part of the planning is well advanced.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): On Thursday, with Rugby’s mayor, I had the great pleasure to open the new Brownsover surgery, which came about because of the hard work of the patient action group. Will the Secretary of State welcome the work of patient groups in delivering NHS services?

Matt Hancock: I am absolutely delighted to welcome the work of the group, which has raised so much money, and of my hon. Friend, who stands up and makes the case for Rugby. More broadly, we should welcome all those who want to make a contribution to our hospitals and hospices. We take a broad-minded and open approach to welcoming people who volunteer hours or raise money to improve our great NHS.
Northern Ireland Backstop

12.40 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Attorney General if he will make a statement on options for legally binding changes to the Northern Ireland protocol of the EU withdrawal agreement, which contains the backstop arrangement.

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): Before I answer the hon. Gentleman, my constituents would expect me briefly to express their dismay and deep concern about Honda’s announcement this morning, which will deeply affect the community. I anticipate the statement of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—

Mr Speaker: Order. Do not tell me what the situation is. The hon. and learned Gentleman is a Law Officer and a member of the Government. A sentence, but absolutely no more. He should have asked me in advance. He is either on the Front Bench or he is not. It is not for him to presume the right to speak of a matter about which he could speak if he sat on the Back Benches, which he does not.

The Solicitor General: I am very sorry, Mr Speaker, but I said what I said.

The Government recognise the legitimate desire of Members on both sides of the House to understand the legal effect of the proposed withdrawal agreement. On 12 February, the Prime Minister set out ways in which legally binding changes to the backstop could be achieved. She explained that the UK and the EU would hold further talks to find a way forward. Those discussions are ongoing, and it would not be appropriate to provide a running commentary.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker, and I thank the Solicitor General for responding. The reality is that there are 38 days until we leave the EU, and in all likelihood eight days until the next round of voting, and we are nowhere nearer having any further clarity on this issue. All this time, our economy, our jobs and our futures are affected by that uncertainty.

On 29 January, the Prime Minister told the House:

“What I am talking about is not a further exchange of letters but a significant and legally binding change to the withdrawal agreement. Negotiating such a change will not be easy. It will involve reopening the withdrawal agreement”.—[Official Report, 29 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 678.]

Can the Solicitor General confirm that it is still Government policy to formally reopen the withdrawal agreement? If not, what positive, concrete proposals are the Government suggesting? Can he confirm whether the Government have actually put forward those proposals as options to the European Commission and the European Council?

Yesterday, on Radio 4’s “Today” programme, the Minister for the Cabinet Office said:

“The Attorney General, Geoffrey Cox, is closely involved with the negotiations too, and he will be making a speech on Tuesday to set out how, in his view, the legal tests that he has set, about ensuring that the so-called backstop cannot be used to trap the United Kingdom indefinitely, could be met and overcome.”

Can the Solicitor General clarify exactly what the Attorney General’s role is in the negotiations and when he will publish those legal tests? Are the Government seeking, as is reported in the media, a “joint interpretive instrument” on the withdrawal agreement, some sort of annexe to it, another exchange of letters, or changes to the political declaration?

We are about to make a momentous decision on the future of our country. The Government need to be clear with this House about precisely what their strategy is. Running down the clock is reckless and irresponsible. Surely this nation deserves better than a Government wandering in the wilderness, not even sure about what their next move is.

The Solicitor General: What would be reckless and irresponsible is for the Government to provide a running commentary on sensitive negotiations. I would have thought it is as plain as a pikestaff to the hon. Gentleman that that is not the way negotiations should be conducted. Let the Government get on with this work at pace, which is what we are doing.

Rather than criticising from the sidelines, it now behoves the hon. Gentleman and all Opposition Members to work for a constructive solution and end the uncertainty. It is in his hands as much as it is in the hands of the Government.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I understand the dangers of a running commentary, but I have a little difficulty understanding by what process we have reached this point. As far as I can see, the serious negotiations are with the Democratic Unionist party and the European Research Group in my party to see what modifications to the withdrawal agreement we have negotiated they will accept. Ministers then go to Brussels to demand that the European Union accepts the changes and threaten it with leaving without a deal if the changes are not made. As my hon. and learned Friend understands it, are those roughly the tactics being pursued? Why does he think any European politician should accept a situation whereby the permanent open border in Ireland is subject to being terminated by the British Government at any stage they want or having an end date put on it, which seems to me a contradiction? Finally, does he think that the hard-liners in the ERG would accept even that, even if my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General produces some ingenious form of words that seems to make it legally binding?

The Solicitor General: As usual, my right hon. and learned Friend tempts me down many paths that I dare not take, simply because this is a negotiation between the United Kingdom and the EU. We heard yesterday from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, who has been to Brussels and held a productive meeting with Michel Barnier, and my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General has been playing an important part in these negotiations. May I reassure my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) that the Government remain determined to get on with the job at pace?

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): This morning, France’s Europe Minister, Nathalie Loiseau, said that there will be no renegotiation of the withdrawal
agreement. In saying that, she was simply echoing what has been said repeatedly by Donald Tusk, Jean-Claude Juncker, Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron and Leo Varadkar. That was the position made crystal clear to the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union when we met Martin Selmayr on 4 February. He said that the most the EU would be prepared to contemplate was an additional legal instrument or a codicil to the agreement, which would incorporate the sort of assurances set out in the letter from Tusk and Juncker dated 14 January but which would not contradict or change the existing text of the agreement. Can the Solicitor General confirm that that is still the position of the EU and that there is no question of the withdrawal agreement being opened up and renegotiated in relation to anything, let alone the backstop? Will he confirm that it is clear that there will be no time limit or unilateral exit clause to the backstop? If his position is that he does not want to give this House a running commentary, why is the Attorney General supposed to be elsewhere today, giving a speech about what is proposed, not to this House, but to I know not who? Is it true that that speech has been cancelled? If so, why has it been cancelled?

The Solicitor General: May I assure the hon. and learned Lady, who expresses a deep interest in the Attorney General’s diary, that his plan is to make a speech about the issues, but it is not going to be some detailed exposition of a legal position, which he will bring to this House if appropriate? He has already shown an admirable willingness not only to address this House, but to comply with its orders, and I am sure he will continue to work in that spirit.

I am glad the hon. and learned Lady referred to the letter of 14 January, because it is important to remind ourselves that the Commission made it clear in that letter that it was determined to give priority to the discussion of alternative arrangements. That is very much part of the ongoing discussion. It would be somewhat difficult for me to commit the other party to the negotiation to a particular position. I have heard her comments with interest. I am here to speak on behalf of Her Majesty’s Government and our position is clear.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): As you know, Mr Speaker, I raised this matter urgently with you yesterday. Does my hon. and learned Friend accept that it is essential that when the Attorney General has had his discussions with the EU, he tables, in compliance with his parliamentary obligations, any asserted “legally binding” treaty text, in black and white, in the House itself by Monday 25 February, so that my European Scrutiny Committee can fully assess and report to the House on its legal meaning and the substance, and he does not merely address some audience at a City law firm?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to remind us that the future relationship document contains a range of options. The negotiation on that will begin as soon as possible; let us get the withdrawal agreement done so that we can have that debate urgently.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does the Solicitor General agree that whatever agreement is arrived at with Brussels, we must get away from the idea that the potentially forever customs union is seen as basecamp for our future trading relationship?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to remind us that the future relationship document contains a range of options. The negotiation on that will begin as soon as possible; let us get the withdrawal agreement done so that we can have that debate urgently.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Has the Solicitor General seen the study published yesterday by Irish Senator Mark Daly, in conjunction with two UNESCO chairmen, on the danger of a return to violence in Northern Ireland in the event of a no-deal Brexit? Given that Senator Daly says that his report “highlights the responsibility of the UK government to stand by the backstop”, what weight have Her Majesty’s Government given to the cause of peace in their discussions on the backstop?

The Solicitor General: I have not seen Senator Daly’s report but will look at it urgently because, like him, I treat the cause of peace with the utmost seriousness. In fact, everything that the Government have said reveals their dedication not only to the letter of the Belfast agreement but to its spirit as well.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The Solicitor General has told the House clearly that the Government will not provide a running commentary on the negotiations—unless, of course, it is Olly Robbins, the Government’s chief negotiator, who can get hammered in a bar in Brussels and give a detailed running commentary
to anybody who happens to be in earshot. That is extremely unprofessional behaviour for a senior civil servant. A Minister who did that would be sacked. What disciplinary action has been taken against Mr Robbins? Or does he get away with it because he is teacher’s pet?

**The Solicitor General:** My right hon. Friend referred to a newspaper report on which it would be ill-advised for me to comment. Let me say this generally about our civil servants: whatever their role, position or views, they are in a singularly difficult position in that they cannot answer back.

**Nigel Dodds** (Belfast North) (DUP): Everybody knows that there is not going to be any hard border in Ireland and, given what Michel Barnier said, everybody knows that even in the event of a no-deal Brexit operational ways would be found so that there were no controls or checks, so all this is scaremongering. It is not going to happen. Anyone who knows anything about Irish politics knows that no Irish Government will introduce a hard border on the island of Ireland. That is the reality of the situation. The fact of the matter is that the Prime Minister has, as the Solicitor General knows, given a commitment to reopen the withdrawal agreement and to seek legally binding changes to the treaty itself. Yesterday, Simon Coveney ruled out legally binding language even outside the withdrawal agreement. Does the Solicitor General accept that some of the rhetoric coming from the Irish Government and others is bringing about the very thing that they say they want to avoid, which is the possibility of no deal?

**The Solicitor General:** The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right in his call for everybody to cool it and to calm down when it comes to important issues such as the Irish border. I am not going to make comments about members of friendly Governments, but I will say that this is a time for calm heads rather than hot ones.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** On the subject of calmness, I think we should hear from a Lincolnshire knight. I call Sir Edward Leigh.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. This is really a taster for what will be a very calm debate: my Adjournment debate on Thursday on this very subject, which I am sure will be the highlight of the week. I do not ask the Solicitor General to provide running commentary, but has he noted that many international lawyers have said that if the EU does not want to reopen the withdrawal agreement, it would be entirely in accordance with international law for us to issue, either unilaterally or in agreement, a conditional interpretive declaration proclaiming that there will be an end date to the backstop? It is something that I have been barking on about for weeks now.

**The Solicitor General:** My right hon. Friend is anything but boring. He might be persistent, but boring? No. I commend him for his work in looking at this particular aspect of international treaty law and interpretation and urge him to pursue it.

**Mr Speaker:** The right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) is quite wrong. He is far too hard on himself. I have known the right hon. Gentleman for 25 years and have never been bored by him on any occasion. Never.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I wonder whether the Solicitor General minds my putting on the record, and I hope he will also put on the record, the distaste that we felt at that personal attack from the Back Benches—I think from a member of the European Research Group—on a civil servant who is trying to do his job. The job that civil servants are trying to do is a very difficult one and the people responsible for that difficulty are the Government, not the civil servants trying to do a good job.

Does the Solicitor General agree that we need a running commentary in this House? I am glad that he has made this statement today, because the fact of the matter is that at a certain juncture in this dialogue we are supposed to be having to find the answer to this difficult problem, the Government side stopped talking to people. Will he resume the talks so that we can get this sorted?

**The Solicitor General:** The hon. Gentleman knows that I am here and always ready to talk, as are the Government, and the dialogue continues. The Leader of the Opposition has of course made an approach, which we welcomed. That is an important sign of the cross-party work that needs to continue.

I have said what I have said about our civil servants. Politicians are here to be accountable and to answer for our actions; civil servants are there to carry them out, nothing further.

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): I find this urgent question from the Opposition somewhat bizarre, as only last Thursday the Opposition Brexit spokesperson, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), said that he had no problems with the backstop at all. For the avoidance of doubt, will the Solicitor General confirm again that the Government stand firmly behind all their commitments on the Belfast Good Friday agreement?

**The Solicitor General:** I will never tire of saying to my hon. Friend or to the House that we remain steadfast in our commitment to the Belfast agreement. It is as important to me now as it was when it was signed 20 years ago.

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): The Attorney General made a rather snippy remark, if I may say so, about my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) having made a comment from the sidelines, and then implied that the solutions to this situation were as much in my hon. Friend’s hands as in the Solicitor General’s. He cannot have it both ways. Has the Solicitor General invited my hon. Friend to be part of the solution—yes or no?

**The Solicitor General:** I remind the hon. Lady, for whom I have a high degree of respect, of section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act, which gives this House the role of ratifying the withdrawal agreement. It
is Parliament that has to ratify it and pass a Bill before that agreement is ratified. It is on us all—the buck stops with all of us before we can ratify—so please let us get on with it.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does the Solicitor General agree with the widely reported comments of Olly Robbins, the Prime Minister’s chief negotiator, who, I believe, spoke in vino veritas when he said that he saw the backstop as a bridge to a future partnership? Clearly, that is a future partnership involving a customs union, which would prevent our having an independent free trade policy. If he does not agree with him on behalf of the Government, why is Mr Robbins still in his position?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend will have heard the answer that I gave some moments ago. I simply say that the backstop is not intended to be a bridge to anywhere. It is to be used only in extremis if we cannot achieve a future relationship. It cannot be a bridge; the bridge has to be with the withdrawal agreement and then our future relationship.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Solicitor General seeks to justify the problem that is Brexit by insisting that the backstop is the problem. I understand that he wants to sympathise with the manufacturing communities in Swindon, Wales and elsewhere that are waking up to job losses, but it is difficult because he is in the Government. Given the evidence, how can the Government, abetted by the Labour Front-Bench team, continue to defend their myopia, their self-interest, and their talent for procrastination? When will he admit their part in this problem?

The Solicitor General: I can agree with the hon. Lady to this extent: it is incumbent on politicians from all parts of the House, most importantly on those on the Opposition Front Bench, to work to achieve a solution, rather than to achieve nano-party-political ends. I entirely agree with her. I have seen precious little of the former, and far too much of the latter, but God loves a sinner who repents, and I look forward to the Opposition following that advice and helping us all to do our duty and get the deal through.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): First, may I thank my hon. and learned Friend for making it clear that there are viable alternative arrangements, which the Government are discussing, arising from the so-called Brady amendment? Last week, President Tusk tweeted that no concrete proposals had been received from the UK Government. Will he now confirm that these proposals have been presented as Government policy to the European Union?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He knows that it would be invidious of me to provide that running commentary that I have been quite properly resisting. May I assure him that the discussions are more than diplomatic niceties? They are meaningful and substantial and will continue in greater depth in the days ahead.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Will the Solicitor General tell us whether the Government have made it clear to the European Union in negotiations that its insistence on the backstop will prove the most expensive financial and political wrongdoing of the past 60 years? There cannot be a hard border because of the complexity of the border on the island of Ireland.

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman, with his deep knowledge of the border, speaks absolute truth when he talks about its complexity. May I assure him that this Government are dedicated to making sure that the backstop is fully understood and that we understand the importance of making sure that this House can coalesce around a deal that will be acceptable? I think that is now very much understood in the corridors of Brussels.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): It is, of course, entirely reasonable that the Solicitor General should decline to conduct a running commentary on the progress of the negotiations, but can he at least confirm that, in approaching those negotiations, the Government have borne fully in mind the view of this House that the Northern Ireland backstop should be replaced with alternative arrangements—a state of affairs that I suggest would not comprehend a mere interpretative instrument?

The Solicitor General: Indeed, the Government listened very carefully when the House passed the so-called Brady amendment and have pursued the strands of work that were encouraged by hon. Members. That continues, and I am confident that it will bear fruit.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Will the Solicitor General please confirm my view that the Prime Minister’s withdrawal agreement creates a different set of trade rules applying on each side of the Irish sea?

The Solicitor General: Without going through the detail of the protocol, the hon. Gentleman knows that the particular construct of the protocol meant that, for certain items of trade, Northern Ireland was treated as a member of the single market. There would be an effective border if Great Britain changed its rules and there was a difference between the two. That is not our intention. I need not recite the matter any further. He knows that that is one reason why we have been looking carefully again at the backstop bearing in mind the decisions made by this House. It is time for him to come forward, be a statesman and vote for the deal.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Does this speech by the Attorney General include the assessment that the one thing worse than the backstop would be staying in the EU?

The Solicitor General: I have not yet read the speech, so it would be wholly premature of me to assume what my right hon. and learned Friend, with great style no doubt, will dilate upon.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Will the Solicitor General give us an assurance that, if there is any change to the legal advice that the Government receive about the withdrawal agreement or any related
documents, that advice will be given to this House before we have the opportunity to vote on any resolution to which it might be relevant?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman makes a very proper point. Very careful consideration will be given to the publication of any documents that might emanate from my right hon. and learned Friend. We are very mindful of the position that we reached in light of motions passed by this House. At the moment, it would be wrong of me to prejudge anything that might or might not exist, but I heard the hon. Gentleman very clearly.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I agree with my hon. and learned Friend that it is not appropriate to provide a running commentary during these negotiations, but does he agree that, during any negotiation, it is not appropriate to remove the option of being able to walk away, because that is what focuses the mind?

The Solicitor General: Indeed, the Government have been very clear that, when it comes to negotiations, one should not willingly and wantonly abandon the cards that they have in their hand. That is the way that we will continue to negotiate—firmly but fairly and as openly as possible, consistent with our duties to this House.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): We have heard all the usual excuses today: blame the civil service; blame Brussels; blame Ireland for what is an entirely British-made problem. As long ago as December 2017, the Government, with the full support of the Democratic Unionist party, gave a binding commitment to provide a solution that would make their customs union red lines compatible with the Belfast agreement. Is it not the case that the only reason why the backstop will ever exist is that the Government have failed to deliver on those commitments? Will the Solicitor General not finally admit that, when it becomes clear that leaving the customs union and the single market is incompatible with the Belfast agreement, the Belfast agreement has to stay and the Government’s red lines have to go?

The Solicitor General: I have not been seeking to blame anybody. When it comes to constructive negotiations, I believe not in blame games, but in trying to find solutions. It is high time that the hon. Gentleman and his party actually joined the solutions-based approach rather than constantly carping from the sidelines. I am absolutely fed up with that approach. It is time that they grew up and joined the debate.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): The Solicitor General is not only a great fighter for workers in his constituency, but a canny negotiator for Government. Does he agree that, rather than Members of this place parroting position lines from EU 27 Government Ministers about how difficult it would be, we need to hold our nerve and keep our best card? That way, we will get a deal and ensure that we deliver democracy at the same time.

The Solicitor General: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his remarks about the communities that both I and my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) serve in the context of Honda. He is absolutely right to say that it is rather run for people in this House and elsewhere to constantly believe the words of other negotiating parties and other Governments as gospel and refuse to accept anything that Her Majesty’s Government might say as even in the remotest bit true.

Mr Speaker: As colleagues will know, the word “rum” was much favoured by PG Wodehouse of whose works, I suspect, the Solicitor General is, among others, a devotee.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Solicitor General says it is in the fate of the Labour party to help him secure a deal, but that simply is not true. What concessions, if any, will the Government make towards the deal that the Labour party has put down as a potential way through this? He knows that I have given his Government the benefit of the doubt on more than one occasion by not supporting things that my party has asked me to, and actively opposing things on other occasions. I did not support the Government on the Brady amendment, but nor did I oppose it, because I believed it was important that the Government had the space to conduct negotiations to get a deal through. The wording of that amendment quite clearly said that the backstop should be “replaced”, so can the Solicitor General tell me, without equivocation, that when he brings that deal back, the backstop will have been replaced?

The Solicitor General: I note with care the hon. Gentleman's position and I have observed what he is doing to represent his constituents. It would be somewhat pre-emptory for me to anticipate what might come back from the negotiation. I assure him that we are trying to get on with it at some speed, so that his position can be as clear as possible, and so that he can, with the rest of this House, make that all-important decision on his constituents’ behalf.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Solicitor General will recall, as I do, that the House expressed a clear view on 29 January, and I am pleased to note that the Government are now negotiating to try to implement that and bring something back. Can he confirm, however, that it is right not to give a running commentary on this, and that anyway the House will have an opportunity next week to debate and vote on this matter again?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to my hon. Friend; he is of course correct on all counts.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): This morning, the Health Secretary said that the NHS is spending £11 million preparing for no deal. In January, this House voted for the Spelman-Dromey amendment to take no deal off the table, so can the Solicitor General explain why the Government are ignoring the will of the Commons by trying to keep no deal on the table, and spending that £11 million unnecessarily?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. The Spelman-Dromey amendment actually committed us to a course of action whereby this House would not leave without a withdrawal agreement and future relationship. Those are not quite the same things as the assertions that he makes. He knows that I am as
anxious as he is to achieve a deal. He represents a constituency that I know well, which has, shall we say, more than its fair share of challenges. I want to help him and his constituents. The way to do that is to end the uncertainty and support the deal.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Is it the policy of Her Majesty’s Government to replace the backstop with alternative arrangements?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend knows the Government’s position. The Prime Minister set out a number of ways in which there could be a revision to the withdrawal agreement. Those matters are being actively pursued, and we will come back as soon as possible, and hopefully satisfy my hon. Friend. That he will be able to do the right thing and support a withdrawal agreement that will facilitate the Brexit for which he has campaigned for so long.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): On 29 January, I voted for the Brady amendment to replace the backstop with alternative arrangements. I praise my hon. and learned Friend for his personal role in helping to develop the Malthouse compromise. With regard to the second meaningful vote, whenever it comes, may I urge him to emphasise to colleagues across the Government that the definition of insanity is to repeat the same experiment and expect a different result?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend puts it in a very attractive way; I commend him for that. He, like me, is a realist, and he knows that he, representing his constituents as ably as he does, will want to resolve the uncertainty. I know that he is very keen to do that, and I applaud him for the constructive approach that he is taking. I very much commend that to him in the days ahead.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Although I recognise the challenging position of many Opposition MPs, does the Solicitor General share my amazement at those Opposition MPs who say they cannot support the withdrawal agreement because it may include a temporary backstop, keeping us temporarily in the customs union but not paying into the coffers and without freedom of movement, and simultaneously advocate a permanent customs union that would stop us from doing international trade deals?

Mr Speaker: The one disadvantage of that inquiry, as the Clerk, having consulted his scholarly cranium, has just pointed out to me, is that it was not about Government policy, and therefore it does not warrant an answer. The hon. Gentleman has made his point in his own way, but he was asking about Opposition policy, which he knows he should not do.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Rather than having to agree with the European Union whether we have met our obligations to avoid a hard border in Northern Ireland, would it not be fair and reasonable to both sides to refer the matter to a process of arbitration?

The Solicitor General: Well, well. My hon. Friend tempts me down an interesting path. He knows that of course the arbitration process is contained within the provisions of the agreement itself. I think that we appreciate that time is of the essence, and that we have to operate within that constraint, which is why we are very keen to come back to this House as quickly as possible.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Last week, I listened with great attention and respect to the former Taoiseach of Ireland, Bertie Ahern, as he gave evidence to the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union. He made the point that leaving with no deal would be extremely damaging to people on both sides of the border, both Republic of Ireland businesses and Northern Ireland businesses—particularly indigenous businesses, not so much international businesses. Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that for that reason it is incredibly important that this matter is resolved, and that the withdrawal agreement is passed with support right across this House?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend has long been a keen student of these issues. He is absolutely right to warn us about the dangers of a no-deal exit. He, I and very many others have supported a deal. It is now time for all of us to do just that and end the uncertainty.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Is it not the case that the time for running around Europe with ambitious schemes that will not be accepted is over, that that simply increases the chances of a no-deal exit and that the requests for any changes need to be detailed and precise? So can my hon. and learned Friend confirm that the Government will be going in with a targeted micro-surgery approach, not trying to blast the withdrawal agreement with a scattergun?

The Solicitor General: I can assure my hon. Friend, who speaks with conviction and passion and serves his constituents admirably, that the Government will be taking a forensic approach. This is a detailed negotiation. The time for platitudes is long gone. We will be adopting his approach in the days ahead.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: If it arises from the urgent question, and in deference to the Father of the House, let us hear it.

Mr Clarke: It is a genuine point of order. In the course of the exchanges, two Members of Parliament on the Government side of the House made reference to a civil servant, Sir Oliver Robbins, who they obviously regard as some sort of political enemy, although he is a non-political civil servant. They not only repeated newspaper rumours about what he was supposed to have been overheard saying, but they did so in terms that suggested he had been drinking too much when he was overheard, of which, as far as I am aware, there has never been the slightest indication, even in any of the newspaper reports on which they were relying.

Mr Speaker, people like that have no opportunity whatever of even knowing that these allegations are about to be made, or replying to them. An increasingly unpleasant personal tone is creeping into debate about Europe, mainly from the right-wing members of my
party, and it will get quite out of hand if you do not issue a word of reproof and say that that is an abuse of the privileges of the House of Commons, and is not conduct that should be repeated.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the Father of the House. I have had a discussion about the matter with the Clerk. I will not argue the toss about wording—it is not, strictly speaking, an abuse of the procedures of the House and it is not disorderly; but I think it is extremely undesirable, and it does represent a rank discourtesy, and indeed, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman implied, a coarsening or vulgarisation of the terms of trade in political debate, which we should all strive to avoid. Let me say to the Father of the House that I did not react as quickly as I should have done to the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) when he said what he did. He was absolutely entitled to his point of view, and even to robust questioning of Ministers, of course, but he should not have said what he did about a serving civil servant.

Perhaps I can gently suggest, at the risk of embarrassing the Father of the House, that Members across the House, whatever their political views, would do well to seek to emulate his example. I have known him for 24 years, and throughout the time I have known him, I have always observed one thing: he plays the ball; he does not play the man or the woman. He sticks to the issues—rather as the Chair of the Brexit Select Committee does, on the other side of the House. That is the model that other colleagues should follow. So I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for stepping in; the point he has made is valid.
1.23 pm

[Greg Clark]

This is a devastating decision that has been made today, and one that requires us to do whatever it takes to ensure that in the years to come Honda will once again, building on its continued presence here, recognise Britain as the best place in the world to build some of the best vehicles in the world.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. This morning’s news is absolutely devastating for the 3,500 workers in Swindon, their families and the wider community. It is absolutely devastating for the businesses in Honda’s supply chain and the tens of thousands of workers employed in them. It is a devastating blow to the automotive sector, to UK manufacturing in general and, indeed, to our entire economy.

A worker employed at Honda in Swindon for 24 years summarised the situation last night when he said that the Government are “completely incompetent”. I could not agree more. Honda’s decision is a damning indictment of the Government’s failure to support car manufacturing and ensure business confidence, with regard both to Brexit and to their so-called industrial strategy. Before Members on the Government Benches become too agitated, let me say that I understand that Honda’s CEO said this morning that the decision was unrelated to Brexit. However, the company’s statement specifically says that it wants to “focus activity in regions where it expects to have high production volumes”, especially of electric vehicles. The logical question is this: why does Honda no longer believe that the UK will have high production volumes, and why does it no longer have the confidence to invest here to make it so? As the Secretary of State has said, it will in future be exporting to the EU from Japan rather than from Britain.

The reason why the likes of Honda and Nissan began producing in the UK in the first place was that it was a good place to locate their manufacturing, so something must have changed. Could it be the Government’s botched Brexit causing chaos and uncertainty and undermining business confidence? The Secretary of State also alluded to the EU-Japan trade deal, which imposes zero tariffs at a time when we do not know what our tariffs will be. The likes of Airbus, Nissan, Ford and Jaguar Land Rover have all halted investment or slashed jobs as a direct result of that uncertainty. Nissan reversed its decision to build the X-Trail here only two weeks ago. JLR has slashed 4,500 jobs, and Ford has cut 1,000 jobs. Over the weekend, the senior vice president of Airbus said that a no-deal Brexit would be “catastrophic”, adding:

“We will have to look at future investments... There’re many other countries that dearly love aerospace.”

In fact, Honda itself warned last year that leaving the EU without a deal would cost the company tens of millions, so there can be no doubt that the Government’s reckless threats of no deal and prolonged uncertainty are having an impact on business decisions in the here and now, even if that is not in the top line of a press release. No deal must therefore be taken off the table and a firm commitment to a customs union and single market deal agreed.

Honda has also said that global trends and the move to electric vehicles were a factor in its decision. Could it be that the Government’s failure to support the transition to electric vehicles through their industrial strategy has augmented Honda’s decision? It wants to expand its electric vehicle production, which is something we all want, but we need that production to be here in the UK now, not used as a reason to close down plants in the wake of Brexit.

The UK has a world-class automotive sector and could be a world leader in electric vehicles, at the cutting edge of electric vehicle technology and research, but the Government have failed to invest to support the transition. I will give just one example. The Treasury pledged last year to support the switch to zero-emission vehicles with a £400 million fund for charging infrastructure, giving manufacturers the certainty to invest in production. Half of the money was to come from the taxpayer, with the rest matched by the private sector. However, one year on, the money that it was promised would be raised from the private sector has not been secured and no money from the fund has been invested.

The automotive sector is the jewel in our manufacturing crown. It supports highly paid, highly skilled jobs, it contributes enormously to our economy, and it has been an exemplar of the kind of industry that we need in the UK. But its future is in jeopardy, as has been shown so clearly in the decisions of recent weeks. Can the Secretary of State commit now to taking a no-deal Brexit off the table, agreeing a customs union deal and working with manufacturers and unions to support the transition in the market before it is too late? Can he offer Honda any incentives or reassurances that its investment here would be secure? After all, he did offer Nissan a sweetheart deal. Or is he happy to let yet another industry, and the communities who rely on it, fall by the wayside on the Conservatives’ watch?

Greg Clark: For over 30 years, Japanese companies investing in our automotive sector have been able to count on a bipartisan commitment to talking about the advantages of investing in Britain: our skills, our commitment to innovation and the efficiency of our operations. Members on both sides of the House know that I and my colleagues have worked intensively, including with trade unions, to ensure that we get investments that recognise those advantages. I hope that we can send to companies considering investment a clear determination, across both sides of the House, that we will continue to keep faith with that tradition of stability.

I think it was evident in my remarks that I share the dismay of the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) at the decision and the consequences for the excellent workforce in Swindon and their suppliers. We will do everything we can to ensure that they have good opportunities in future.

The hon. Lady asked about Brexit. The company said that the decision was not about Brexit and clearly we must accept that. She asked about its market share. In truth, it has a small market share in Europe compared with the markets in which it said it was expanding. Those are the reasons that it has given. However, I have always been clear with the House that the motor industry,
Japanese investors and particularly Honda have made it clear for many months that Brexit is an additional worry at a difficult time. They have been instrumental in shaping the deal that has been negotiated. If there is one message all of us in the House can give that they want to hear it is that the deal should be ratified.

Ford Motor Company said:

“A no-deal Brexit would be a catastrophe...It’s important that we get the agreement ratified that’s on the table at the moment.”

Aston Martin said of the deal,

“it’s obvious that... it meets the needs of all the requests we put forward as an industry and as Aston Martin”.

McLaren said that the withdrawal agreement would

“provide urgently-needed certainty and an implementation period that allows us to plan for the future”.

Toyo t a said:

“We welcome the announcement of a deal. It would provide business with the certainty”

that it needs. I could go on. The clear message from the automotive companies is that we should get on and ratify the deal.

The hon. Lady asked about the industrial strategy. She will know that our commitment to it, and through it to the future of mobility, has been at the heart of our policy and has been widely recognised. The £250 million investment in the Faraday challenge to make Britain the best place in the world for new battery technology has resulted in the national battery manufacturing centre being established in the west midlands. We already have the biggest-selling electric vehicle in Europe—indeed, one in five electric vehicles in Europe is made in Britain.

The fact that Honda’s R&D facility will continue to be in the UK and that companies such as Ford are moving their R&D to the UK underlines the strategy. The London Electric Vehicle Company is making taxis powered by electricity, not just for London but for export around the world. Aston Martin has invested £50 million in its new electric engine facility in Wales. Cummings is investing £210 million in its R&D in the automotive sector.

The hon. Lady asked about the charging network: £200 million is being invested in new, fast-charging networks for electric vehicles. Our reputation for automotive innovation and export is strong and growing. That is one of the reasons why it is particularly frustrating that Honda has made this decision, when other companies are recognising the fruits of those investments and investing in Britain.

The announcement comes at a time of disruption and change in the industry. Veterans of the industry say that this is the biggest period of change in most of their careers. That reinforces how right we are to invest in the future and in promoting Britain as a place to develop the next generation of vehicles. I hope that in the weeks, months and years ahead, the whole House will support us in promoting those advantages, not just for Honda, but for other companies that can invest in this country.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I accept, as the Secretary of State does, Honda’s statement that Brexit played no significant role in the decision. We must avoid a childlike debate every time there is an industrial announcement, whereby one side or the other leaps on how far Brexit has been involved in complex decisions. However, the fact remains that when I served at the Department of Trade and Industry under Margaret Thatcher, and at the Treasury under John Major, I was involved in pursuing the policy of those Governments to draw foreign investment to this country to revive our manufacturing base by presenting Britain as the most attractive and business-friendly country in the European Union, through which companies could gain access to the single market. The Blair Government pursued that policy with equal vigour. As my right hon. Friend has just said, it is no good people ignoring the warnings of every leader of the car industry, most of our foreign investors and all our business leaders that we must seek to retain that reputation. Will he therefore confirm that, in line with the withdrawal agreement, we are pursuing a customs arrangement and a regulatory alignment that will not put new barriers in the way of trade with our biggest, most important market? If we fail to do that, there will be a succession of announcements of this kind, and Britain will cease to be of any particular attraction to international investors seeking a European market.

Greg Clark: I acknowledge my right hon. and learned Friend’s contribution as part of a succession of Ministers on both sides of the House who have given confidence to investors from Japan and around the world. A particular admiration has been accorded to Britain for the stability and predictability of our arrangements. In a turbulent world, the sense of continuity that we have been able to offer, especially to investors who invest for the long term—and any automotive investment is for the long term—is important. It is essential that we recover that.

It is also important that we listen and respect the evidence of people who employ hundreds of thousands of our constituents. We have consistently done that. In my response to the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles, I set out the almost unanimous view of investors that the deal that has been negotiated meets their needs. That is not a surprise because they have been consulted during the negotiations. However, this is a moment when the House needs to reach a resolution. The Japanese ambassador is very active on these matters. He summarised his views in a letter to the UK and the EU:

“What Japanese businesses in Europe most wish to avoid is the situation in which they are unable to discern clearly the way the Brexit negotiations are going, only grasping the whole picture at the last minute.”

We should heed that advice. We have the opportunity to bring negotiations to an orderly conclusion. I hope that, for the sake of jobs in constituencies throughout the country, we will do that.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Our thoughts on these Benches are with the people of Swindon, those whose jobs are at risk and those in the supply chain who face further uncertainty. Unite the union made the point:

“The usual formula is one job in the plant equates to four in the supply chain and the local economy. If closure is confirmed, it will rip the heart out of this area.”

I welcome the taskforce that the Secretary of State has set up. Will he assure the House that he will regularly communicate its outcomes to hon. Members?

We have known for some time that the EU was making tariff-free trade for Japanese car makers possible and shipping from Japan viable. Does the Secretary of State therefore agree that it is important that the Government now communicate a similar zero-tariff ambition for UK-EU car exports?
Some of us are very concerned that no deal will do irreparable damage to the manufacturing sector throughout the UK. What is the Department doing to protect the UK’s manufacturing sector?

Gerg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks and the tone in which he expressed them. I will certainly keep the House informed about the taskforce’s progress. We should bear in mind that there are two years in which the workforce will continue to be employed. It is important that the sales in Swindon should continue so that their jobs can be secure. During that time, I want to find out whether in the first instance Honda, recognising its continued commitment to research and development, will see that it has an ideal facility in Swindon in which to build the next generation of vehicles.

The fact that there is a modern plant and a workforce in Swindon who have an international reputation for being excellent and innovative is a message that we should send out loudly and clearly. At a time when there are skill shortages across manufacturing industry, there is absolutely no reason why the opportunities made available to the workforce should not give them equally promising and rewarding careers in advanced manufacturing, such as they have enjoyed in Swindon. I will certainly update the House on the progress on that.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the trade agreement with Japan. My view is that the best outcome—indeed, the essential outcome—is that we should roll over, and continue to be able to benefit from, the trade arrangement that has been negotiated between the EU and Japan, unless and until we negotiate an alternative that is at least as good.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Is not one of the lessons from this about the power and scope of the EU-Japan trade agreement, in contrast to the continuing uncertainty for our businesses here and for overseas investors—two and a half years after the referendum—about what the future terms of our trading relationship with Europe are actually going to be? Will the Secretary of State tell us why it is taking so long to put in place our trade agreements with countries such as Japan, Canada and Australia?

Gerg Clark: I agree with my right hon. Friend. Although Brexit uncertainty was not cited as one of the factors in the decision, it is evident in investment decisions in the whole industry. I know from regular conversations with investors that it does bear on their minds. Last time I was in the House, I mentioned that Nissan has said that the political uncertainty over a no-deal Brexit, or what kind of Brexit there will be, is “casting a shadow” over its future. When investors have no political motivation to make such statements issue that advice and warning, we should attend to it. It seems to me that we have the information necessary to conclude these negotiations, and in my view we should do it during the days ahead.

Gerg Clark: Like my hon. Friend, I pay tribute to our colleagues, my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland), my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Claire Perry) and my hon. Friends the Members for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) and for Salisbury (John Glen). The constituents of all of them may be affected by this matter, but they are all unable to take part in this statement because of their roles as Ministers.

Across Wiltshire, we are deeply concerned about the 3,500 job losses and potentially more in the supply chain. May I therefore volunteer to take part in the excellent taskforce that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has announced? I think that is a very useful step forward. Will he join me in rejoicing at the fact that the economy of Wiltshire is actually extremely strong at the moment? The unemployment figures announced this morning are the lowest there have ever been, and we have had huge growth particularly in electric car manufacturing and our high-tech industries across the M4 corridor. I hope he will join me in thinking that we will therefore be able to find useful employment for all these people in good time before the plant closes.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) is absolutely right to refer to the fact that the success of Swindon and the whole of Wiltshire has been notable. In fact, one of the problems that Honda has occasionally discussed with me in the past is its struggle to recruit the volume of labour that has been
required. It is a matter of sadness that that will not be a problem for the future, given this decision. He is right to emphasise that the demand for the kind of skilled labour that exists in that country is very strong. Through the taskforce, we will do everything we can to make sure that employers are matched with people with skills.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Brexit may not have been the direct cause of Honda’s announcement, but, to echo the wise words of the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), does the Business Secretary agree with me that it is an absolutely key part of the context in which Honda and other major car manufacturers are making decisions on where to invest in the generations of vehicles that will transform this industry? The harsh reality is that Britain’s reputation as a stable place to do business and as the gateway to Europe is being undermined before our eyes.

The Business Secretary mentioned the EU-Japan trade agreement. Will it not be a ludicrous situation if we end up leaving the EU without a deal at the end of March, or if we end up on World Trade Organisation terms after a transition in 2020, and tariffs are put on cars exported from Honda in Swindon to the EU that do not apply to cars exported from Japan to the EU? Does that not indicate that, whatever else happens in the coming weeks, the option of a no-deal Brexit has to be ruled out once and for all?

Greg Clark: I agree with the hon. Gentleman when he describes the reality of how the automotive industry successfully trades in this country. It is based on a just-in-time system of production, which has been very well calibrated over the years to make us very efficient. That has been communicated not just to me but to Select Committees of this House. It is clear, and it has been much debated, as the hon. Gentleman will know from his constituency experience. That is what we must agree on, and it is what has been agreed—the ability to continue to trade without tariffs, without rules of origin checks, without quotas and with a minimum of frictions—which is why the companies have endorsed the deal. I agree with him that to leave on WTO terms would be a hammer blow to this foundational industry in this country. However, he has it in his gift, as do all Members, to avoid that by coming together in the days ahead to agree a deal.

Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con): While this is awful news for the employees at Honda and those affected, it has to be said that the Secretary of State and his team will be doing all they can to support Honda and those affected during this time. Let us not forget that, 3,500 households are facing a pretty bleak future at the moment.

The point the House needs to address today is that this is not a one-off incident—it comes on the back of similar announcements from Nissan and Jaguar Land Rover. It raises serious questions about the future viability of our automotive sector as a whole. This is precisely the sort of thing the Secretary of State’s industrial strategy was designed to address. Why is it that, at the moment, it does not seem to be working?

Greg Clark: The decision we took to position this country at the leading edge of the new automotive technologies—battery technology and connected and autonomous vehicles—is evidently the right one, because the pace of change, as has been made clear by Honda today, is faster than even it expected two or three years ago. If we sustain our commitment through the industrial strategy to make sure that we are the place in the world associated with the leading edge of battery technology and its manufacture—the Faraday challenge and the Faraday Institute are prime examples of that—there is a very prosperous future for that industry. However, it also occurs to me that, in a world in which there is such turbulence and so many changes, we should do everything we can to neutralise other sources of uncertainty. So we need to do both.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know that, sadly, Honda today also announced the closure of its plant in Turkey. Given that Turkey is, and will remain, part of the customs union, does he not agree that we should be careful about accepting the advice of those such as the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) that we, too, should join the customs union, as that would clearly have made no difference to Honda’s decision?

Greg Clark: My right hon. Friend is correct in pointing that out. As I said in my statement, the company has decided to consolidate its production, in this instance, in Japan, and the consequences for Turkey and the Swindon plant are the same. That also draws attention to the fact that free trade agreements, important though they are, do bring about changes themselves and are associated with decisions that sometimes can be difficult.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): This is a devastating blow for the south-west, Swindon and the wider UK manufacturing base. Does the Secretary of State not accept that it is a fact that our not being in the new Japan-EU free trade agreement, and therefore not being able to guarantee future tariff-free trade between our country and Japan, puts us at a disadvantage when people are making these sorts of decisions? I was encouraged by the replies he gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), who chairs the Brexit Committee, but when will he and
Greg Clark: It is evidently the case that we should be part of a free trade agreement with Japan, and we should avail ourselves of the one that has been negotiated with the EU, unless and until it is replaced by a better one. Notwithstanding the disruption that free trade can sometimes cause, I am strongly of the view that, as a nation, we prosper from being a nation of free trade, and I think the right hon. Gentleman agrees. I think it has been evident in my replies to hon. Members on both sides of the House that I regard it as an urgent requirement to conclude our discussions. That will require compromise on both sides of the House, but that is something that this House has achieved over the years; indeed, the rest of the world has admired this House of Commons for coming to pragmatic decisions that are in the interests of the long-term reputation of this country.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders has said that the industry is on red alert. Will the Secretary of State ensure that his Department is in full dialogue with the SMMT on the issues that it needs to address to reassure the rest of the automotive industry? Although these 3,500 jobs are incredibly important and skilled, there is also a very big supply chain, which involves many other companies, other than just directly Honda. Will my right hon. Friend, in making up his taskforce, ensure that my right hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), my hon. and learned Friend (Claire Perry), my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Robert Buckland) and my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) are very much involved?

Greg Clark: I will indeed, and I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. I and my colleagues are in frequent dialogue with the SMMT and all the companies that are part of the industry. It seems to me—he knows this from his time in the Department—that having a close relationship with no rules of origin, quotas or tariffs? The largest European market for electric vehicles is in the Norwegian market, which is outside the customs union but has specific relationships for no rules of origin, tariffs or quotas. The second largest market is of course our own. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the withdrawal agreement and future partnership will allow British manufacturers to have that same specific relationship with no rules of origin, quotas or tariffs?

Greg Clark: I agree with the hon. Lady. That the environment in which investment decisions take place affect all businesses, not just those in the automotive sector. That is why I have taken pains to remind the House of what the leaders of the industry say, which is that we should conclude these matters on the lines of the deal that has been negotiated. It is in her hands to contribute to that resolution.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It is worth noting that the largest European market for electric vehicles is the Norwegian market, which is outside the customs union but has specific relationships for no rules of origin, tariffs or quotas. The second largest market is of course our own. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the withdrawal agreement and future partnership would allow British manufacturers to have that same specific relationship with no rules of origin, quotas or tariffs?

Greg Clark: It will. This is one of the big advantages of the agreement. The industry and individual firms have been very clear that this is one of the reasons why they have endorsed it.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Today is a human tragedy for 3,500 workers in that great Swindon factory, yet there are those, such as Patrick Minford, who would say that the car industry should...
follow the coal mines down the path to industrial oblivion; and there are those in this House, such as the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), who are confronted by the automotive industry's concerns about, for example, frictionless trade and the impact of Brexit, say, "Fake news." Does the Secretary of State agree with me that our 850,000-strong automotive industry is a world-class success story, and that nothing should be done that puts it at risk by those who would be oblivious to the consequences of their actions and take this country crashing out of the European Union on 29 March without a deal?

**Greg Clark:** I am very proud of our automotive industry. It has all the attributes the hon. Gentleman ascribes to it. I am proud of the workforce. I am proud of the workforce in Swindon in particular. This is no reflection on their calibre, their commitment and their ingenuity. Far from the automotive industry being an industry that we can or should do without, it is one of the prime opportunities we have. If we have some of the best brains on the planet looking at connected and autonomous vehicles, and harnessing the next generation of batteries, why on earth should we not make the products of that ingenuity in this country? I am determined that we should do so.

**David T. C. Davies** (Monmouth) (Con): Given that we have decided to ban all their vehicles from our roads by 2040 and that many Members on both sides of the House have called for that ban to be brought forward, what does my right hon. Friend think is more surprising: that some of these companies are thinking of relocating elsewhere or that so many MPs in this House seem to want to put the blame on Brexit?

**Greg Clark:** What I would say to my hon. Friend is that we are talking about Honda’s plant in Swindon and that most of its output is not diesel but petrol vehicles, which go all around the world. Automotive companies are increasingly reflecting the much more rapid global shift to new powertrains than was expected a while ago. I think advantage comes from being in the vanguard of that change, rather than being a laggard. That is why we, in the industrial strategy, are determined to make sure that we are at that leading edge and can be an example to the rest of the world.

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): This morning a person who owns a firm in the supply chain wrote to me. He expressed his extreme dismay about the lack of a UK-Japan trade deal and he suggested that Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Ministers talk to the 56 Japan-based firms in the north-east. He also sought a more active industrial strategy. I know about the Secretary of State’s Faraday initiative, but were we to have some really big infrastructure investment for electric vehicles, we might grow the domestic market, which would enable us to sell more here and leverage more exports on that basis.

**Greg Clark:** As my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) said earlier, we are the second country in the EU in terms of take-up of electric vehicles. I do not think the hon. Lady will find anyone in the industry who doubts the commitment my colleagues and I make to our industrial strategy and advancing that leadership. That is noted not just in this country, but around the world. As I said earlier, it is frustrating that the timing of this decision by Honda does not allow it to avail itself of some of the fruits of that strategy.

**John Stevenson** (Carlisle) (Con): Manufacturing represents about 20% of the Carlisle economy, which is twice the national figure, and many of those businesses export to Europe and to the rest of the world. Probably most important of all, they provide jobs, security and livelihoods for thousands of people who live in my constituency. Does the Secretary of State agree that we must do nothing that endangers that success? Does he further agree that he must ensure we continue to have access to our biggest export market, as well as a domestic environment that is stable and certain?

**Greg Clark:** I agree with every part of what my hon. Friend says. At a time of change and challenge for the industry, this is just the time to provide the certainty, commitment and enthusiasm about the future that will retain and attract investment from this country and around the world.

**Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Those arguing that this announcement is in no way Brexit-related are insulting the intelligence of the workers in Swindon and those in the manufacturing companies along the supply chain. Two of those companies are based in my constituency and they employ hundreds of workers. What discussions will the British Government be having with the Welsh Government to co-ordinate a response to today’s announcement?

**Greg Clark:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. It is important to point to and acknowledge the reasons for the decision that have been given by the company. I have been clear that publicly the automotive sector has strongly advocated the need for supply chains to continue to be effective and uninterrupted. I work very closely with Ken Skates, my counterpart in the Welsh Government. We will make sure that we work together to ensure that the supply chain in Wales is part of initiatives we take.

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): I have a sense of déjà vu, because few days after the meaningful vote was lost, Philips announced the closure of the Philips Avant plant—the largest plant in my constituency. It said explicitly that it was not due to Brexit that production was being moved to the Netherlands. The key point is surely this: we know it is bad news, whatever the cause; we now have to get new inward investment and make ourselves competitive and attractive. Will we do that better if we trade on WTO terms, or if we have a deal with the EU, with tariff-free access to our largest market?

**Greg Clark:** My hon. Friend puts it extremely well. In a world of competitive investment, we need to deploy all the assets and strengths at our disposal. Internationally mobile investments are competed for by many other countries, so we have to get everything right. It seems to me that to have trading relationships that are the bare minimum of international arrangements is a handicap rather than an advantage.
Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): An analysis of the last Labour Government’s car scrappage scheme revealed that it generated almost 400,000 new sales over a 12-month period at a relatively modest cost. Given the twin challenges of poor air quality and a downturn in the automotive sector, why do the Government not consider a repeat of that strategy?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman is very familiar with and experienced in this area, and I understand his point. I would say that the reasons behind this decision and some others have been not so much about demand—in this case—but about an acceleration of a change in technology and how investment can be consolidated, so I am not sure that his proposal is the answer to the reasons that Honda cited, but I take into account the representation he makes.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): The car industry is having to reset quickly as consumers turn their back on diesel and, increasingly, internal combustion engine cars more generally. Does the Secretary of State share my view that as we compete for new electric vehicle production lines, one way of making the UK more attractive is to show strong domestic demand by accelerating our planned transition from ICE to electric vehicles?

Greg Clark: If a country wants want to be renowned as a source of innovation and manufacturing, there is an expectation that people can look to the domestic market to see that the products are consumed there. That is important, but I am always careful to respect the fact that for some years to come conventional vehicles will be manufactured here and will be a perfectly reasonable choice for people to make. An orderly transition rather than an abrupt shift would be best for investment and confidence.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Honda’s employment base and supply chain go well beyond Swindon into the Stroud valleys, which remain a major manufacturing area. We have had a double blow with SKF’s announcement that it intends to shut its factory in Stonehouse, and the loss of our last aerospace ball-bearing manufacturer will have a major impact on Rolls-Royce. Is it not about time that the Government make their case very well in response to this devastating news. My real condolences go to Swindon, which I

Greg Clark (Co-op): The announcement is very sad news for the workers at Honda in Swindon. Just up the road in Bridgend, which neighbours my constituency, Ford has announced voluntary redundancies. The Jaguar Land Rover contract is ending three months early and there is only one Dragon engine left, which will mean the employment of only 500 people by 2021. Going from 1,700 people down to 500 means far more redundancies in the long term. Ford has also supposedly warned the Prime Minister that a no-deal Brexit would be a catastrophe and that it would look to pull all its production out of the UK. First, what more can the Minister do to support the Bridgend workers, particularly at Bridgend Ford? Secondly, I wish him luck in trying to convince the Prime Minister to take no deal off the table, because that would be catastrophic for the car manufacturing industry in this country, including Bridgend Ford.

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman mentions Bridgend; I speak to Ford and its VP for Europe, Steve Armstrong, very regularly, and the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that it is looking to us to resolve this matter. Steve Armstrong says that if we leave without a deal, it would be “pretty disastrous” and that it would force us to think about what our future investment strategy for the UK would be.”

However, he also says that the deal that has been negotiated would address these concerns, and I hope that given the hon. Gentleman’s interest in the workers in Bridgend, he will come to resolve this matter by voting for the deal.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): This announcement is very sad news for the workers at Swindon and for the jobs and businesses in the supply chain, but does my right hon. Friend agree that this is much more to do with the EU-Japan trade deal than it is about Brexit? The reality is that free trade deals create winners and losers in the short term, but in the longer term, there are benefits for all from free trade.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): My sympathy extends to all those who are going to lose their jobs. I remind the Secretary of State that we are leaving the EU and that we must be able to strike our own trade deals around the world if we are to flourish as a country, as I believe we would, so any deal that we sign with the EU that prevents us from doing that is not acceptable.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The Secretary of State makes his case very well in response to this devastating news. My real condolences go to Swindon, which I
visited as the automotive Minister. However, has not the central problem been displayed in the Secretary of State’s exchanges with some Government Members—namely, that the deal that the Prime Minister is putting forward is an interim deal that defers the big question of whether we have frictionless access or whether there is the freedom to make trade agreements? It is getting towards high noon. I have a lot of respect for the Secretary of State. The position is that there is a natural majority in this House to do the sensible thing. We need to have people like him being statesmanlike and taking the right decision on behalf of the country—that is, to reach a permanent deal on our arrangements with the EU and to sort this situation out. As a former Minister for the sector, for which I have a great deal of affection, I plead with him to do that.

**Greg Clark:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. He embodies the spirit of continuity in understanding and support for the sector, which I said at the beginning of my statement is very important for investors. On the future partnership agreement, in fairness, it was the EU that maintained that those discussions could take place only after we have left the EU. That is part of its negotiating mandate. That is why it has not been possible to agree the final state, but it is the case—I have worked hard to convey the requirements of manufacturing industry—that within those negotiations, the opportunity to have frictionless trading arrangements should be there and be noted, and it is one of the reasons why firms and sectors support the deal.

**Mr Marcus Jones** (Nuneaton) (Con): This is a very sad day for the people whose livelihoods depend on the Swindon plant. This is a global industry undergoing massive change, with the challenge of car sales volumes falling significantly in many markets. I heard what my right hon. Friend said about Brexit and moving forward. Will he say what more can be done to help British manufacturing companies and manufacturing companies from other countries that are based here to get through this transitional period and the current turbulence, so that these companies can emerge stronger and be world-leading in many of the new technologies?

**Greg Clark:** Companies’ prime requirement is that the uncertainty be brought to an end. It is in the gift of the House to meet that requirement, and we cannot and should not leave it a moment longer. We will have the opportunity in the days ahead to conclude this matter. That is the best thing the House can do for manufacturing and other sectors of the economy.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): May I applaud the response of the two hon. Members for Swindon, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), and the Business Secretary for his swift plans to go to Swindon and establish the taskforce, but may I criticise him for not being clear enough that this is not a Brexit-related issue? Had we voted to stay in the EU in June 2016, chances are he would be here today at that Dispatch Box making a statement about the closure of the Honda plant. We know this because Honda is closing its car factory in Turkey, which is a member of the customs union, and because Honda’s chief European officer said on the radio today: “This is not a Brexit-related issue for us”.

**Will the Business Secretary make it absolutely clear that we will offer every support to the Honda workers but that this closure announcement has nothing to do with Brexit?**

**Greg Clark:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving me the chance to say on the record that we totally respect the reasons Honda has given. In fairness, he will agree that I have made it clear that the sector is undergoing a big change, not least in technology, but I have to report to him and the House the countless conversations I have with virtually every firm in the automotive sector, large and small, all saying that the uncertainty is a negative factor in their investment decision making and that they want our future relationship to be without frictions, tariffs and rules of origin checks. That is sufficiently consistent that it is fair that I bring it to the attention of the House in a statement about the automotive sector.

**Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): A year ago, the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Select Committee visited the Honda plant at Swindon. We saw Civics coming off the line, many of them destined for the European market, and the benefits of the substantial overseas investment in our automotive industry, some of which has benefited my constituency through the London Electric Vehicle Company. In its peak year of 2013, investment reached £588 million. Are there any decisions the Secretary of State would suggest the House take in the next few days to encourage future investment to get back to that kind of level?

**Greg Clark:** There are indeed. The context of technological change is common to the motor industry around the world, but as I hope I have made clear, we have the opportunity to be a beneficiary of that change. We cannot be complacent about how competitive the sector is around the world, which means we must do everything we can to give confidence to investors, and that certainly involves agreeing a deal over the next few days that can unleash the optimism that comes from investment up and down the country—investment that I know in many instances is not taking place while people contemplate what our future trading relationship will be.

**Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): My thoughts are with the workers whose excellent work I saw for myself on a visit to the Swindon plant with the Industry and Parliament Trust last year, and with those at Bridgend and elsewhere—my first job after graduation was as a foreman at Ford in Bridgend. We must not have no deal. Honda’s relationship with the UK car industry goes back much further than the car plant at Swindon to the tie-up with British Leyland and the Rover Group when it was still nationalised. I urge my right hon. Friend to remember that history and to engage with Honda to see in what other innovative ways we can engage with it to the benefit of workers at Swindon and elsewhere; just as the then Government did with Michael Edwards and British Leyland in the days of the new Rover models.
Greg Clark: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, drawing on experience that I was not aware of but which is clearly important to him. He is right that this country’s relationship with Honda has been a mutually successful one lasting many years and that we should respect its contribution to the British economy over that time. As I said in my statement, I hope that the fact that its European headquarters will remain here, that its Formula 1 team will still be based just outside Milton Keynes and that it will continue to do research and development there will mean that in the months ahead, when it contemplates new investments, it will think first of a place that has served it and its workforce well for a very long time.

Making Tax Digital

2.25 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): With permission, I would like to make a statement on making tax digital for business.

It has never been more important for businesses to be able to seize the opportunities that digital technology offers. Making tax digital helps them to do just that, and I am pleased to update the House today on Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs’ progress in delivering this important modernisation of the UK tax system. Businesses that are registered for VAT and whose taxable turnover exceeds the VAT registration threshold of £85,000 will be required to use digital tools to keep their business records and to file their VAT returns for periods from 1 April.

It is important to be clear that MTD is not changing what businesses do for VAT—the frequency of reporting and tax rules remain unchanged; rather MTD is about making it easier for businesses to get their tax right by transforming how businesses keep their records and send their information to HMRC. Under the changes, those who do not already keep their records digitally will be required to start doing so, but the process of then sending returns to HMRC will become more straightforward, with their VAT returns generated and sent direct from the software they are using to keep their records.

In my last update to the House in July 2017, I announced that I was slowing the pace of the roll-out of MTD to give businesses, particularly small businesses, more time to prepare. I set out then that the start date for MTD would be April 2019, that it would be limited to VAT at that time and that the smallest VAT-registered businesses would not initially be required to use it. The extra time that these changes provided has been well spent. The pilot for the MTD VAT service has been running successfully since April 2018 and was opened up to the public in October. I can announce today that over 16,500 businesses are now signed up to the service, and I would encourage all those businesses that will be mandated to use MTD from April to sign up now and get used to the new service.

Businesses such as the oldest family business in Britain, R J Balson & Son, a butchers based in Bridport, Dorset established in 1515, just six years into the reign of Henry VIII, are already making the switch from keeping paper records, and prior to that no doubt records on parchment. The benefits to those moving to MTD are clear: it gives businesses more control over their finances, allowing them to spend their time focusing on innovation, growth and the creation of jobs. Indeed, the Enterprise Research Centre in 2018 found that, for microbusinesses, web-based accounting software delivered productivity increases of 11.8%.

In a world where businesses are already banking, paying bills and shopping online, it is important that the tax system keeps pace, but MTD is not just about providing a modern, digital service for businesses but about helping them get their tax right. We know that keeping records on paper and submitting VAT to HMRC manually results in errors. In a recent YouGov poll, 61% of businesses said they had previously lost receipts, and errors can also occur in the manual
Some have questioned HMRC’s decision not to produce its own software for businesses, but I make no apology for overseeing the development of a diverse software-supplier marketplace that caters to a variety of needs, ensuring that businesses have the tools that they need to succeed. Software developers have responded positively by producing software at a range of price points, including free products, and offering different levels of functionality. That includes bridging software for those who want to continue to use spreadsheets for record-keeping, as well as fully integrated accounting software that provides additional functionality to help users to better understand and plan for their business.

More than 160 software products are already listed on HMRC’s software choices page as part of the MTD VAT pilot, and I know of many others that are currently being developed. Our approach to the provision of software means that businesses will be able to choose a product that suits both their budget and their needs. That includes some products which have been developed specifically to support different types of sector, such as specialist products for farmers.

However, it is not just HMRC and the software industry that are getting ready. HMRC’s latest research, which I can now share with the House, shows that in December 2018, 81% of the mandated population were aware of MTD, and 83% of those had started to make the necessary preparations. HMRC will have written directly to every business that is mandated to join MTD by the end of this month to signpost them to the help and support that they need in order to prepare. Now that the January self-assessment peak is over and HMRC is expanding its communications activity, we are confident that awareness and take-up will increase still further.

HMRC wants to ensure that MTD lands well and that customers feel supported throughout their transition. The first staggers of businesses that file quarterly will not need to submit their first VAT return through the new service until August this year. We will continue to listen to our customers to ensure that the right support is available to businesses as they become familiar with the new requirements of MTD. I must make clear that during the first year of mandation, penalties will not be issued for late filing but only for late payment. There will, of course, be a process to claim an exemption from MTD on the basis of digital exclusion owing to factors such as disability or problems with access to broadband, or on religious grounds. Any business that is already exempt from online filing for VAT will remain so under MTD without having to reapply.

Some have questioned the timing of these changes, and, in particular, have mentioned the proximity to the date on which the UK will leave the European Union. I can reassure the House that MTD is designed to enable businesses to meet their UK tax obligations as simply as possible, regardless of the outcome of the EU exit discussions, and is designed to complement other business tax obligations. We will continue to work closely with the software industry and with business over the coming weeks to ensure that that happens.

HMRC has made good progress in preparing for MTD. The pilot has progressed well and the full functionality of MTD has been tested with a wide range of different businesses, including some below the VAT threshold which have chosen to take part voluntarily. HMRC is ready, the software market is ready, and hundreds more businesses are getting ready every day by joining the pilot. MTD will help unlock the potential of UK businesses, putting them on a stronger footing to compete internationally, maximising productivity and simplifying business processes.

I commend my statement to the House.

2.33 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I thank the Financial Secretary for providing a copy of his statement in advance, and for his reference to Henry VIII. I must say that the Government are obsessed with Henry VIII, and with all the powers that they are using in that connection.

As has been recognised by the Federation of Small Businesses, the Labour party has consistently called on the Government to rethink their making tax digital policy, not least because our manifesto commits us to scrapping quarterly reporting for companies under the VAT threshold. The Opposition’s concerns are therefore well versed. We have raised them during numerous debates in relation to numerous pieces of legislation, announcements, delays and, indeed, U-turns. Unfortunately, we are here again today, addressing the Government’s absolute failure to handle the digital transition—a failure that has serious consequences for businesses throughout the country.

Let me make it clear that we fully support digitalised tax reporting, which we all agree has the potential to drastically reduce the time that individuals and business owners have to spend filling out long and complicated tax returns. We are also aware of the productivity gains that it will bring, to which the Financial Secretary referred. If handled correctly, it could make positive changes in the way in which people report their tax position for decades to come. However, the stakeholders to whom we have spoken in the business sector and the tax community continue to raise deep concerns about their ability to be ready for digital VAT reporting, and they have expressed those concerns to the Treasury Committee.

Owners of small and medium-sized businesses are already worried about the stark changes that they will have to make in 2019 to prepare for Brexit. They are worried about the possibility of a no-deal scenario and the overnight effect that it would have on costs and supply chains. There is also the potential introduction of tariffs and the impact on staff who are EU citizens. The Government have continuously failed to provide the certainty that is needed, so it is little wonder that business confidence is pretty low.

What is more, few people inside or outside the Government believe that HMRC is actually ready. To the best of my knowledge, it has the same problems as many of the businesses that will be required to begin digital reporting in 2019. Those concerns are echoed by tax professionals, who emphasise that the current timetable is unrealistic and unworkable for HMRC and the business community.
That is why the Opposition propose a delay in the introduction of digital reporting for VAT and income tax purposes until the end of the current Parliament in 2022, assuming that it lasts that long. Such a delay would give HMRC and small and medium-sized businesses the time that they need to prepare adequately and to implement new software in their businesses. Notwithstanding today’s announcement, there is a risk that the Government’s current timetable will bring chaos and confusion unless the concerns of the business community are fully addressed.

I should be grateful if the Minister would answer the following questions. Are any further costs anticipated as a result of today’s announcement? Is the delay in the implementation of making tax digital in any way connected with the so-called estate transformation—or downsizing—of HMRC, which has seen 170 regional offices merged into 13 “regional centres”? Is there not a need for in-house provision of making tax digital software, given the bespoke nature of HMRC’s UK-specific needs and the need to co-ordinate with other Departments? Under what legal authority or process has HMRC outsourced provision of that software?

A total of 0.5% of eligible businesses—one in 200—have signed up to making tax digital. Is the Financial Secretary confident that all the businesses will have signed up by the end of the Parliament? He says that he wants to be confident that all the businesses will have signed up to making tax digital. Is the Financial Secretary provision of that software?

The hon. Gentleman referred to the continuing estate transformation work and asked whether there was any link between that and MTD. I think there is in the sense that we have a clear drive to make sure that HMRC is a lean and efficient organisation itself in the 21st century and that its estate is not scattered across the country in numerous offices, some employing fewer than 10 staff, but is in state-of-the-art hubs where digital and IT approaches can be maximised.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether we had considered developing in-house software for MTD, and I think he might have been urging us to do so. I know that it is a passion of the Labour party to centralise and have monolithic organisations that do all the organising at the centre, but that is not the way of us on this side of the House; we believe that the market generally knows best, which is why I was delighted to have been able to announce that we have no fewer than 160 different competing products, and that number is growing by the month.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the Government were confident that we would be signing up the right number of companies in time, and I would make a few important points on that. First, there is no cliff edge on 1 April; that is the date at which companies and individuals will be required to keep digital records, but for most companies the first time they will have to submit a VAT return under MTD will be for the first tranche around 6 August and for subsequent tranches in the months following that date. There is plenty of time for companies to sign up and get involved. Secondly, as I have already elaborated, we will take a proportionate, light-touch approach to penalties, working with companies and businesses to make sure that MTD roll-out is a success.

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his response to my statement. I am pleased that he, like me, recognises the value of the digital processing of tax returns. Indeed, he made a specific and welcome reference to its productivity advantages. However, he also referred to what I think he suggested were serious failings in our approach, suggesting that it was not the right approach. I could not disagree more. In my statement, I was at pains to emphasise the proportionate and measured way in which we had approached these matters. I said that when I first became Financial Secretary to the Treasury, I decided to delay the roll-out of MTD so that it related only to VAT-registered businesses by 2019, and carved out the very smallest businesses and individuals from these measures. Indeed, I gave reassurances to the House and the business community that nothing will be introduced in terms of income tax and corporation tax any earlier than 2020 and that we would see how the roll-out of the VAT MTD went before we took any further decisions in that respect.

The hon. Gentleman raised several specific questions, which I will address in turn. He asked whether there will be any additional costs as a result of today’s announcements to those businesses in scope of MTD, and the answer to that is most certainly not. He might be familiar with the estimates already produced that suggest that on average a business in the UK that is in the scope of these measures will face additional costs of some 60p per week, and that does not take into account the efficiency gains that can be expected or indeed the fact that in many cases those costs will be able to be written off against taxation.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the continuing estate transformation work and asked whether there was any link between that and MTD. I think there is in the sense that we have a clear drive to make sure that HMRC is a lean and efficient organisation itself in the 21st century and that its estate is not scattered across the country in numerous offices, some employing fewer than 10 staff, but is in state-of-the-art hubs where digital and IT approaches can be maximised.

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Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): There is a lot going on in HMRC just now: MTD, the incredible number of additional staff being put in to deal with Brexit, and the downsizing and changing of HMRC offices. It is interesting that the Minister says he is not in favour of centralisation in the provision of software but is in favour of centralisation in relation to closing all the offices so that there are only super-offices, not local ones.

HMRC has not yet provided even the most basic information that taxpayers will require in order to take part in MTD. Some have received a letter—an overly complicated and fairly cursory letter—telling them of the start date, but they have not received information on their specific queries about how to sign up to MTD and how it will work for them. It would be useful for the Minister to provide more information around what HMRC is doing on that.

The Minister said 81% of the businesses that are expected to sign up by April are aware of MTD. It is a damming indictment that only 81% are aware of it; HMRC and the Government should be doing a better job of making sure these businesses are aware of it, because 19% are not aware, and in fact a significant number of businesses are hearing about this potentially for the first time today.

Because there is no one approved software provider recommended by HMRC, I am concerned that 160 choices is a baffling array that businesses will have to decide between with no idea which of these software choices will work, which will work well and which will suit their business. It is not helpful to have that many software choices.

On penalties on businesses, I understand that when businesses sign up to MTD, their previous records are transferred from the old system to the new one and are lost from the old system. Can the Minister confirm that businesses that hold out until later than April but before their filing date will not be penalised for holding out in order for them to make sure the system is working properly and to make appropriate software choices before they make that switch, and potentially lose all their old records?

On Brexit staff and the changes HMRC has been making to focus on Brexit, can the Minister confirm how much resource has been put into MTD and communicating this to taxpayers compared with how much resource has been put into preparing for Brexit? If significantly more has been put into Brexit, is now really the right time to be trying to make changes around MTD when there is potentially not enough HMRC resource to go around, never mind enough resource within businesses to try to deal with both these things coming down the line at once?

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Lady for her various questions and will deal with them in turn. She referred to the matter of awareness and the 81% figure. We would expect that figure to rise through time quite strongly, not least because of our communications programme. We will be writing by the end of this month to the 1.2 million businesses and individuals in scope of this measure. We of course have our VAT helpline for where there are queries, and there is a huge amount of information available on gov.uk.

The hon. Lady made a pertinent and perfectly reasonable point about how businesses and individuals will navigate their way around the various software suppliers and the 160 different products. First, all that information is available on gov.uk, and, secondly, we will shortly be releasing further information that will allow businesses to put in their requirements and then reduce that number of products to a subset that is particularly relevant to their needs.

The hon. Lady asked about the resources put into MTD compared with those put into our Brexit preparations. That of course probably begs several other questions as to what aspects of our preparation for Brexit she wishes to make for that particular comparison, and I would be very happy to discuss that with her in further detail after this statement.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Is there a short and comprehensive guide for small businesses in my constituency that are worried about this but have been concentrating on serving their customers, because it is not necessarily their first priority to get alongside this? They now know they have got to do it, however, and they need something short and simple so they do not have to waste too much time fiddling around with how to comply with the tax authorities.

Mel Stride: The short answer is yes; it can be found on gov.uk. Indeed we have also produced a partnership pack for intermediaries, which sets out in very clear language exactly what is involved and what will be expected of those businesses and individuals.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I do not know whether the Minister is familiar with young children’s literature, but Roger Hargreaves is a popular choice as the inventor of the Mr Men. I am not accusing the Minister of being Mr Tickle or Mr Silly, but perhaps today he is Mr Smug. The fact is that small and medium-sized enterprises in my constituency and around the country have been knocked sideways by the changes in the training levy, which relates to how they get their people skilled and trained. They have not yet digested that, but now we have another onslaught with digitisation. Is he aware that many of my constituents are going to be forced into the hands of so-called professional people—accountants—who will charge them a great deal of money to do this process for them?

Mel Stride: I am indeed familiar with the work of Roger Hargreaves. I am not sure whether there was a Mr Cautious or a Mr Sensible, but I think they would be more appropriate than Mr Tickle or Mr Silly. To answer the hon. Gentleman’s question, in terms of navigating around the various options, we are providing clear guidance that is very easy to follow, and 98% of those businesses and individuals that will be impacted are already filing their VAT returns digitally. Among the software products available, there is bridging software that allows companies to continue to make use of spreadsheets while using the software, some of which is free, to make their submission to HMRC.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I welcome this statement. One of the barriers to creating a coherent strategy to encourage more female entrepreneurs is a lack of gender-disaggregated data to enable us to
understand not just how many there are but what sectors they are in. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this platform could provide a way to resolve this?

**Mel Stride:** First, I should like to thank my hon. Friend for all the good work he does through the women and enterprise all-party parliamentary group to promote women in the world of work. This Government have of course presided over almost a record number of women being active in the workplace. I know that his all-party group will shortly produce a report on the point that he has raised, and I will look at that carefully to see whether something might be done. I shall remain mindful of the important point made by many others that we do not want to over-complicate or clutter up forms by seeking additional information, but I will look carefully at the recommendations he makes.

**Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD):** On the one hand, the Minister says that he wants to simplify and digitise the tax system, while on the other, exporters are being threatened with masses of red tape as a result of the Government’s refusal to rule out a no-deal Brexit. Why are we rushing this through at this point, when companies are already facing such flux and uncertainty because of Government policy?

**Mel Stride:** I think our preparations for Brexit are probably slightly outside the scope of this statement, but I can reassure the hon. Lady that every step that has been taken in preparing for MTD—indeed, its roll-out was delayed to ensure that we were prepared—will ensure that the 1.2 million companies and individuals are in the best possible position to go forward with something that will actually be a help to their own productivity.

**John Howell (Henley) (Con):** One of the problems areas in my constituency is the farming industry, which seems to be having enormous problems with this. The Minister mentioned this in his statement, but can he tell me what is doing specifically to help the farming industry?

**Mel Stride:** My hon. Friend is right to say that I referred to the fact that specific software was available for those in the farming sector. There is also advice that is relevant to farming on gov.uk, but if there are any further specific points that he would like to raise with me in the context of his farmers, I would of course be happy to discuss them.

**Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab):** The HMRC command economy in Wales requires all HMRC workers to work in Cardiff city centre. May I invite the Financial Secretary to the Treasury to get out more and to go to places such as Wrexham, where 380 skilled HMRC workers are being forced either to go to Cardiff city centre or to work in England? We have a vibrant digital sector, and we have businesses that are anxious to support the local economy. Why are the Government so intent on focusing centralisation on communities? Should not the towns in this country have a stake in the digital sector?

**Mel Stride:** I think the hon. Gentleman’s question relates almost exclusively to the HMRC transformation programme, as opposed to MTD, but perhaps with your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I can reply to his specific questions. What matters is that HMRC is ready and right for the 21st century, that its digital offering is sophisticated enough and that it has the skills resident in the centres that we have in order to run a 21st century tax system. He invited me to get out a bit more: I shall have great pleasure in visiting Bristol within the next fortnight to be part of the opening ceremony for the important office that we are bringing on stream in that part of the world.

**Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con):** I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement, and especially his determination to make it easier for individuals and businesses to get their tax right with MTD. I am also pleased that he will be sympathetic to small businesses, particularly initially, but will he confirm that the Government remain absolutely determined to tackle tax avoidance, tax evasion and non-compliance?

**Mel Stride:** I thank my right hon. and, indeed, gallant Friend for his question. He has my reassurance that we will most definitely continue to focus on avoidance, evasion and non-compliance. We have brought in and protected a total of £200 billion since 2010, and these measures will protect and bring in a further £1.2 billion by 2023-24. Let us remember that we bring in this tax for a purpose, which is to support our vital public services, including the record amount that we will be spending on our national health service.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I very much welcome HMRC’s efforts to introduce MTD through its pilot schemes, where the take-up has been significant. However, there is a shortfall of up to 25%, as the Minister said, as some businesses are not au fait with technology and find the process laborious. Does he agree that there is a need for a concerted campaign to hand-hold those remaining customers, particularly in the farming sector, through the introduction of MTD? Will he commit to doing just that?

**Mel Stride:** The hon. Gentleman raises an extremely important point about our communications programme. As I have already set out, we will be writing to every one of those 1.2 million businesses and individuals who are in scope of MTD by the end of this month, and that comes on the back of the huge amount of engagement that has already taken place. We are also holding webinars on MTD, and there is certainly one, if not two, taking place this afternoon. For those who are genuinely and absolutely digitally excluded, we have a pilot to ensure that we are able to accommodate them. Those 5,000 businesses and individuals that are currently excluded from digital filing for VAT will automatically be excluded from having to enter into MTD.

**Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con):** The Minister knows that I am one of those who would urge him to introduce MTD faster, because the benefits so clearly outweigh the disadvantages. We should no more seek to limit the number of software providers in this country than we should seek to limit the number of accountants. Can he assure me that HMRC is doing everything it can to encourage more software providers, so that we can provide unique and bespoke software to the many different sectors that power our economy?
Mel Stride: I thank my hon. Friend for making that important point. We are encouraging businesses to engage with the software community, which has been part of our engagement more generally with stakeholders over a number of months. New software products are coming to the market all the time, and, as I have said, no fewer than 160 different products are already available.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): It is good to see that the Government recognise that accessing adequate broadband remains a challenge to many businesses, especially those in more rural areas. Will the Minister elaborate further on the exemption that will be introduced to reflect that fact, and tell us how it might apply to areas such as Ceredigion, where 9% of lines receive speeds lower than 2 megabits per second?

Mel Stride: The standard speed of 2 megabits per second is perfectly adequate to run the kind of software that we are looking at here. I have touched on the issue of digital exclusion, and we will ensure that businesses that really cannot find appropriate broadband speeds, that are extremely isolated or that are among the 5,000 businesses and individuals already exempt from submitting digital VAT returns are still excluded. We will look at every single case carefully and on its merits.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Like many self-employed service providers, my constituent collects VAT from his clients, does his VAT return himself, and then inputs the figures directly into the HMRC website. Now that he will need to use software to upload that data, I am delighted to hear that there are 160 different providers, some of which are free. However, the HMRC website is not clear about which providers are free, and my constituent has been trying to find a free option that is suitable for a small business. Will the Minister ensure a little more clarity from the HMRC as to which options are free and which are best for small, self-employed entrepreneurs?

Mel Stride: I thank my hon. Friend for her question, and I will certainly look into that specific matter.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Following on from the previous question, a KPMG survey reports that 64% of businesses say that making tax digital is a good idea but that they need more support. Unsurprisingly, the British Chamber of Commerce has called for a good idea but that they need more support. Unsurprisingly, the British Chamber of Commerce has called for a good idea but that they need more support. Unsurprisingly, the British Chamber of Commerce has called for a good idea but that they need more support. Unsurprisingly, the British Chamber of Commerce has called for a good idea but that they need more support. Unsurprisingly, the British Chamber of Commerce has called for a good idea but that they need more support. Unsurprisingly, the British Chamber of Commerce has called for a good idea but that they need more support. Unsurprisingly, the British Chamber of Commerce has called for a good idea but that they need more support. Unsurprisingly, the British Chamber of Commerce has called for a good idea but that they need more support. Unsurprisingly, the British Chamber of Commerce has called for a good idea but that they need more support. Unsurprisingly, the British Chamber of Commerce has called for a good idea but that they need more support. Unsurprisingly, the British Chamber of Commerce has called for a good idea but that they need more support. Unsurprisingly, the British Chamber of Commerce has called for a good idea but that they need more support. Unsurprisingly, the British Chamber of Commerce has called for a good idea but that they need more support. Unsurprisingly, the British Chamber of Commerce has called for a good idea but that they need more support. Unsurprisingly, the British Chamber of Commerce has called for a good idea but that they need more support. Unsurprisingly, the British Chamber of Commerce has called for a good idea but that they need more support. Unsurprisingly, the British Chamber of Commerce has called for a good idea but that they need more support. Unsurprisingly, the British Chamber of Commerce has called for a good idea but that they need more support. Unsurprisingly, the British Chamber of Commerce has called for a good idea but that they need more support. Unsurprisingly, the British Chamber of Commerce has called for a good idea but that they need more support. Unsurprisingly, the British Chamber of Commerce has called for a good ide

Mel Stride: That is certainly no oxymoron, Mr Speaker. My hon. Friend is indeed a distinguished estate agent, and I thank him for his question. He has my absolute reassurance that we will not bear down on businesses with additional bureaucracy. We are there to help and support them and at the same time to ensure they are more efficient and effective in their tax affairs.

Mr Speaker: The nation will be pleased to know that the hon. Gentleman is a distinguished estate agent.

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Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): I am reassured by the Minister’s comments about businesses that are unable to access suitable broadband provision. However, what conversations has he had with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport about access to better broadband, so that the 5,000 businesses that will not be able to access MTD will be able to do so in the future?

Mel Stride: All Departments across Whitehall have regular contact with DCMS about broadband roll-out. Broadband is central to much of what the Treasury does, but it is of particular importance to MTD. We will continue to have those conversations.
Point of Order

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Many Members regard parliamentary privilege—that we can say things in the House that people cannot take action against—as the greatest privilege, but a small minority of Members seem to use privilege more regularly to attack either colleagues in the House or people outside. Today, during the urgent question on the Northern Ireland backstop, two Members went for a senior civil servant, Olly Robbins, saying things about him, his reputation and his character that were quite indefensible. I know that Members on both sides of the House have thoughts about such remarks about senior civil servants, who cannot answer back and have no recourse. Is there any way that you could look into how a small minority of people are using parliamentary privilege in a way for which it was not designed?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, and I will make several points in response. First, Members should exercise their parliamentary privilege with due care and a sense of responsibility. Secondly, immoderate language, not merely in relation to subject matter but more particularly in relation to people, is frankly to be deprecated. Thirdly, we should observe the precepts of “Erskine May” in the conduct of parliamentary debate.

I do not recall off the top of my head whether the hon. Gentleman was present in his seat when I treated earlier of this matter in response to a timely point of order from the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), who of course is also the Father of the House and who similarly took exception to some of what was said. I did not intercede at the time for there was no direct breach of parliamentary protocol. There was nothing specifically disorderly about what was said, but I did think that there was an issue, at the very least, of taste, and I think I did refer to the coarsening and vulgarisation of debate, which we should take care to avoid.

More particularly in relation to what the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) says about civil servants, although each Member must of course take responsibility for what he or she says in this place, we must remember that such individuals are not in a position to respond. They cannot speak for themselves with a public voice, other than very specifically on behalf of their ministerial bosses. Many people will feel that it is inappropriate to launch personal ad hominem attacks on public servants. What we say to each other is a bit different, but great care and responsibility should be exercised in relation to such career officials. I am sorry that there have been departures from that principle in recent times, and I hope they will not be repeated.

Dog Meat (Consumption) (Offences)

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

3.9 pm

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make it an offence to consume dog meat and to transport, possess or donate dog meat for the purpose of consumption; and for connected purposes.

Tragically, around the world, 30 million dogs a year are eaten, and more than 10 million of them are killed in China alone. In the Republic of Korea, dog meat is the fourth most consumed meat after pork, beef and chicken. More than 450 tonnes of dog meat were imported to Japan between 1997 and 2017. The dog slaughter industry is worth between $220 million and $273 million.

Eating dog meat has long-standing cultural significance in many east Asian countries, where many consumers believe it to have medicinal value and to bring good fortune, yet none of the alleged health benefits has any scientific basis. Instead, eating dog meat fuels an unspeakably cruel trade involving animal torture.

It may seem extraordinary, but consuming dog meat is currently not illegal in the UK. Luckily, there is no evidence that dogs are eaten in the UK yet, but due to the vile way in which dogs are treated in China, I would like our country to join in setting an example to the world. China argues that, until we make it illegal, why should they?

Two months ago, a ban on the human consumption of dog meat was passed in the United States, following Germany, Austria, South Australia, Taiwan and Hong Kong. This Bill is an opportunity for the UK Government to join those countries in introducing a ban, which is particularly important as the conditions under which dogs are farmed, transported and slaughtered are deliberately cruel. It is believed that inflicting suffering raises an animal’s adrenaline levels, tenderising its meat and adding medicinal properties.

This Bill, therefore, is not just about consuming dogs but about the extra suffering and cruelty involved. Humane Society International, the animal protection organisation, has reported the appalling conditions to which dogs are subjected. Usually forced into tiny cages, many dogs suffer broken limbs as they are transported vast distances, often without food or water. Poor sanitation, parasite infestations and disease outbreaks spread quickly in crowded conditions.

A 2007 study by Vietnam’s National Institute of Hygiene and Epidemiology found that two in 10 sick dogs in Hanoi slaughterhouses were rabid. Some dogs are force-fed with a tube down their throat to boost their weight before slaughter. Nearly half the dogs die before reaching their final destination. Injured, dehydrated and exhausted, the dogs that are still alive face unspeakably cruel deaths. Routine methods of slaughter include bludgeoning, hanging, boiling, skinning and blow-torching alive. The dogs are then consumed.

The city of Yulin in China hosts an annual dog meat festival that is infamous for its inhumane slaughtering methods, which are practised at over 100 slaughter sites around the city, including crowded markets, in the streets and outside schools. The dogs, some of which
are puppies, are tortured and killed in front of each other. During the 10-day festival, 2,000 to 5,000 dogs are killed each day. Over 230 tonnes of dog meat are consumed each year at that festival alone. I hope the House would agree that the sheer scale, as well as the unnecessary cruelty, is truly shocking.

In the UK, we spend £10 billion a year on our 8.9 million pet dogs. They provide companionship and love and, for many people, they are part of the family. Dogs are used by the police, our armed forces, in therapy and, of course, as guide dogs. Our laws usually reflect the respect that dogs deserve, and this Bill fits with our long and proud tradition of support for and insistence on the highest standards of animal welfare. As a nation of dog lovers and champions of animal protection, the UK must enact a ban on trading and consuming dog meat.

If the animal cruelty were not bad enough, the human suffering cannot go unnoticed. In China, an estimated 70% of dogs slaughtered for consumption are stolen pets. Anybody whose pet has gone missing knows the worry and fear for the future of their loved pet, the anguish and concern over what has happened, or simply having to wonder, “Where is my dog?” At least in the UK we know our missing dogs will not be eaten.

In China, dog-snatching gangs are hired by butchers to supply cheap animals. Increasingly bold, these gangs are often armed with machetes and Tasers. The dog meat trade normalises violence and fuels both animal and human abuse. For the sake of the tortured animals, the victims of crime and the exploited workers, it is vital that the UK takes steps to end this cruel industry.

In 2015, the World Dog Alliance organised a petition to urge the South Korean Government to act, and it received more than 100,000 signatures from UK citizens. In response, the South Korean Government closed the nation’s biggest dog meat market ahead of the 2018 winter Olympics. Fortunately, many countries recognise the value of contributing to this global effort, with the United States being the latest to introduce a ban. That ban was passed two months ago, even though, like here, dog meat consumption is not a problem in America. Last week, a group of US Congressmen and former Representative Jeff Denham wrote directly to our Prime Minister urging the Government to introduce a ban, emphasising the need for an international condemnation of dog meat consumption.

I am proud to have campaigned for tougher sentences for animal cruelty, and I am proud that the mistreatment of animals in the UK, and across the globe, has always been an important concern of our Government. My hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) has tabled an amendment to the Agriculture Bill that would enable the House to support the ban on consuming pets. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) will introduce a Westminster Hall debate on this topic on Thursday.

It is helpful that this issue has support from MPs on both sides of the House, and it is certainly an issue that my constituents, and the wider population, care deeply about. I am sure that anyone who takes animal welfare seriously would join my colleagues and me in condemning the vile torture and slaughter of dogs. Making it an offence to consume dog meat, or to transport, possess or donate dog meat for the purpose of consumption, would highlight our country’s commitment to outlawing the practice globally and would cement the UK as a champion of animal welfare.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Giles Watling, Andrew Rosindell, Dame Cheryl Gillan, Sir David Amess, Scott Mann, Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger, Daniel Kawczynski, Sir Henry Bellingham, Damien Moore, Royston Smith, Tracey Crouch and Bill Wiggin present the Bill.

Bill Wiggin accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March, and to be printed (Bill 337).
Exiting the European Union (Structural and Investment Funds)

3.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): I beg to move,

That the draft European Structural and Investment Funds Common Provisions and Common Provision Rules etc. (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 28 January, be approved.

When debating statutory instruments, we normally say how honoured we are to serve before the Chair, whoever he or she may be. This is the first time I have debated a statutory instrument in the Chamber, so I do not know whether I should say it is an honour to do so before you, Mr Speaker. If you took it as read, you would be entitled to do so. [ Interruption. ] The Opposition Whips are chuntering from a sedentary position, and they do themselves no credit.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): That is bordering on the scandalous.

Richard Harrington: Indeed so.

In a no-deal situation, this instrument will repeal the European regulations concerning the European structural funds, while ensuring that the funds can continue operating domestically. It will also repeal the regulations on the Cohesion Fund, for which we are not eligible.

The structural funds include the European regional development fund and its cross-border European territorial co-operation component, and the European social fund. The structural funds are shared management funds that support regional investment across the UK, and they are funded via the EU budget, with co-funding provided by project participants. Typical projects include the recently launched advanced engineering research centre in Sheffield, which supports economic development and upskilling in the local economy. Typical cross-border projects under the European territorial co-operation component of the structural funds include the intelligent community energy project on smart energy. Three UK universities and local small businesses are working in collaboration with French research centres and small and medium-sized enterprises to find local solutions to support low-carbon energy systems.

In a no-deal scenario, the United Kingdom is expected to lose access to European funding. To ensure that this regional funding continues in a no-deal scenario, the Government announced in 2016 that they would guarantee funding for structural funds projects signed before we leave the EU—that was extended last July to cover new projects signed after exit until the end of 2020. That guarantee covers UK beneficiaries and, exceptionally, all beneficiaries of the Peace and Interreg programmes in Ireland and Northern Ireland, and Interreg V-A in Ireland, Northern Ireland and Scotland. This is due to the Government’s continued commitment to support peace and reconciliation in Ireland.

This statutory instrument facilitates the domestic delivery of structural funds in a no-deal scenario. It repeals the European regulations for these funds, as they would become inoperable retained European law and therefore would not work, because the European regulations create a shared management programme between the EU and a member state. Keeping them would create obligations that the managing authorities of the funds could no longer meet after a no-deal exit.

The instrument also ensures that for European regional development fund and European social fund projects started before exit, current fund delivery rules would be upheld through existing funding agreements, without keeping redundant EU regulations. The powers to continue paying project beneficiaries in the UK already exist under our domestic law, so the instrument does not make provision for projects started after exit. Managing authorities for the funds will none the less continue to sign new projects under existing domestic powers and using existing delivery systems, with appropriate simplifications. So the main aim is to provide stability for beneficiaries, and the project rules will continue to be enforced through the same funding agreements. Hon. Members should also note that this instrument ensures that structural funds delivery remains a devolved matter.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I will refrain from asking my hon. Friend’s opinion on a no-deal. Structural funds are there primarily to try to rebalance our economy, through regional investment right across the UK. Whether we are in the EU or out, and whatever state we are in afterwards, does he agree that it is hugely important that we spend a greater proportion of our investment on infrastructure and other economic development in the regions, rather than in the capital?

Richard Harrington: I totally agree with everything my hon. Friend said, other than not asking my views were on no deal. I think he knows those, and I hope most people in the House do.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will my hon. Friend just tell us what the dispute resolution procedure is?

Richard Harrington: If my right hon. Friend would bear with me, I will address that later in my remarks—I thought he was going to ask me the same question.

This instrument includes a transitional provision that enables the guarantee to be paid out to bodies involved in a European territorial co-operation programme. The power to fund beneficiaries of cross-border programmes currently comes from European law, and therefore needs to be continued in domestic law through this instrument to protect beneficiaries in a no-deal situation. That will enable the United Kingdom to continue to participate in cross-border European territorial co-operation programmes involving Northern Ireland, Ireland, and Scotland. Those programmes, known as Peace and Interreg V-A, support peace and reconciliation on the island of Ireland.

The EU has made special provisions to enable the United Kingdom to continue in both Peace and Interreg V-A in a no-deal situation, if the United Kingdom continues to pay for its share of those programmes. The transitional powers in this instrument enable the United Kingdom to make such payments to the EU to enable our continued participation in the event of a no-deal. That is consistent with our general commitments to Peace and Interreg V-A. In this arrangement, the European
regulations do not need to be retained. The United Kingdom will sign an agreement with the EU to ensure that programme beneficiaries continue to follow relevant rules. The transitional provision to pay the guarantee to European territorial co-operation beneficiaries also ensures that beneficiaries of cross-border programmes other than Peace and Interreg V-A can be paid sums from the guarantee. Specifically, this provision gives Her Majesty’s Government and the devolved Administrations the appropriate powers to ensure that UK partners of such cross-border projects can receive the guarantee through domestic arrangements, to safeguard for all possible no-deal scenarios.

Among such scenarios, the House should note that in a no deal, without further changes to the European Commission’s regulations, UK organisations would be unable to continue in the majority of European territorial co-operation programmes, other than Peace and Interreg V-A, as they would not have third country access to the programmes. This instrument is designed to enable UK partners to access funding in such a scenario. The EU has published a no-deal regulation that would allow the UK to continue participating in EU programmes in the event of no deal until December 2019. However, that would depend on the UK agreeing to continue to contribute to the 2019 budget as if we were a member state. This proposal is subsidiary and without prejudice to the EU’s specific proposal on Peace and Interreg V-A. The Government are currently analysing the Commission’s proposal, but hon. Members should rest assured that this instrument will allow the guarantee on European territorial co-operation programmes to be distributed in any scenario.

Without this statutory instrument, delivery Departments would not have the powers to pay out the guarantee to beneficiaries of European territorial co-operation programmes.

Without legislation, the United Kingdom would not be able to pay for its share of the Peace and Interreg V-A programmes involving Northern Ireland. That would mean we could not take part in these two important programmes, and current beneficiaries of those programmes would be at financial risk.

I mentioned briefly the separate legal provision being made by the EU for the UK to continue to participate in the Peace and Interreg V-A programmes. That provision is intended to enable continued access to the programmes in the event of no deal, but it does not resolve the problem of payment powers. That is why we need both the EU regulation and this statutory instrument to ensure that UK partners of such cross-border projects can receive the guarantee through domestic arrangements, to safeguard for all possible no-deal scenarios.

In conclusion, in a no-deal scenario this instrument is designed to enable continued access to the programmes in the event of no deal, but it does not resolve the problem of payment powers, which is why we need both the EU regulation and this statutory instrument to safeguard those programmes and to ensure the continuation of their benefits.

Chris Elmore: I do not think anyone on the Opposition Benches objects to what the Minister is saying. In fact, I am sure that he and I agree about the catastrophe that could be a no deal. Will he care to expand on what would happen with the shared prosperity fund beyond any transition period and beyond any deal? Currently we seem not to know. The Minister is an honourable man, and it would be helpful if he could give the devolved Administrations some reassurances about how the prosperity fund will be managed and what funds will be available to regenerate communities in my constituency.

Richard Harrington: As the hon. Gentleman—who, for the record, is also an honourable man—would expect me to say, that is not actually within the scope of this particular statutory instrument. I know, Mr Speaker, that in this case you do not have to rule on the scope of it, but the answer to the hon. Gentleman’s question is quite long, so I am happy to discuss it with him outside the Chamber, if that is acceptable to him.

Chris Elmore indicated assent.

Richard Harrington: I think I got a way with that one, Mr Speaker, but I am not sure. [Interruption.] For now, Mr Speaker.

The House should note that this instrument is designed for a no-deal scenario. If there is a deal, the intention is to include a provision in the withdrawal agreement Bill to defer commencement of the regulations until the end of the implementation period. For that reason alone, I urge all right hon. and hon. Members to vote for the EU withdrawal agreement Bill. That deferment would mean that the regulations would come into force at that point, rather than on the date of exit.

In conclusion, in a no-deal scenario this instrument repeals redundant European law while ensuring that regional investment projects previously supported by the EU, including those supporting peace in Northern Ireland, are protected by the funding guarantee. For those reasons, I commend the regulations to the House.

3.30 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I thank the Minister for setting out the technical details of the statutory instrument so clearly. Here we have yet
another statutory instrument that makes provision for the regulatory framework after Brexit if we crash out without a deal. The parliamentary recess has been cancelled because of the sheer volume of SIs to be dealt with before 29 March. Of the 442 laid since June, 269 have yet to be passed. Of the 20 SIs relating to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy passed in 2019, only two had impact assessments available.

As many of my shadow ministerial colleagues have made clear, the volume and flow of secondary legislation on European Union exit is deeply worrying in the context of accountability and proper scrutiny. The Government have assured the Opposition that no policy decisions are being taken, but the establishment of a regulatory framework inevitably involves matters of judgment and raises questions about resourcing and capacity. In that light, the Opposition wish to put on record our deepest concerns about the process for the regulations.

Labour will not oppose the statutory instrument, given the importance of the European structural and investment funds to the United Kingdom. We recognise the necessity of ensuring that the requisite regulations are in place to allow the UK to manage such funding, but we have serious concerns about the scope of this SI and the Government’s complete failure to take effective action to reduce regional inequality in the UK. The Government have presided over the UK becoming the most regionally unequal country in the European Union. We are the second most unequal country in the OECD, with only Mexico ahead of us. We are home to the richest region in northern Europe—London—but we also have six of the 10 poorest regions. In London, disposable income per household is almost 60% higher than it is in Wales and in many regions in England. Transport spending per head is 15 times higher in London than it is in Yorkshire.

The Government have not only failed to tackle regional inequality, but increased it. Their local government finance settlement shows a party so beholden to ideology that they will willingly deepen the crisis in our councils, which have been “gutted by a series of government policies.” Those are not my words, but those of the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights. European structural and investment funding plays a significant role in tackling just such economic and developmental disparities between regions. It is all the more important because of the impact of the past 10 years of Tory Government.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady refers to some figures that, I think, come from the Institute for Public Policy Research, saying that the spending in Yorkshire is 15 times lower than it is in London.

Chi Onwurah: On transport.

Kevin Hollinrake: Yes, but those figures are inaccurate. The contribution from central Government is pretty much on a par on a per capita basis. The difference comes when we add in local authority spending on transport infrastructure and private sector investment. It is about 3:1, which is still too great a differential, but it is important that we look at the figures in the round and factually, rather than at some of the headline figures.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. It is important that we look at the background to the statistics that we use. I can say to him very clearly that, for example, the statistics used by Transport for the North and other reputable bodies show consistently higher per head spending in London than in our regions, including in his and mine.

In the hon. Gentleman’s region, in my region and across the country, ESI funding supports our people, our businesses and our innovation. Those things are simply too important for us to leave questions about transition unanswered. Over the current 2014 to 2020 funding cycle, the European structural and investment funds are worth more than £19 billion to the UK, including £10 billion in direct investment. Wales alone, as one of the poorest regions in the UK, is receiving £2.4 billion in the current period. The impact of that funding is huge; the impact of losing it would be greater.

In the past 10 years, it is estimated that European Union investment has created more than 115,000 jobs and 25,000 businesses. In my constituency, funding from the European regional development fund supported the construction of The Core, part of the Newcastle Helix, and the growth of more than 800 local businesses through Supply Chain North East. Throughout the UK, EU funding has driven growth in the low-carbon economy, particularly through investment in research and innovation, and it has ensured that it is local economies that have benefited. It is not just income that the European Union funds provide: the security guaranteed by the seven-year funding cycle of structural funds allows economic planning in partnership across local authorities, the private and third sectors over a longer period than our domestic funding. That security is crucial to attracting the necessary match funding from donor partners.

The statutory instrument deals purely with projects that start before the Brexit exit day on 29 March and enables them to be administered according to pre-agreed frameworks. None the less, we need more clarity. Does that refer to projects that have been approved before 29 March, or just projects that have actually started, and how is started to be defined? What of projects started after exit? How are those to be administered?

We have been promised that funding for all projects up to 2020 is guaranteed and that projects will continue to be signed under the same terms until 2020. What we have not been told is anything about how these projects are to be run, how decisions are to be made and how funding is to be allocated. According to the instrument, these frameworks are still being drawn up. It states merely that delivery frameworks for future projects will be “based on the pre-exit framework and the same investment priorities as have been applied for existing Structural Fund projects.”

Who will make these decisions, and how do the Government intend to replace EU structural funding in the longer term?

The Government have committed to a successor fund—the shared prosperity fund—and to holding a consultation on that fund by the end of 2018. In case the Minister...
has not noticed, it is now 2019. We are just 38 days away from 29 March, but we have yet to hear a single detail about how that fund is supposed to work. How do the Government plan to replicate the security of the seven-year EU funding period, and how do they intend to administer the shared prosperity fund? The Minister said that that was not within the scope of this statutory instrument, but I think that to give confidence in the ongoing funding and the decisions that the Minister is taking, it is necessary that we understand that there is a strategic vision for what will happen after Brexit.

EU structural and investment funding has traditionally been focused through regional and sub-regional bodies and aligned to regional priority programmes. That has given our local areas a strong degree of direct influence and control over resources and the ability to align them with other local and regional investment—an ability that is all too often missing in relation to central Government funding. Unfortunately, because the coalition Government chose to abolish regional development agencies, the current ESIF programme lost much of that local knowledge. Instead we have a national approach with regional allocations, and leadership and administration of funds moving from regional development agencies to central Government Departments. Despite the committed work of local enterprise partnerships and their partners working in the regions, the loss of regional control over funds has resulted in their being targeted less effectively and subjected to significant delay in approvals and delivery, as well as being less responsive to local needs and aspirations.

How does the Minister intend to make the right decisions for regions, given the lack of regional development authorities? We need clarity; we need details, not just empty promises, because real jobs, businesses and communities are at risk. This Government’s continued failure to address regional inequality is the hallmark of a Tory party that places narrow party interests above the good of the country.

The absence of any plans that deal with projects started after exit day and the deafening silence about the shared prosperity fund leave our regional economies in jeopardy. While we are not opposed to the statutory instrument, we want to know how the Government will do more to safeguard the future of our communities. Labour has committed to matching European Union funding for regional development for at least the next decade. Why will the Minister not follow suit? A Labour Government would invest £250 billion in a national transformation fund to meet the infrastructural needs of every part of our country, and create a network of regional development banks to ensure growth in the areas that most need it.

We need a viable plan for sustainable and equitable regional development—one that reflects the needs of the region, one that empowers local people and grows local economies, and one that can guarantee funding for all our communities. It is evidently one that only a Labour Government can provide.

3.42 pm

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this afternoon’s debate and I warmly welcome the statutory instrument, which, as we heard from the Minister, preserves the effect of structural funds through to the end of the 2014 to 2020 period, whether we have a deal or no deal, in true Noel Edmonds style.

I very much hope that there will be a deal, and I underscore again my commitment to the Brady amendment, on which we voted on 29 January, and the Malthouse compromise, which is attached to that. However, if the EU is not disposed to be reasonable, then as a matter of law we will leave the EU with no deal. It is important and right that we ensure that at that point our law continues to operate and that important funding streams continue to be devoted to addressing the aims for which they have been set up. The EU structural funds are, of course, a very important source of funding.

I have always slightly objected to the concept of EU largesse that is implicit in the concept of structural funds. As the UK is, of course, a net contributor to the European Union, that is in effect our money being washed through the EU institutions back into our country. As we know, in a number of European nations the EU structural funds have been the subject of very considerable abuse over the years, which was one of the drivers of frustration with the EU in the first place.

In our country, where the money is generally well spent, there is nothing to fear. Moreover, once we have left the European Union we will be able to ensure that the money goes to our priorities. Of course, that is why the shared prosperity fund is so important. It is something the Prime Minister spoke about a week before the 2017 general election, in Guisborough in my constituency. She outlined her clear commitment to ensuring that the amount of money devolved through EU regional development funding will be matched by the UK once we have left. We warmly welcome that, because the north-east has been a net beneficiary of that funding, and my goodness, there is a lot that we could be doing with it.

We know that the shared prosperity fund will be used to drive the local industrial strategies that the Government quite rightly want to establish. I think that is working very well, and I am glad that it has not emerged as a continuation of the ’70s policy of picking winners. Instead, it is about empowering local devolution to make a real difference in supporting industry.

In the Tees Valley we have a really exciting proposition under our Mayor, Ben Houchen, who has a clear plan for projects such as the South Tees development corporation on the former Redcar steelworks site. Making sure that we have serious, sustained and long-term funding in place for such projects is essential if we are to continue to close the gap between London and the regions. That is something that all of us in this House support, and I am confident that, thanks not least to this SI, we will continue to be able to achieve it. Whether on transport, jobs or education and skills, there is a tremendous amount of work that can be done.

I do not think that there is anything to fear from leaving the framework of the EU and its structural funding. Instead, I think that this is a classic example of how taking back control can work for the benefit of the UK, and indeed of those parts of the UK that voted most heavily to leave in the 2016 referendum. It is worth noting that Teesside voted by two thirds to leave, and in some cases more, so there is real confidence among its population that we should indeed take control of this funding.
I am optimistic. I am grateful to the Government for putting in place a clear plan to ensure that there is no discontinuity on exit day, however we end up leaving. I am grateful to the Minister, because I know that he and I take a somewhat different view on some aspects of the debate, but he has none the less approached this work with great professionalism. He continues to deliver good, sensible legislation to ensure that, in all circumstances, our country should have nothing to fear.

3.47 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Like the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), we will not oppose this SI this afternoon, but we do share many of the deep concerns, particularly in relation to what exactly the UK shared prosperity fund will be and what it will mean. Of course, this SI would not be necessary if the Government would simply take the threat of a no-deal Brexit off the table. They could, if they so choose, remove that threat today, but instead they have decided—very cynically, in my opinion—that it is too politically useful to have as a tool in order to bludgeon MPs into supporting a deal that we have already rejected as the clock runs down towards 29 March. However, if the Government insist on preparing for the possibility of a catastrophic no-deal scenario, then yes, this SI does allow for the transfer of regulations in order to ensure the continued roll-out of the European agricultural fund for rural development and the European maritime and fisheries fund. The SI will continue to allow payments until their closure after the end of the current 2014-20 programming period.

It is worth pointing out the huge importance of those funds to communities right across Scotland, particularly in remote and peripheral areas such as my Argyll and Bute constituency. The EU structural funds in Scotland are worth up to £941 million across the EU budget period, for use in economic development. Over £500 million a year comes to Scotland from the common agricultural policy in the form of direct payments to farm businesses and rural development funding. The UK Government have provided short-term guarantees to replace most CAP funding until 2022 following Brexit, but no firm commitments have been given about replacing the CAP in the long term.

Mr Simon Clarke: It is important to note that the Agriculture Bill provides for ensuring that environmental incentives are aligned with good practice in agricultural management. I think that hon. Members of all parties want that. It will be a welcome change from the way in which the CAP simply rewarded the largest farmers.

Brendan O’Hara: The hon. Gentleman makes the important point that we are discussing the SI before Report stage of the Agriculture Bill. I will come back to that. I do not necessarily defend the way in which the CAP is administered—the way in which every pound is allocated—but it is important to recognise the amount of money and support that the CAP gives UK agriculture, particularly those less favoured area support scheme parts of my west of Scotland constituency.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a great speech. On the lack of certainty beyond 2022, are not those in farming communities planning a long way ahead for what they intend to do with their land? Certainty beyond 2022 would help them in their long-term planning for their stewardship role as well as for trying to make money.

Brendan O’Hara: My hon. Friend is right that it is vital that our farmers have the ability to plan into the future. At the moment, we enjoy that ability to plan long term, and the fear is that that is being taken away.

The common fisheries policy is co-financed through the European maritime and fisheries fund, and Scotland is allocated 44% of the total UK figure, with £42 million—over 80% of the Scottish allocation—already committed to projects. Competitive funds are awarded directly by the European Commission to organisations, and that includes significant research, innovation and education exchange programmes. Since 2014, Scottish organisations have secured £533 million of Horizon 2020 funding, £65 million of Erasmus+ funding and £58 million of European Territorial Cooperation funding. Even since 2016, the European Investment Bank group has signed loans worth £2 billion for projects in Scotland.

These EU-funded programmes represent a vital source of funding to communities right across Scotland, but as I said earlier, they are particularly important to peripheral communities, which are in greater need of support. That is why, when the question was asked in 2016 whether we wished to remain part of the European Union, every single part of Scotland, without exception, urban and rural, said yes to staying in the EU. Our communities knew—and still know—the benefits of being a member of the European Union and the significant difference that that has made to their lives, economically, socially and culturally.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making some great points. Is he aware that urban areas such as Glasgow have hugely benefited as well? Since 2010, regional selective assistance grants to businesses in Glasgow have provided more than £83 million of investment and created 7,292 jobs.

Brendan O’Hara: It is absolutely remarkable that all 32 Scottish local authority areas—urban and rural, with the vast differences that exist between them—said with one voice that we as a nation wished to remain in the European Union. That cannot and should not be ignored. Its significance cannot be underplayed.

The loss of the funds I listed earlier could be absolutely devastating for our farming and fishing communities. As yet, there are no guarantees about the continuity of these funds beyond 2020. Here we are, a month from Brexit day, and there is still no certainty for our farming and fishing communities as they plan for the future.

Kirsty Blackman: My hon. Friend is making a great point about funding. Does he share my concern that these communities will be hit doubly, because there will also be changes to immigration, which may mean they do not have access to labour? Given that some of our areas are suffering from depopulation, which we have worked very hard to counter, does he feel this is a double whammy that rural communities cannot afford?

Brendan O’Hara: My hon. Friend may well have been looking over my shoulder, because I was about to come on to that very point.
My constituency of Argyll and Bute is suffering from massive depopulation. We are losing population at a rate that we cannot sustain. We need to get people to come and live, work, invest and raise families in Argyll and Bute, and much of our plan is predicated on EU nationals coming to Argyll and Bute to fill that function. We are being denied access not only to funding, but to people. Unless we can find a way of squaring that circle, which I do not think is possible, then I fear for the future. That is why independence, with an independent Scottish Government being represented as an equal partner in the European Union, is without doubt the only way that Scotland is going to prosper.

It has been reported just today that the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Secretary has told the National Farmers Union, in relation to UK farmers, that “there is no absolute guarantee that we would be able to continue to export...to the EU” under a no-deal scenario. This is the chaos into which we have descended.

As has been said, the UK Government have of course promised to replace EU funds with a much-vaunted UK shared prosperity fund, but despite all the repeated promises, still no detail or definition has been given about how that new structure will operate. May I ask the Minister when we will find out the detail of this shared prosperity fund, and when will we know exactly what it will mean for people across the UK, including for people in my Argyll and Bute constituency?

Will the Minister tell me, post-2020, when the cycle of these current EU funds comes to an end, how the proposed new system will operate? What consent and control will the devolved Administrations have in relation to this future funding model? What consultation has been carried out to ensure that this new system will have the consent of and remain consistent with the devolution settlement? Will he explain why, as I said to the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), this statutory instrument has come to the Floor of the House before the Agriculture Bill and the Fisheries Bill have even reached their Report stages in this place?

Given that the President of the European Commission has promised to support Irish farmers financially in the event of a no-deal Brexit, why have the UK Government not offered similar support to Scottish farmers? Finally, does the Minister agree that so much of this worry, angst and trauma we are being put through and putting other people through could all be prevented if the Government simply took no deal off the table?

3.58 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I will not detain the House long, but I want to speak in support of this SI, which secures funding that is vital for some projects in my constituency. Overall, £41 million comes to Lincolnshire, of which about £500,000 is helping to secure a project that protects large amounts of farmland from flooding. This is an important measure from a Government who are taking sensible steps.

The broader but not lengthy point I seek to make is that while money did come back to Lincolnshire, the fact that Britain was a net overall contributor to the EU does mean that, when we set up the funds the Minister spoke about post our exit from the European Union, that will give us the opportunity to do two things. The first is to redress some of the regional imbalances mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), which have a particularly extreme effect on regions such as Lincolnshire. However, I hope it will also give us a much more serious opportunity to win the argument around funding and what the Government are doing to seek to address regional imbalances. That is an argument the EU totally failed to win or even engage in, which is in many ways why, in a constituency such as mine, even when money came back to Lincolnshire from the EU, we saw no great love for the European Union. That was of course reflected, as it was in Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland, in the referendum result.

I therefore hope that the Government, in establishing these new funds, will seize the opportunity not only to redress these imbalances, which is very real work, but to get an advantage from being seen to do what all good Governments should do, which is to move some of these opportunities around the country—in my case, away from the south-east and into Lincolnshire. That is good, sensible work and good, sensible economics, and it will allow us to improve productivity and to grow our thriving agricultural economy.

However, that also needs to be sold to the public. As I said, the European Union encouraged huge antipathy for the European project, and we have enough trouble with people holding politicians in this place in contempt, so we need to sell the work we do to redistribute that money. That will go far further than investing in sensible infrastructure projects such as the drainage project I referred to, and will allow people to see that we do fundamentally good work in this place that addresses things our constituents want done. Ultimately, that is about not just economics but good democracy, which is why I will be supporting this SI.

4.1 pm

Richard Harrington: Welcome to the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker. As I explained to the Speaker, this is the first SI that I have done in the Chamber, and I had not realised that this would be a general debate on the European Union. Most Members’ views on that subject are quite clear—many of us share the same views, while some of us disagree—but for the purpose of this statutory instrument, I will try to answer some of the questions people asked about the specifics, if that is acceptable to you.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) asked how the funds for the Peace and Interreg V-A programmes would be calculated—those are the funds our country would have to pay to the EU to get back. I can confirm that the UK would pay its full share of the Peace and Interreg V-A programmes, including—this is what he wanted to know—the administrative costs. If he would like further detail, I would be very pleased to try to answer more detailed questions.

I thank the shadow Minister for supporting the gist of the statutory instrument. She asked me quite a lot of questions, which I shall do my best to answer. A lot of them were to do with her views on regional inequality generally, which is slightly wider than the scope of this statutory instrument. However, I must say that I absolutely
agree with her, having been brought up myself in the north of England and in a country where government was very centralised.

When I was doing my A-levels, I went to visit—I think this was in her constituency, but it was probably a long time before she was born—Laughter/One has to do one’s best to soften up the Opposition a bit, but that was actually true in her case. However, when I was a school student, I went up to visit the local National Economic Development Council, which was an offshoot of the Government. Well-meaning civil servants tried to give people Government money to, basically, invest in companies in the region. We were also shown the devastation caused by the end of mining and other things. That should be very familiar to the hon. Lady, and it is also familiar to me, coming as I do from Yorkshire.

Successive Governments—Labour and Conservative—have tried their best to deal with that issue. In some cases, they did that by pretending that the Government should not have an industrial development policy, which I have no truck with at all. Following that, there was a more centralised approach by the Labour Government, with the best intentions. Then there were different attempts to devolve, either through legislation, as in the case of the Scottish and Welsh authorities, or through regional policy, which I very much support, to try to have local delivery mechanisms. Local mayors are a very good example of that—irrespective of political party, the structure is a very good way to try to address the imbalance—alongside local enterprise partnerships and the northern powerhouse initiative.

The Opposition argue that that is fine, but a lot more money needs to go into the machine in the first place. That is always arguable: Oppositions always say they want to spend more money and Governments of whatever complexion say that they have to find the money from somewhere. Those are well-rehearsed arguments, but I would like to place on record that I fundamentally agree with the point, which was very well made, that devolution and more money to regions are absolutely vital.

The shared prosperity fund will invest in the foundations of productivity, as set out in our industrial strategy, to support people to benefit from economic prosperity. I fully accept that the Opposition and many other hon. Members—not just Members here today—want to know what it will look like. The written ministerial statement in July stated clearly that the fund is designed to tackle inequalities between communities, especially in those parts of the country whose economies are furthest behind. The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) argued that case very well. I will address some of his more specific points in a moment, but that point was very well made. The fund is there to invest in the foundations of productivity, which we put in our industrial strategy document: ideas, people, infrastructure, place and a business environment. It will be an integrated, simplified fund that operates throughout the UK, not with centralised decisions.

What are the Government going to do now? I accept the Opposition’s point, but it is always difficult if you are in government. You have to consult everyone and form an actual policy, otherwise one gets criticised—not you, Mr Deputy Speaker; you would not be criticised at all. Unless the Government consult they get criticised, through legal challenges and so on, for not consulting properly. There will be a proper consultation shortly to recognise that there are a lot of interested parties with different opportunities. It will inform our decisions on the composition of the shared prosperity fund, which will be taken at the spending review later this year.

I would like to set the record straight: the shared prosperity fund will respect the devolved settlements. We have made it very clear that we will continue to work in partnership with the devolved Administrations to ensure that the fund works for all places across the Union.

There have been calls for clarity and we are working on that. The Government are holding engagement events with stakeholders from a variety of sectors across the country, including devolved authorities. We have to discuss the lessons of the past and learn from them, as well as potential investment priorities. I believe that next year, when the spending review consultation takes place, we will be able to move a lot more quickly.

The Government have guaranteed funding for all structural fund projects signed before exit in the event of a no deal. The guarantee can also be used to fund projects started after exit. This will protect beneficiaries under the settlement and regional investment will continue as planned.

My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) has said on a number of occasions, with his usual dignity and tact, that we disagree on certain matters. However, one thing that I absolutely agree on is the way he works so diligently to push the interests of his constituents and the importance of regional plans. He mentioned Mayor Ben Houchen and others. I really think that this is a model for the future. Whatever one’s views on other subjects—again, I apologise for talking about your views, Mr Deputy Speaker—I think everyone agrees that Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland could not have a better Member of Parliament representing its interests. He reiterated the importance of the shared prosperity fund to his constituency.

The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute, the SNP spokesman, also gave his views on Brexit generally. Rather than rehearsing those arguments, I would like to talk specifically on the point he mentioned about why the Government are taking a different approach in this statutory instrument to the agriculture and fishery funds. The European agricultural fund for rural development and the European maritime and fisheries fund share some regulations in common with structural funds, but this SI makes provisions only for the structural funds. There is a separate SI for the agricultural and fisheries funds, which will retain and amend the EU regulations in so far as they apply to those funds. That is why they are being treated differently, unlike the European regional development and the European social funds. He asked why this is happening before the Report stage of the Agriculture Bill. It is because this SI is designed to address structural funds. The DEFRA SI will deal with the agricultural fund, which this is not related to.

Finally, I commend the speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) and thank him for his support. He made the excellent point—often not made in this House—that the distribution of funds should come with love as well as money. I am
sure that he could be in charge of love in his constituency—actually, I am sure he is doing that very well at the moment. I have tried my best to answer the questions that were asked, and I commend this SI to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That the draft European Structural and Investment Funds Common Provisions and Common Provision Rules etc. (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 28 January, be approved.

Terms and Conditions of Employment

4.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): I beg to move,

That the draft National Minimum Wage (Amendment) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 28 January, be approved.

The Government want fair employment for all. Through our industrial strategy, we committed to boosting productivity and increasing earning power across the country. The way in which people work is changing, thanks to new technology and new employment models. We need to ensure that the labour market continues to work for everyone.

In December, we published the “Good Work Plan”, which sets out the biggest package of workplace reforms in over 20 years. This includes our vision for the future of the labour market and our ambitious plan for implementing the Taylor review recommendations. The important package will ensure that workers have access to the rights and protections that they deserve. It will also create a level playing field for employers, ensuring that responsible employers are not undercut by a small minority who seek to circumvent the law.

The national minimum wage and the national living wage are crucial to those commitments. They help to protect the lowest paid in our society. We can be proud of our labour market. Our employment rate of 75.8% is the highest since comparable records began in 1971. Unemployment is down to 4%. Since 2010, the national minimum wage has increased faster than average wages and inflation, meaning more money for the lowest-paid workers while employment continues to increase. This success means that we can continue to increase the rates above inflation. We will continue to work towards our target of the national living wage reaching 60% of median earnings by 2020, subject to sustained economic growth.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): The Minister is doing a brilliant job as the Minister responsible not only for small business but for the labour market. I was lucky enough to be the Minister when we brought forward the biggest increase in the national minimum wage for 10 years. Does she agree that the greatest beneficiaries of that are women in the workplace who tend to be the lowest earners, and that our actions in increasing the minimum wage on the scale that we have has gone a long way towards helping to reduce the gender pay gap?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend, my predecessor, for making those comments on what the Government have undertaken over recent years to increase wages for the lowest-paid workers. I agree with him that what we have done to increase the rate of pay for the lowest-paid workers has supported women in the workplace and has been able to help to reduce the gender pay gap. We also have other programmes coming forward, including our consultation on mandatory ethnicity pay reporting, which we will say more about soon.

The regulations will increase the rates of the national minimum wage and national living wage from 1 April. We estimate that this will lead to a pay rise for more
than 2.1 million workers. I would like to place on the
record my gratitude for the work of the independent
Low Pay Commission, which recommends the rates,
bringing together the views of businesses and workers,
using research and analysis to inform its work and
reaching a consensus on what the rates should be. I am
delighted to say we have accepted all its recommendations
for the increases to the rates from 1 April.

The regulations will increase the national living wage
for those aged 25 by 38p to £8.21. This is an above-inflation
increase of 4.9% and means a pay rise for a full-time
worker of more than £690 a year.

Andrew Griffiths: May I too commend the work of
Bryan Sanderson from the Low Pay Commission and
his team? Given that he manages to bring together
unions, labour market experts and businesses and get
them to agree, does the Minister think we should get
him involved in our European Brexit negotiations?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for pointing
out the good work of the Low Pay Commission and
how it brings people together to come up with balanced
proposals, such as those before us today, which the
Government have accepted.

The regulations mean that a full-time worker will be
more than £2,750 better off next year compared with
the year the national living wage was introduced. The
regulations also increase the rates for younger workers
and apprentices. Those aged between 21 and 24 will be
entitled to a minimum hourly rate of £7.70, which is
a 32p increase; workers aged between 18 and 20 will
receive an extra 25p an hour, taking their rate to £6.15;
16 to 17-year-olds will earn at least £4.35 an hour—a
15p increase; and apprentices aged under 19 and those
in the first year of their apprenticeship will receive the
largest percentage increase of 5.4%, meaning an hourly
rate of £3.19.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Does the
Minister appreciate that that is not even enough to buy
a Freddo?

Kelly Tolhurst: I point out to the hon. Lady that we are
talking about the apprentice rate.

The regulations will also change the amount employers
can charge workers for accommodation without it affecting
their pay for national minimum wage purposes. From
April, this will increase to £7 per day.

Changing the law is the first step, but we also need to
make sure all workers know they are entitled to the
national minimum age and that all employers know
they must pay it. The Government run an annual campaign
to increase awareness of the national minimum wage
and the national living wage. Last year, we spent
£1.48 million reaching workers and employers through
posters and billboards as well as digital and online
channels. We know that most businesses are good employers
and pay at least the national minimum wage, but where
non-compliance exists the Government will step in and
make sure that money is recovered on behalf of workers.

Since 2015, we have doubled our investment in
enforcement of the regulations to more than £262 million
per year. More than 420 staff in Her Majesty’s Revenue
and Customs are involved in the enforcement of the
national living wage, and they follow up every worker
complaint they receive. HMRC also conducts pro-active,
risk-based enforcement in sectors or areas with a higher
risk of workers not being paid the legal minimum wage,
including those identified by the director of labour
market enforcement. In this work, it co-operates with
other labour market enforcement bodies to share
information and conduct joint operations where that
makes sense for businesses and workers.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): When businesses
are repeatedly found to have breached national minimum
wage regulations, will the Minister ensure that HMRC
proactively investigates other cases of staff employed
on similar terms and with similar contracts, rather than
requiring each employee to demonstrate separately that
he or she has been underpaid?

Kelly Tolhurst: I assure my hon. Friend that we take
HMRC’s enforcement of the national minimum wage
very seriously. There are many actions that we can take
when people breach the law and do not pay the minimum
wage. We will prosecute companies that are found not
to be paying it, but our priority remains ensuring that
workers who have been underpaid receive the arrears
owed to them, and in such cases companies must also
pay a penalty. We are committed to the enforcement of
the minimum wage, which is why we have doubled our
expenditure on it.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): How many
people are currently employed in HMRC’s national
minimum wage compliance unit, and how does that
number compare with, for example, the number employed
in the Department for Work and Pensions to chase
social security fraud?

Kelly Tolhurst: Unfortunately I do not represent the
DWP here, so I am unable to make comparisons at the
Dispatch Box today. However, as I have just said, 420 staff
are involved in enforcement, and we have doubled our
spending on it because we are determined to ensure that
businesses pay workers what workers are entitled to. We
will continue to enforce that where we can.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): How many
companies have been penalised for breaking the rules
on the national minimum wage? How many prosecutions
have been brought in the last year?

Kelly Tolhurst: There have been 14 prosecutions since
the introduction of the minimum wage, and other
companies are undergoing investigations. However, as I
have said, our priority in regard to enforcement is to
ensure that people who have been underpaid receive
the arrears to which they are entitled, and the payment of
those arrears is matched with a penalty of up to 200%.
We can undertake prosecutions, among other actions,
but that is our priority.

Nick Smith: The Minister replied to my question by
saying that there had been 14 prosecutions since the
introduction of the minimum wage, but that
was not the question I asked. I asked how many
prosecutions there had been in the last year. Could the
Minister clarify that, please?
Kelly Tolhurst: I will happily try to find some information for the hon. Gentleman. He referred to “the last year”; perhaps he will clarify which part of the year he was referring to, 2019 or 2018. I do not have the year-on-year breakdown, but I have told the hon. Gentleman how many companies have been prosecuted since the national minimum wage was introduced.

We will continue to help businesses to comply by issuing guidance, and through the advisory work of ACAS. Alongside these regulations, new legislation will come into force from April dealing with payslips. Under this, all employers must provide payslips to all workers. If a worker’s pay varies according to time worked, their payslip must show the number of hours worked. This will increase pay transparency and help workers understand and check their pay.

These proposed increases in the national living wage will keep it on target to reach 60% of median earnings by 2020. This Government have an aspiration to end low pay. In his 2018 Budget speech, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer said that “we will give the Low Pay Commission a new remit, beyond 2020.”—[Official Report, 29 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 667.]

This will be set out in the Budget 2019. In developing this remit we will engage both with employers and workers to balance the needs of both.

These regulations make sure that the lowest-paid workers are fairly rewarded for their valuable contribution to the economy. The regulations contribute to our commitment to promote a labour market that increases people’s earning power and boosts businesses, and they will give over 2.1 million people a pay rise this year. I therefore commend these regulations to the House.

4.26 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): In the Labour party’s long history of standing up for working people, the introduction of the national minimum wage in 1998 was a particularly proud moment, and let us never forget that Conservative Members unanimously opposed that introduction.

I want to start by saying that we will not oppose this increase in the minimum wage for working people; any increase in pay for those on the lowest pay is to be welcomed. However, this small rise is entirely insufficient, and is emblematic of a Government who will only do the very barest minimum for working people, and often not even that.

There is a crisis in our country. Millions are struggling to make ends meet. Work is no longer a guarantor of a decent standard of living; indeed, work and poverty are no longer contradictory under this Government. The failed policy of austerity has had a terrible impact on our communities. Years of austerity have bred wage stagnation, which in turn has meant that 4 million workers across the country are living in poverty. Real wages are still almost £15 a week lower than 10 years ago, and they will not recover to those levels until the mid-2020s.

But at the same time, the rich are getting richer and our country is getting more unequal. Top executives are now paid 133 times more than the average worker, which means the salary of the average FTSE chief executive is the same as that of 386 workers on the minimum wage combined.

Andrew Griffiths: The hon. Lady is making a very good speech, but does she agree that as a result of the taxation policies of this Government, the richest are paying more tax than ever before, and that by changing the tax rates we have lifted the lowest paid in our society out of paying tax entirely?

Chi Onwurah: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but it does show a lack of understanding of the economic realities in our country. The richest are not paying their fair share; the poorest are paying more in tax, particularly through that most unequal and unprogressive of taxes, value added tax, which the coalition Government immediately raised when they came into power. So the poorest in our country are being taxed more and the richest are not bearing their share of the burden.

Andrew Griffiths: The hon. Lady mentioned VAT. Is it her party’s policy to lower VAT, should it ever come into power?

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Wait and see!

Chi Onwurah: As one of my colleagues helpfully says, the hon. Gentleman must wait and see. In our 2017 manifesto, we set out our fully funded taxation and spending policy. The hon. Gentleman needs to recognise that a fairer taxation policy would not only enable us to fund our public services better but ensure that our economy was growing and that the growth was shared by all those who contributed to it, unlike what is happening at the moment. Last month, we learned that household debt was at its highest rate ever. Many people are reliant on borrowing, not for luxuries but for essentials such as putting food on the table for their children, and food bank use has skyrocketed.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Our 2017 manifesto was fully costed and full of figures, but the only figures in the Conservative manifesto were the page numbers. According to the StepChange charity, 3,500 families containing 5,000 children in my constituency are in toxic debt, owing about £14.5 million. Does she agree that this is because of eight years of austerity?

Chi Onwurah: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The burden of debt has been shifted. We still have our public debt, but the burden has been shifted on to our poorest families. The national figures for debt are a matter of great concern for our future economic stability. As a consequence, food bank use has skyrocketed, with wages no longer covering basic living costs. In my constituency, Newcastle’s West End food bank is the largest in the country. That is not an achievement of which we are proud, but we are proud of the generous Geordies who take on the role that this Government have abandoned in feeding the most vulnerable among us.

We know that 5.2 million people are trapped in low pay, and small single-figure percentage increases in the legal minimum wage will not put an end to this misery. Shockingly, one in four employees earning the minimum wage for five years have been unable to move out of that low pay, which is the highest figure since records began.
Low pay is becoming a trap, and the workers least likely to escape the low pay trap are those in the north-east and women. They are being trapped by the lack of action from this Government. Will the Minister admit that, under the Tories, low pay means that work is not a protection against poverty? I want to make it clear that, despite its name, the Government’s minimum living wage is not a real living wage. The small increase that this statutory instrument introduces will not make it a real living wage. More than 5 million people are paid less than the living wage—a huge increase from the 3.4 million people in 2009.

Mike Wood: The shadow Minister refers to small increases in the minimum wage. An increase of 38p in the national minimum wage is now being introduced. Can she tell the House in how many of the 10 years after the introduction of the national minimum wage the Labour Government made a bigger increase than the 38p that workers will see under this increase?

Chi Onwurah: When we introduced the national minimum wage, it was a transformative change for the pay of so many low-paid people, and our commitment to a real living wage of £10 an hour will also be transformative for working people.

Research by the Living Wage Foundation, which the hon. Gentleman might be interested in, revealed that one in five workers—more than 5 million people—is paid less than the living wage, which is a huge increase from 3.4 million in 2009. In Newcastle, 30% of workers who live there and 20% of those who work there are paid less than the real living wage. In the north-east, around 238,000 jobs are not paid the living wage. I am therefore particularly proud that, despite having its budget halved by reckless Tory austerity over the past decade, in January Newcastle City Council renewed its commitment to pay all staff the real living wage. After a decade of imposing austerity, this Government will still not give workers a real living wage. Will the Minister tell me why the Government will not follow Newcastle City Council’s example and raise the minimum wage to a real living wage?

The Minister said that she does not represent the Department for Work and Pensions, but she does represent the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, which is not paying the London living wage to all its staff. Will the Minister confirm the number of employees who are not receiving the London living wage? Will she explain how we can have confidence in her ability to enforce even the national minimum wage when her own staff are striking due to the lack of a decent wage from the Government of the day?

Chris Stephens: The shadow Minister makes an important point. UK Departments are not complying with the London living wage, and people are taking industrial action. Does she agree that that needs sorting out today?

Chi Onwurah: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. A Government who cannot even guarantee a decent wage to their own employees should not be able to speak in this debate. I hope that the Minister will clarify the points that I have raised and confirm that a real London living wage will be paid to the Government’s employees. It is totally within their ability to do so.

The increase in the minimum wage will be of some help to the lowest paid, but it will not be transformative. It will not tackle extreme and growing levels of inequality, and it will certainly not end the growing levels of in-work poverty faced by millions. Even if it was a sufficient safety net, the minimum wage would not catch all workers. With the growing gig economy forcing more and more workers into sham self-employment, it is more important than ever that every worker is paid a decent living wage. However, the minimum wage does not cover self-employment, and TUC figures show that almost half of self-employed people earn less than the minimum wage, meaning that 2 million self-employed workers are now stuck on poverty pay. Does the Minister think that that is acceptable? What is she doing to address poverty pay among the self-employed?

Another glaring inconsistency is the huge discrepancy in the minimum wage for people over 21 and for those aged 18 to 20. Will the Minister set out why the Government believe that workers aged 18 to 20 should be paid a far lower rate than those aged 21 for exactly the same work? Why is the adult rate for under 25s less than for those over 25? What is it about a 24-year-old doing exactly the same work as a 26-year-old that leads the Minister to believe the former deserves less?

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Does the hon. Lady agree that the anger felt by young people is palpable? The message that the Government are sending is, “By being younger, you’re not worth as much as someone who is older than you.” What kind of message is that for young people?

Chi Onwurah: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. What message is being sent to the under-25s about their contribution to our economy? They are exactly the people whose confidence and contribution we need to promote, especially during these difficult times.

In its latest report, the Low Pay Commission found that more than 200,000 workers were underpaid by a cumulative total of £15.6 million last year. From 2017, measured underpayment for those aged 25 and over increased to 23% of all those covered by the national living wage. Does the Minister agree that is simply not good enough?

Labour will stand up for workers against unscrupulous employers by properly resourcing Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, which is critical to enforcement, and will strengthen the enforcement of labour laws. We will crack down on employers that breach labour market rights and regulations through increased fines and sanctions.

Labour is committed to making work pay, which is why we will ensure a real living wage of at least £10 an hour for all workers aged 18 and over. There is no justification for differential rates based on age. Increasing wages, particularly for the lowest paid, would not only immediately help those workers and their families but would increase demand in our economy and reduce the subsidising of low pay by the state. Given the Government’s chaotic handling of Brexit and the perilous state of our
economy as a consequence, does the Minister agree that the economic benefits that a significant increase in the living wage would create are desperately needed?

It is important that the state sets a minimum rate of pay based on the Low Pay Commission’s recommendations, but state minimums are just one part of the solution to low pay. Trade unions are the collective voice of workers and are best placed to bargain over what workers are paid, within a negotiating framework that includes employers. Does the Minister agree that it would be far better if workers had a direct voice in the setting of their pay through, for example, national sectoral collective bargaining?

Workers in this country deserve far better than this Government are offering, and they deserve far better than this Government. That is why Labour will set up a new Department to roll out sectoral collective bargaining, protect the interests of workers and strengthen trade unions, introducing new rights and freedoms so that every worker gets the support, security and pay at work they deserve. This Government are clearly incapable of doing that, but I hope the Minister will at least be able to answer my questions.

4.43 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): I am pleased to see the national living wage and the national minimum wage continue to increase and support the lowest paid. Those on the minimum wage often have the hardest jobs, and those jobs are vital to our daily lives. Carers are just one example; many of us who have a cared-for relative know just how demanding and invaluable—indeed, priceless—such work is. We need to make sure that carers and many on the minimum wage are properly rewarded for their work, as everybody should be. The Government have made some promising steps, with net wages for people on the minimum wage increasing by 39% since 2010.

It is estimated that 2,600 people in Chichester are on either the national living wage or the national minimum wage, and they are all set to benefit from the above-inflation increases to their hourly rate. They represent about 6% of the local workforce, and Chichester chamber of commerce and industry has welcomed the Government’s acceptance of the Low Pay Commission’s recommendations. The CCCI has said that Chichester businesses want to recruit the very best employees, and this needs to come with a decent wage. I completely agree. I am encouraged by the fact that the CCCI does not foresee any adverse effects on local businesses from the proposed increases.

I am not saying that raising the minimum age alone is the silver bullet, but the proposed increases mean that the earnings of a full-time minimum wage worker will increase by more than £2,750 annually from next year—that represents a number of Freddo bars. That good news comes on top of other Government measures, such as increases to the personal tax allowance.

I also celebrate the 20p increase to the hourly rate for an apprentice, which represents by far the biggest proposed increase—a 5.4% rise on current rates. That will be a welcome boost to the pockets of the 540 people who started an apprenticeship this year in Chichester, although we should not forget that this is a minimum wage and many people pay apprentices above the minimum wage. I was an apprentice at 16, more than 30 years ago, when the Labour policy was not to pay me the same minimum wage as someone aged 50. It seems that that could be the policy Labour is about to introduce, according to their Front Benchers. In addition, apprentices are getting valuable new skills, which are sponsored and paid for by their employers. As a newly appointed apprenticeship ambassador, and with National Apprenticeship Week coming up, let me use this opportunity to say that, along with learning the necessary skills, this increase will be one of the benefits of taking the apprenticeship route into the workplace. I will be welcoming that.

Unemployment is at an all-time low under this Government. Only 1.2% of people in Chichester are unemployed, so the jobcentre’s aim to get everybody a job, then get them a better job and then move them into a career is a realistic ambition. The minimum wage will help along that journey, so I welcome the proposed increases and I am pleased that we are on our way to making the national living wage reach 60% of median income by 2020. Hard-working people deserve an income that reflects their importance to our economy and the services we rely on daily. We all want to make sure that work pays, and I think these inflation-beating increases are a good step in making that a realistic prospect.

4.47 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): This is my first statutory instrument debate in the Chamber, and it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan).

When we are in this Chamber, I am sure there is always a moment when we ask ourselves whether the party of the establishment actually has a clue about what happens in real life. That moment was revealed today when my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) pointed out to the Minister that one of the increases in the minimum wage rate was the price of a Freddo bar, and we saw that some Government Members did not know what a Freddo bar was. The Prime Minister’s Parliamentary Private Secretary—I did tell him I was going to mention him—was shouting from a sedentary position that he thought the price of a Freddo bar was. The Prime Minister did not know what a Freddo bar was. Perhaps the Library might want to do some research on the minimum wage rates we would be presented with today if the minimum wage rate had increased at the same rate as the price of the Freddo bar. I suggest that the rates would be higher than what the Government are presenting today.

Mike Wood: Clearly, one does not get a fine figure such as mine without knowing precisely the price of a range of chocolate bars. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be aware, as I am from having young children, that as recently as last month Freddo bars were indeed 10p in Tesco.

Chris Stephens: It seems unlikely—perhaps we will ask for photographic evidence from the hon. Gentleman of the price of a Freddo bar, or make that a competition for Members of Parliament this weekend.

Statutory minimum wage rates are important because in some sectors of the economy the statutory minimum rate actually becomes the maximum wage rate. It is
important that statutory minimum wage rates are enforced properly. In answer to a question, the Minister notified me that the national minimum wage compliance unit has hired 420 staff to enforce national minimum wage compliance across these islands. There are 4,754 full-time equivalent posts for staff to chase social security fraud. Yet we know that more than 200,000 workers are not paid the proper statutory wage. That is an absolutely scandalous figure that needs to be addressed, so I hope the Minister can tell us what plans the national minimum wage compliance unit has to hire additional staff to correct the current situation and to ensure that the national minimum wage rates are enforced properly, so that in the future we do not have more than 200,000 workers being paid incorrectly.

The Minister mentioned the “Good Work Plan”. It is certainly the view of SNP Members that it does not go far enough. In fact, the Minister should just pick up the Workers (Definition and Rights) Bill that I have introduced and take that forward, as it would give workers far better protection. My Bill would sort out the status of a certain the view of SNP Members that it does not go 200,000 workers being paid incorrectly.

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The real living wage, as calculated by the Living Wage Foundation, is set at £9 an hour, or £10.55 an hour in London; the pretendy living wage falls short of that. For those of us who want a highly educated, highly skilled, high-wage economy, it continues to be extremely disappointing that the UK Government choose not to increase the minimum wage to a level people can actually live on.

High wages are linked to increased productivity—an issue the UK has struggled with for many, many years—increased staff retention and higher standards of workers. A substantial increase in wages is not a choice between acting in the interests of businesses and acting in the interests of employees; it is entirely possible to cover both. The attitude that I am hearing from Government Members is that the national living wage falls short of a real living wage, but we should celebrate it anyway because it represents a pay rise for working people. That shows a real lack of aspiration on the part of the UK Government—a Government who claim that they want to help people work their way out of poverty but whose actions fail those people time and again.

If this UK Government really wanted people to work their way out of poverty, they would be investing in our labour markets, increasing the powers of trade unions and improving the rights of those in insecure work. They are presiding over one of the lowest rates of real wage growth among the advanced nations of the G20. Andy Haldane at the Bank of England has described the past 10 years as “a lost decade” for workers, and the measures today will do very little to address that problem.

As things stand, the Chancellor is giving with one hand and taking away with the other. For those at the lower end of the income scale, the proposed increase in the minimum wage does not even offset the impact of the benefits freeze. I and my hon. Friends have consistently called for an end to the benefits freeze, which is a pay cut by stealth for some of the lowest earning people in this country. We welcome the Labour party’s commitment to scrap it, even if it did not feature in its 2017 manifesto.

The age pay gap is the income inequality that the national minimum wage policy creates between age groups. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy impact assessment on the policy explicitly states that the purpose of a lower minimum wage for under 25s is to “maximise the wages of low paid younger workers, without damaging their employment prospects.”
It also says that the Government asked the Low Pay Commission to recommend separate national minimum wage rates
by age band (16-17, 18-20 year olds, and 21-24 year olds).”
There is no real evidence to justify why that is necessary. It is insulting to young people in my constituency and
across these islands to say that employers would not want them if they had to be paid a fair wage; quite apart
from that, it entices employers to make hiring decisions based on age, encouraging unscrupulous employers to
break the law.

Make no mistake, this is state-sponsored age discrimination. In the impact assessment, the public sector equality duty sets out that the Government must
“eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act”.
It goes on:
“The protected characteristics consist of nine groups: age, race, gender, disability, religion or belief, sexual orientation, gender
reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership.”

If women were to be paid less than men, that would be against the law because gender is one of the protected
characteristics; mysteriously, however, this impact assessment does not extend to age. I would really like to
see some smart lawyer take a legal challenge against the Government, because there is clear discrimination in the
terms of this statutory instrument on the basis of age alone. There is no justifiable reason for this policy.

To compound matters further, the proposal that we are discussing today will increase the pay gap between age
groups. The unifying that will result from the regulations means that 24-year-olds could earn £90 less a month
than 25-year-olds for exactly the same job, amounting to a difference of more than £1,000 a year. The gap
would increase even further within the under-25 age groups, making it even harder for young people to get
by. Since the measure was brought in in 2016, 18 to 20-year-olds have seen the age pay gap between themselves
and someone on the higher rate go from £1.90 to £2.06; 16 and 17-year-olds have seen it rise from £3.33 to
£3.86—that gap between the highest wage and all that they are legally entitled to be paid—and for apprentices,
the gap has gone from £3.90 to £4.31. No justification is given in the impact assessment for that state-sponsored
age discrimination.

If I were to suggest that Members of Parliament—an MP born in 1973, perhaps, like my hon. Friend the
Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), or an MP born in 1978, like the Minister, or myself, born
in 1982—were to be paid different rates depending on age, I cannot imagine any MP in the House signing up
for that. Why should young people face the discrimination in law that the Government are proposing today?

Gillian Keegan: I am listening carefully. Having started my working life aged 16 as an apprentice, I would not
expect to get the same minimum wage at 16 as I would starting in a new job when I was 20, 30 or 40. Surely
there is some recognition that experience comes with age, even if it is not always experience in the workplace.
I think that perhaps people when they are older might expect to see a differential to reflect their experience.

Alison Thewliss: The hon. Lady misses her own point, because the regulations are not called “The National Experience
Wage (Amendment) Regulations”. The regulations discriminate
by age alone, not by experience, so if the hon. Lady, as a 16-year-old, walked into a job on the same day as
someone who was 25, she would not be legally entitled to the same wage. The 25-year-old would have no more
experience in that job, regardless of their experience in life. There might be 20 or 16-year-olds who are far more
savvy on the first day in the job than a 25-year-old, or a 45-year-old, or a 65-year-old. We are not measuring
experience here.

Mike Wood: Surely the hon. Lady acknowledges the Low Pay Commission’s conclusion:
“In light of this evidence we concluded when thinking about the pay floor for this age group, that it could not currently be set
to the same level as the national living wage without risks to employment.”

Alison Thewliss: That was exactly the type of comment that the Conservatives made when the national minimum
wage was introduced—that it would risk people’s employment. That has not been the case. The impact
assessment says that the Government asked the Low Pay Commission to set the national minimum wage at
these levels. The Government have instructed the Low Pay Commission to do this. That is quite different, and I
do not buy the hon. Gentleman’s arguments at all.

The gap amounts to a difference of thousands of pounds in the take-home pay of a 16-year-old, an
18-year-old, a 21-year-old and a 25-year-old, and it is completely unjustifiable, because this is not about experience,
as I said. It does not say that in the regulations; they specify the age, and age alone.

I shall quote from the excellent report by the Young Women’s Trust, called “Paid Less Worth Less?”, which I
commend to the Minister. Shanae, who is 24, said:
“A 25-year-old starting out on their first job and just entering the workplace would have the same experience as a 16-year-old
who is also just starting out. If companies want to pay based on experience, then that should be reflected in what they choose to
pay people. But that’s different from paying us on our age.”
She is absolutely correct.

At 25 or younger, many people have families of their own to support and their own responsibilities, and in
the research by the Young Women’s Trust, Tia mentions her circumstances specifically. She says:
“I am a care-leaver and I have lived independently since I was 17, so that makes my costs exactly the same as maybe like a
30-year-old who is living in a private rented flat. You have bills to pay like any other adult. Everyone gets hungry. Everyone has to
pay for gas, electrics, toiletries, clothes and food. It still adds up the same. So I don’t see why there should be a pay difference.”
I do not see why there should be a pay difference either. It is completely unjustifiable.

Young people have to pay the same amount as somebody over 25 for rent, for getting the bus to work, for childcare,
for the cinema, and maybe for a Freddo bar. All those prices are exactly the same. Young people are not entitled
to discounts on their rent because of their age, and indeed they get less in benefits from this Government as well
because of their age, so they are doubly missing out. Young people deserve the right to be paid a fair market value for their skills, and not be subject to
state-sponsored age discrimination.

I mentioned unscrupulous employers. When I was at school, it was well known among my peers that some
employers would employ young people right up until
the point at which they would have to pay them more, and then they would let them go. That is particularly true for people on zero-hours contracts or in precarious employment, who can be let go at a moment’s notice. As soon as an employer has to pay them more, they are shown the door. There is very little by way protection, particularly for young people, who often do not know their rights and cannot afford legal representation to challenge an employer. A few years ago I met a constituent who had been working in a bar when the rate of pay went up. She was pretty sure that she was let go because she was the oldest person employed there, but she could not prove it. This Government are leaving the door open for unscrupulous employers to do that time and again to low-paid workers, often female workers in part-time jobs. This Government are aiding and abetting those unscrupulous employers.

Scotland is the best performing part of the UK when it comes to paying the real living wage. There are 1,363 real living wage employers in Scotland, and I am proud to say that the latest among them in my constituency include the Scottish Fairtrade Foundation, Silver Cloud and the spectacle manufacturer IOLLA, which has a shop in Finswinton. I am proud that those responsible employers are seeing the benefits of paying the real living wage, because it improves retention and morale. However, powers over the minimum wage are not currently devolved; they remain with this Government, who are not interested, frankly, in making the change for young people in this country. If the Minister is not interested in doing this, will she devolve the powers to the Scottish Government and let us get on with the job?

5.6 pm

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank all Members who contributed to the debate. I was pleased to hear that the Opposition will not oppose this statutory instrument, although I was disappointed by some of the comments about the Government’s commitment to workers and, in particular, to young people—it seems to be a recurring theme, because some of these criticisms were levelled against me in a debate last week. This Government and the Prime Minister have been clear about our commitment, so I will take no lectures from the Opposition on supporting low-paid workers, and no suggestion that Government Members do not understand the real world. As I have said numerous times, I am proud to be a member of a Conservative Government who are committed to the biggest reformation of rights in the workplace in 20 years. I am proud to be a Minister who is part of that.

Andrew Griffiths: I thank the Minister for what she has said so far. We hear a lot about workers’ rights being eroded by us leaving the European Union, but are we not demonstrating, through the Taylor report, that we are actually going further and faster than Europe in guaranteeing new rights to the lowest paid and to vulnerable workers?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. He is indeed correct, because we have been clear that we will not be rolling back workers’ rights when we leave the European Union. That has been further guaranteed by the introduction of the “Good Work Plan”—I will say more about that later—and we have already laid three SIs dealing with workers’ rights. We are going further on workers’ rights and increasing the wages for the lowest paid. We are sticking to our commitment. I am proud to be part of a Government who have put workers’ rights and the lowest paid in our society at the top of our agenda, so I will take no lectures from the Opposition in that regard.

We will increase the personal allowance of the lowest-paid workers to £12,500 in April. That will take 1.7 million people out of tax. Since 2015, the national minimum wage has risen faster than average wages and inflation. For the lowest paid, there has been 8% growth, above inflation, between April 2015 and April 2018. I will therefore not listen to accusations that we have not continued to work towards our commitment to reach 60% of median pay by 2020.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): May I confirm that the lowest paid will get the same deal that they get now, or better, if Brexit happens, which it will?

Kelly Tolhurst: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is right. The rates that come into force in April will be the same whether we leave the European Union or not—[Interruption]—as we leave the European Union.

Those increases did not happen year on year under the last Labour Government. This Government have made and delivered that commitment. This year, we have come forward with another plan, which accepts the recommendations of the independent Low Pay Commission. It takes its job extremely seriously, produces great reports, consults businesses and workers, and ensures that its independent recommendations to Government are objective and fair.

Daniel Zeichner: Will the Minister remind the House who introduced the national minimum wage and the Low Pay Commission?

Kelly Tolhurst: I point out that we introduced the national living wage in 2016. As I said, we have made increases year on year and stuck to our commitment.

I want to answer a few more questions, particularly the question that the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) asked about pay for the Department’s security staff. We value all the staff, who deserve fair and competitive wages. The Department has agreed with its contractors to align the pay of cleaning, catering, mailroom and security staff with the median rates for those occupations. That will come into effect on 1 March.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the Minister for that clarification. Is she saying that all staff at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will be paid the London living wage from this financial year?

Kelly Tolhurst: I welcome the hon. Lady’s comment about the London living wage, and we value the work of the Living Wage Foundation. However, it is the Government’s responsibility to set the minimum rate and, as I said, it has been agreed that the wage rates will be aligned with the median rates for those occupations, and that will come into effect on 1 March.
As a result of the increases in pay that will come into effect in April, another 350,000 young workers will benefit. Nine out of 10 workers between the ages of 18 and 24 are paid more than the minimum rates. There has been much criticism of age-related rates, but they are not new. Age-related rates have been in place since the national minimum wage was introduced in 1999. In fact, this Government have asked the Low Pay Commission to review the youth rates this year to see whether they are fit for purpose, and it will report later in the year.

Chris Stephens: Surely the Minister must concede that the Government have made this situation worse by introducing the pretendy living wage rate for those who are 25 and over. Has that not actually increased age discrimination, and not reduced it?

Kelly Tolhurst: As I have already highlighted, age rates are not new to these regulations. We have asked the Low Pay Commission to review the age-related rates to see whether they are fit for purpose, and to report back later in the year.

As hon. Members have raised in the House, it is absolutely true that younger workers are the most vulnerable with regard to employment. I must point out that, from September and November 2018, 11.7% of 16 to 24-year-olds were unemployed, compared with 2.9% of over-25s. It is absolutely right, when these rates are set, that we have in mind that we want young people to be in work and getting experience in order to have the future earning capacity to reach their full potential and be able to fly. They can do that through work experience, and by getting into a place of work and gaining such experience, while in some cases they will get the entrepreneurialism they need to go on to do great things.

Alison Thewliss: Will the Minister give way?

Kelly Tolhurst: As I want to make one more point about the age-related model. This model has been in place since 1999, and it is used across OECD countries, so it is not specific to the UK.

I will move on quickly to enforcement. I have said at the Dispatch Box a number of times since I have had this role that we take enforcement extremely seriously. That is why we have doubled spending on enforcement to £26 million. In 2017-18, there were 810 penalties, totalling £14 million. This is five times more in penalties than were imposed in the last five years of the previous Labour Government. To level the criticism that we are not taking enforcement seriously is just factually incorrect.

Chris Stephens: Will the Minister give way?

Kelly Tolhurst: I am keen to make some progress because I know there is other business to be getting on with.

On enforcement, we are committed to making sure that anyone who underpays on the minimum wage will be investigated and penalised or prosecuted. As I have said, HMRC will always investigate every worker complaint and make sure there is compliance with the national minimum wage. This Government are clear, as I have been all the time I have had this role, that the enforcement of the national minimum wage is important and delivering this is central.

To level the criticism that we are deliberately discriminating against young people in the workplace is pure fantasy; we are not discriminating. In actual fact, this Government are taking forward plans and making progress with work to make sure that workers in this country are not discriminated against, and we are going as far as we can.

On the specific questions about the SI that have been laid, three have been laid. In fact, the first will be debated on 6 March, and I am looking forward to bringing it forward in the House.

The national minimum wage and the national living wage make a real difference to the lives of millions of workers in this country. I am glad that there is agreement across this House that the lowest-paid workers deserve a pay rise, which these regulations will provide. These regulations mean that, on 1 April, over 1.7 million workers on the national living wage will receive a pay rise. A full-time worker will receive an additional £690 a year. Younger workers will also get more money, through increases to the youth rates. I hope we can do more in the future.

Our industrial strategy aims to build an economy that works for everyone, wherever they live and wherever they work. Creating good jobs and increasing people’s earning power is one of the pillars of our strategy. Having a UK-wide minimum wage, recommended by the independent and expert Low Pay Commission, makes sure that the lowest paid in society are protected in terms of pay. It also means that businesses compete on a level playing field.

The increases for this year will mean that wages continue to rise above inflation. We remain on track for the national living wage to reach 60% of median earnings by 2020. We also have the highest employment rate since comparable records began. We can be proud of our labour market, and we can be proud of these regulations. I commend them to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That the draft National Minimum Wage (Amendment) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 28 January, be approved.
Exiting the European Union (Medicines)

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I beg to move,

That the draft Medicines for Human Use (Clinical Trials) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 23 January, be approved.

Before I discuss the regulations, it is important to reiterate that we wish to retain as close a possible working partnership with the EU to ensure that those engaged in clinical trials can continue to develop innovative and cost-effective treatments and that patients recruited in trials can continue to have timely access to medicines. However, we are bringing forward this legislation to continue preparations for no deal, in case we need to be prepared for that eventuality.

In developing this amending legislation, my Department’s priorities have been to minimise any disruption to ongoing trials and to make sure that the UK regulator can still protect public health and, importantly, that the UK’s biomedical, health and life sciences research sectors can continue to be world-leading. With that in mind, the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Authority has sought to take a pragmatic and proportionate approach in establishing the new regulatory requirements. Importantly, that has been done through continued close co-operation with stakeholders. After a period of informal consultation in August, the MHRA published an initial proposal, and it followed that up with further consultation. The feedback from that consultation, which received over 170 responses, led to the statutory instrument before us.

Let me bring a few details to the attention of the House. First, wherever possible, we have sought to maintain existing arrangements. Given that the system for clinical trials is currently based on national-level decision making in the EU and globally, we have not had to make any substantial change in some key areas. In particular, on the ability of the UK to participate in multinational trials in the EU or in the rest of the world, there will be no change. Also, the data gained from trials in the UK can still be deposited in international repositories and be accessed by others. I think the House will agree that that reflects our approach, which is to continue multinational co-operation on clinical trials.

In other areas, we have faced a choice regarding the UK’s regulatory requirements. In those instances, we have sought to maintain current arrangements, provided that the regulator still has sufficient ability to protect public health. For example, we will continue to recognise existing approvals, so there will be no need to reapply for both regulatory and ethics approvals. We will have the same information requirements as the EU for any new applications for multi-state trials in the UK. There is also a requirement that a clinical trial sponsor or legal representative for clinical trials in the EU should be based in the EU. That will ensure continuity of the existing clinical trials landscape and maintain the UK as an attractive, open environment in which to conduct clinical trials.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Minister is making an important speech. Does she recognise industry concerns about the introduction of an extra level of regulation through the proposals for a qualified person requirement? There is a worry that it will make our country a less attractive place to conduct clinical trials, which are, of course, extremely important to my part of the world.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s point. Perhaps I can reassure him by emphasising that the UK is committed to establishing a far-reaching science and innovation pact with the EU to facilitate the exchange of research and ideas, so we continue to maintain the competitiveness to which he refers.

In bringing forward these proposals, we have been determined to establish our pattern of regulation from outside the EU if need be, but as much as possible we wish to continue with business as usual. We will continue to engage with the sector to maintain competitiveness, because we fully appreciate the value of the life sciences sector to our economy.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Paragraphs 7.6 and 7.7 of the explanatory notes highlight that the EU makes information public and transparent. They talk about the MHRA doing that, but they do not mention that the MHRA would be publishing data within the upcoming EU system.

Jackie Doyle-Price: The regulations are determined to facilitate transfer with not only EU bodies, but internationally. We fully recognise that in bringing forward the regulations we are operating in an international landscape. The regulations are designed to facilitate that co-operation, as well as to establish the MHRA as the lead regulator. It is worth noting that, within the current system, the MHRA is the lead. In terms of the regulation we are transposing, rather less is coming to the MHRA given the existing ownership it has in this field.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Given that our industry is a world leader and a very significant part of the European effort, does the Minister see opportunities in the future for us to have world-class regulation where we lead and differentiate in a way that would strengthen our efforts?

Jackie Doyle-Price: My objective this afternoon is to make sure we can continue with business as usual on exiting the European Union, but clearly once we have left the European Union that would be open to us. The ethos behind the regulations and the consultation we have had with the sector very much recognises that this is an international market place. We must ensure that in taking forward these requirements we remain competitive.

As I was saying, we will require the same information requirements as the EU for any new applications for multi-state trials in the UK. There is a requirement that a clinical trial sponsor should be based in the EU. There are a few areas where it has been necessary to add a new requirement, as a result of the UK no longer being part of the European regulatory framework, relating to the MHRA putting in place a new national IT system for safety reporting and submissions. In addition, investigational medicinal products, known as IMPs, imported from the European Economic Area will now require an import licence, as they would no longer be part of the single
market. As the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) said, they will be overseen by a qualified person to ensure that the products are appropriately certified. That builds on the existing import licensing system, which allows the transport of IMPs direct from the EEA to UK trial sites to continue. Recognising that this is a new system, we have provided stakeholders with a 12-month transition period from exit day before it comes into force.

While not specifically covered in this statutory instrument, I would like to reassure Members that the Government are engaging with organisations running clinical trials to ensure continuity of supply and that drugs continue to be received. The Government are undertaking a comprehensive deep dive into clinical trial supplies to gain detailed understanding of what is required, and are putting place contingency plans in case the sponsors need them. They will include access to the same prioritised shipping routes that will be available for all other medicines.

As I mentioned in response to the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), the Government are committed to ensuring that the UK remains one of the best places in the world for science and innovation. Members should note the Government’s commitment to aligning with the EU’s new clinical trials regulation as far as we can, without delay, when it does come into force, subject to the usual parliamentary approvals.

Daniel Zeichner: Will the Minister also comment on the concerns raised by organisations such as Cancer Research UK about future pan-European trials, for which it would appear that the sponsor or lead would have to be from within the EU rather than within the UK?

Jackie Doyle-Price: As I said in response to earlier questions, the Government’s approach is that this is an international marketplace. We clearly want access to the best possible medicines and to ensure that we can continue to co-operate and share that information as best as possible. I fully expect the MHRA to share that information with the European regulators, as it currently does. Regardless of EU exit, the MHRA and partners across the UK healthcare ecosystem are already taking steps to improve the UK clinical trials application process to ensure that it is as seamless as it can be.

In conclusion, in the event of a no deal, these regulations will put in place a pragmatic solution that ensures that the UK’s clinical trials legislation continues to function effectively after exit day. Essentially, we want this to be business as usual following exit, and I commend this statutory instrument to the House.

5.31 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for bringing this legislation to the Floor of the House and for providing us with a summary of it, which helped immensely. We are expecting many more health SIs in the weeks to come, so I must make it clear again, as I will in future, that it is incredibly concerning that we are now only 38 days away from 29 March and are still preparing for a no-deal Brexit. I hope that it does not come to that, but this has taken up a considerable amount of Parliament’s time and resources. My preferred scenario would have been one in which the Prime Minister did not run down the clock for two years, and especially now when we are getting closer and closer to Brexit day. I understand the need for “just in case” legislation, but we should have secured a deal by now.

Moving on to the legislation, clinical trials will probably not be in the forefront of people’s minds, but they are crucial for the safety and efficacy of medicines, as well as for our health and wellbeing. Medicine is not something that we should get wrong, but when we do, as in the case of Primodos, valproate and vaginal mesh as a surgical procedure, we must hold up our hands and take urgent action.

While this may not be the most eye-catching statutory instrument, it is hugely important. It is about patient safety and confidence. It would mean that in a no-deal scenario, the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency would be able to operate as a regulator outside the EU system and would therefore take on roles formerly conducted by the European Medicines Agency and through the wider EU regulatory framework. I must put on record my disappointment that the EMA is relocating from the UK to the Netherlands next month because of Brexit. Our loss is the Netherlands’ gain, but we should not have let it come to this. However, this SI means that in the event of a no-deal Brexit, the MHRA will be able to regulate clinical trials to ensure that they continue to operate effectively.

I want to ask the Minister for clarification on a few points. The new EU clinical trials regulation was introduced in April 2014 and was expected to come into force in October 2018. I understand that owing to technical issues that has now been delayed. The Government’s no-deal guidance says that “we’ll align where possible with the CTR without delay when it does come into force in the EU”.

Will the Minister please restate that commitment to the House today?

If the UK does leave with a deal, which I hope we do, what will the arrangements be for the CTR and the UK? Could the UK, no longer being a part of the EMA, delay the availability of new medicines in the UK? I am aware of concerns raised that, because the UK will be seen as a smaller market for new drugs than the EU, companies will be more likely to prioritise the authorisation of new drugs in the EU rather than in the UK. Has the Minister made any assessment of this risk?

Will the Minister please tell the House what the implications of a no deal would be for clinical researchers who are EU nationals? Will the UK also be eligible for EU funding for clinical trials under a no-deal scenario? The UK is currently one of the largest recipients of funding for clinical trials, and I am concerned about the implications for future trials and opportunities. The MHRA will have the power to publish its own guidance on clinical trial applications and applications for an ethics committee opinion, as well as declarations of the end of clinical trials and the content of documents forming trial master files. Could the MHRA continue to work with EU states in order to keep regulation in line with the EU? Will the Minister review important details, such as ethics, where concerns are raised?

In July 2017, the then Health Minister, Lord O’Shaughnessy, said that in the event of a no deal the Government would ensure that any system put in place would not
impose additional bureaucratic burdens. Can the Minister reaffirm this commitment today? I know that this instrument was subject to consultation and that because of concerns raised amendments were made. Will she please say whether any further amendments are expected and whether there will be further consultation? Finally, will she please confirm that any changes made by the instrument will be communicated effectively to stakeholders in a timely manner?

5.36 pm  

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): As we all know, Europe is the biggest research network in the world—bigger than China and America; and the UK and, within the UK, Scotland have been major beneficiaries. As the shadow Health Minister mentioned, the EMA provides a single licensing system, and countries outside Europe that are not major economies, such as Canada and Australia, face a delay of six months to a year in accessing and licensing new drugs. The EMA is not just a licensing body, however; it also funds and promotes research, particularly into rare conditions and childhood diseases.

Europe created the comprehensive trial regulation system with the clinical trials directive in 2001 and the good clinical practice directive in 2005. As mentioned, however, in 2014 a new directive introduced the EU clinical trials information system and the new trials regulation system, which will be under the control of the EMA when it comes into force next year. The system will provide a single portal for sponsors to register, collaborate and analyse their work and will provide work spaces for authorities and a public site that will tell patients what trials are going on and what their benefits are. It will also contain the EudraVigilance database on medicinal products that are not yet licensed, which is critical during initial trials.

The MHRA will take on the full role of clinical trial regulation, including legislative functions currently carried out by EU bodies, which will obviously mean additional work and costs for the MHRA. I welcome the Government’s commitment to align closely with the new European regulations, but this is not the same as being part of a single collaborative system. I note that the UK Government plan to recognise sponsors in the EEA, since EEA states will be recognised as approved countries—I am not sure what the amendments made—to minimise upheaval, but that means there will not be any compulsion to have a legal representative or lead researcher here in the UK.

Clinical trials sponsors must report any suspected unexpected serious adverse reactions—SUSARs, as they are known—to the EU database. They can currently do that from the United Kingdom, in a straightforward fashion. Similarly, any SUSARs registered elsewhere in Europe are entered in the database, so that concerns are highlighted at the earliest point during trials. Many of us will remember safety trials carried out on human subjects that resulted in major damage. It is critical that the UK does not operate in a vacuum.

Before licensing, particularly in the early stages of safety, dosage or phase 1 trials, investigational medicinal products are used. Those products are unlicensed, and, as the Minister said, they must be certified by a qualified person based in the EEA. If they are made in the EEA or in a third country, not in the UK, they need a manufacturing and importation authorisation, and must ensure that a qualified person certifies the products before supplying it.

Unfortunately, the regulations mean that bringing a drug into the UK for the purpose of a Europe-wide trial and exporting an IMP to Europe from a UK pharmaceutical firm will introduce bureaucracy. It is bizarre to claim that there will be no additional bureaucracy. The regulations merely describe the extra licences that will be required. The MHRA will publish data on UK trials, but there is no promise that they will also be posted on the EU trials information system.

Simply creating something separate will not replace our collaboration across Europe. We are seeing duplication, obstruction and expense. I am sorry to say that those are all the enemies of collaboration—and that defines the loss that is Brexit.

5.41 pm  

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Let me start by thanking the Department for an actual impact assessment. I have attended too many debates on statutory instruments when there has been no impact assessment. At least we know what we are talking about on this occasion, and I congratulate the Department on that.

I shall make three very brief points to which I hope the Minister will be able to respond. First, the headquarters of two of the top 10 pharma companies, GlaxoSmithKline and AstraZeneca, are in the United Kingdom. That matters, because there is considerable evidence that the location of the headquarters is the location of much of the investment in clinical trials. We need to maintain that hegemony, and ensure that we keep those trials here. How do the Government intend to guarantee investment in both the industry and the clinical trials?

Secondly, the industry is very concentrated. I know more about animal medicines, because of my involvement with the shadow DEFRA team. For instance, it was decided that the trial of the bovine tuberculosis vaccines for badgers had to end because the vaccines were needed for human use. There was one major company in Paris. That shows what the industry is really like, and that is why I fear that if we do not get this right, it will drift to other parts of the EU and we will lose out.

My third point is about barriers. This is not just about physical resources, the drugs and chemicals themselves; it is about people. We might find ourselves in a very difficult position, particularly if we were to crash out, heaven forbid. How does the Minister intend to ensure that, in such an event, the key people will be able to secure transferability between the UK and the rest of the EU? That issue is heightened by the enormous pressure on the MHRA in connection with a crash-out. It would be useful to know from the Minister what we will do on the people side to ensure that we genuinely defend the industry.

There is important health investment in pharma companies in my constituency, as there is in many other constituencies. It really does matter to us all to know that there is some certainty in what is a very uncertain process.
5.44 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price: I thank all hon. Members who have participated in this debate, which has demonstrated how vital it is that we make sure the legislative underpinning of clinical trials continues safely, as the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) outlined in her opening comments. That is by far our biggest priority: we need to continue business as usual, and to value our important pharmaceutical and life sciences sector and guarantee people’s safety.

I will try to address some of the points made today. The hon. Lady mentioned the clinical trials regulation and what it would mean in terms of adoption by the UK if it was implemented after March 2019. We expect the clinical trials regulation to be implemented in late 2020, and the MHRA, the National Institute for Health Research and the NHS have been working towards the implementation of that regulation since it was agreed in 2014. The withdrawal agreement Bill will give effect to the implementation period in domestic law and will allow EU regulations to continue to apply directly in the UK for this time-limited period. If the clinical trials regulation comes into force during the implementation period, as it is currently expected to, we would expect to apply that to the UK. If however we leave without a deal—this is why we have these regulations—the CTR will not be in force in the EU at that time so will not be incorporated into UK law on exit day; however, we intend to align, where possible, with the CTR without delay when it comes into force, subject of course to the usual parliamentary approvals. But that alignment will happen after 29 March 2019.

The two key elements of the regulation that are outside the UK’s control and that this instrument does not therefore cover are the use of the shared central IT portal, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), and participation in the single assessment model, both of which will require negotiated UK-EU agreement regarding UK involvement post-Brexit. This reiterates the wish expressed by the hon. Lady and what it would mean in terms of adoption by the UK if it was implemented after March 2019. We expect the clinical trials regulation to be implemented in late 2020, and the MHRA, the National Institute for Health Research and the NHS have been working towards the implementation of that regulation since it was agreed in 2014. The withdrawal agreement Bill will give effect to the implementation period in domestic law and will allow EU regulations to continue to apply directly in the UK for this time-limited period. If the clinical trials regulation comes into force during the implementation period, as it is currently expected to, we would expect to apply that to the UK. If however we leave without a deal—this is why we have these regulations—the CTR will not be in force in the EU at that time so will not be incorporated into UK law on exit day; however, we intend to align, where possible, with the CTR without delay when it comes into force, subject of course to the usual parliamentary approvals. But that alignment will happen after 29 March 2019.

The hon. Lady also mentioned patient safety. Currently a sponsor can report a suspected unexpected serious adverse reaction—SUSAR—during the course of a clinical trial through the EU database. Similarly, all SUSARs originating outside the UK where the sponsor has an ongoing trial in the UK involving the same medical product must be entered on the EU database, and we will clearly need to find a way of entering that so we can share such information and have arrangements for holding it on the MHRA database.

Dr Whitford: Does that mean that that ability is not there if the UK leaves without a deal, for April of this year?

Jackie Doyle-Price: Being brutally honest with the hon. Lady, and perhaps more honest than some are in this debate, I do not think we can dictate terms to our EU partners; I think we can look forward to having constructive working arrangements with them and it is in all our interests to do so, but ultimately we would have to seek agreement about this. At this stage this SI can only really cover the things that are in the gift of this Government, and a lot will rest on good co-operation after the event, which again means it would be much more preferable to leave with a deal.

John Redwood: Given the great importance of joint venture companies and joint investment and joint activity across the Atlantic, will the Government also be looking at changes in American regulation to see if any of that would be appropriate—or maybe a UK version could be better than both the American and EU ones?

Jackie Doyle-Price: My purpose this afternoon is to ensure that we have business as usual post-exit day, and that we can maintain patient safety at that time. I would not want to encroach on any debate beyond that now.

Questions were raised regarding research funding. I should advise the House that before the Brexit vote the UK was involved in more EU-funded science projects than any other country. The UK secured 14.3% of the total share of the funding to date and is the second-highest recipient of grant funding. We are committed to remaining a world leader in science and research, and that is why, in our modern industrial strategy, we have committed to spending 2.5% of our GDP on research and development by 2027. We have invested an extra £7 billion in research and development as a first step towards that.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): My hon. Friend has said that just over 14% was received by this country from EU funds. Does she have the figures to hand—I would not blame her if she did not—for the percentage of funds that we gave to the EU to be distributed around the bloc?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I do not have a detailed knowledge of the accounts in that regard. I can only tell the House how much we have received, and how we are replacing it, which is really the crux of the matter.

Mention was also made of what the Government are doing to prevent the loss of EU nationals working in research. We have been clear that we wish the UK to continue to be an open and tolerant nation, and to continue to attract the brightest and the best. That is equally applicable here. The Prime Minister told the House of Commons on 21 January:

“Having listened to concerns” about the settled status scheme

“I can confirm today that, when we roll out the scheme… the Government will waive the application fee”.—[Official Report, 21 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 27.] We want to give a clear message that we are open for business and open to the brightest and the best.

In bringing these regulations to the House, the central point is that the fundamentals of how clinical trials operate will remain the same and that, wherever possible, we have sought to maintain existing arrangements rather than creating new ones. While it is not the focus of this statutory instrument, the Government are working to ensure that the trials have continuity of supply and will continue as planned. I commend these orders to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That the draft Medicines for Human Use (Clinical Trials) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 23 January, be approved.
NHS 10-Year Plan

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We now come to the general debate on the NHS 10-year plan. Colleagues will notice that there is a bit of a time issue. I know that the Front-Bench spokespeople will be considerate in this regard, but it is only fair to warn colleagues that I will then impose an immediate three-minute time limit on Back-Bench speeches. I call the Minister, Stephen Barclay, to move the motion. [Interruption.] I am sorry. Let me do that again. I call the Minister, Stephen Hammond.

5.53 pm

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the NHS Ten Year Plan.

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. You will understand that I am pleased not to have to follow my predecessor’s responsibilities.

As last year’s 70th anniversary celebrations proved, the NHS is one of this country’s proudest achievements. That is clear from the number of people who want to contribute to the debate this evening, so I shall be as brief as I possibly can. The Government’s top funding priority is the NHS. By 2023-24, the NHS budget will increase by £33.9 billion in cash terms, which is the equivalent of £20.5 billion in real terms. This means that in five years’ time the total NHS budget will be £148.5 billion.

In January this year, the NHS published the long-term plan, which sets out the priorities for the next 10 years of the service. The additional funding has given the NHS the stability and certainty it needs to make that plan for the decade ahead. The plan represents a historic moment for patients across the country. It was developed by NHS leaders and clinicians, in consultation with patients and the public, and Members can be assured that it focuses on the biggest priorities for patients in the next decade.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the plan ensure that areas such as mine, which has fast growth and lots of new housing, will receive adequate resources to put in new surgeries and additional capacity, which has not happened in the past?

Stephen Hammond: My right hon. Friend will note that the plan includes the transformation that we will bring to primary care, which will look not only at how primary care will be developed and delivered, but at ensuring that there is enough money to deliver the changes.

The plan sets out a scheme that will provide the best support for patients throughout their lives—from getting the best start in life to being supported into old age. The plan sets out the transformation needed at every level of the health system to ensure that it can continue to provide world-class care. Part of that, as I have just said to my right hon. Friend, is a fundamental shift towards primary care and prevention. The plan will keep people healthy and out of hospital by boosting services closer to home.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): The long-term plan acknowledges that life expectancy continues to improve for the most affluent 10% but has either stalled or fallen for the most deprived 10%. In Sheffield, life expectancy for the most deprived women has fallen by four years over the nine years that this Government have been in power. Does the Minister have any analysis of why life expectancy has fallen for the most deprived women on his watch?

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): Very good question.

Stephen Hammond: I am sure that there will be a number of excellent questions and interventions, but it was a good question. The plan sets out that all local health systems will be expected to outline this year how they will reduce health inequalities by 2023-24, and the intention is that that process will consider exactly the health inequalities that the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) mentions.

Additional money for the primary sector will ensure that funding for primary medical and community health services, such as GPs, nurses and physiotherapists, increases by £4.5 billion in real terms in the next five years. That will mean up to 20,000 extra health professionals working in GP practices, with more trained social prescribing link workers within primary care networks. By 2021, all patients will be offered a digital-first option when accessing primary care. The plan also considers the future of the health system, and the new proposals for integration are the deepest and most sophisticated ever proposed by the NHS.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): The plan recognises that some proposals in the Health and Social Care Act 2012 were made in error when it comes to the transference of powers to public health bodies and local authorities. However, based on my reading of the plan, the omission from that list relates to addiction services. If we are serious about mental health and about improving care and reducing health inequalities in areas such as Sheffield, which was just mentioned, we need to get the commissioning of addiction services right and transfer that back to the NHS. Such services deal with some of the most vulnerable patients, but they are underfunded and failing to treat people, and the taxpayer is paying the price. Patients badly need those services, so will my hon. Friend take the matter up and give it a push?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend makes a good point and urges me to take up the issue, which I will. He is obviously an expert in this field and will know that the Government have asked the NHS to come forward with proposals for legislative reform to support the long-term plan’s ambitions, and I will reflect on his comments in my thinking.

By 2021, every part of the country will be covered by integrated care systems, which will bring together local organisations, including local authorities, to redesign care and improve population health. They will become the driving force for co-ordination and integration across primary and secondary care. Any claim that such reforms
might lead to privatisation are misleading. In fact, the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee said that the proposals “will not extend the scope of NHS privatisation and may effectively do the opposite.”

The NHS will invest more in preventing ill health and stopping health problems getting worse. That includes offering tobacco treatment services to all in-patients and pregnant women who smoke, establishing new alcohol care teams, and offering preventive treatments to more people with high blood pressure and other risk factors for heart disease.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): As my hon. Friend is probably aware, I have a part-time job in which I deal with a preventable disease: caries. In dentistry we spend £34 million to £38 million on this preventable disease. Will he consider looking seriously at how we could persuade local authorities to put fluoride in the water supply to prevent caries?

Stephanie Hammond: My hon. Friend will know that the plan has much on prevention in primary care and public health. I offer to meet him, and I will listen carefully. He tempts me down a line that I would rather not go down tonight.

The long-term plan marks a huge step towards parity of esteem between mental and physical health. In the next five years, the budget for mental health services will increase by at least £2.3 billion in real terms. This additional funding will be used to fund a major expansion of mental health services for both children and adults. In addition to piloting four-week waits for children and young people, we will test waiting times for adult and older adult community mental health teams, and clear standards will then be set. Specific waiting times for emergency mental health services will take effect for the first time from 2020 and will be set to align with the equivalent targets for emergency physical health services.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The mental health budget is 10.2% of the current NHS budget. If the overall budget increases, will there be an equivalent rise in the mental health budget? The mental health budget has risen because the overall budget has increased, but the proportion allocated to mental health has not risen. If we are serious about tackling mental health in this country, why is the proportion allocated to mental health not higher?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady will know that, as I said a moment ago, the long-term plan, for the first time, sets a parity between mental health and physical health. The mental health budget will increase by £2.3 billion by 2023-24.

Of course, everything we have been talking about here needs to be supported by new innovations and new technology. Patients can expect a radical reshaping of how the NHS delivers its healthcare using technology, so that services and users can benefit from the opportunities of advances in digital technologies. That includes making care safer, enabling earlier diagnosis and giving more independence to those managing different health conditions.

Additionally, it is vital that we build a more innovative NHS, which will help patients to be among the first in the world to benefit from life-changing new technologies. Last year, the Secretary of State announced his ambition to sequence 5 million genomes in the next five years, making the NHS the first national healthcare system to offer whole genome sequencing as part of routine care. Most importantly, none of that will be possible without dedicated staff who are properly trained and supported throughout their career. The long-term plan sets out a strategic framework to ensure that over the next 10 years, the NHS will have the staff it needs to ensure that the detailed plan can be implemented. Baroness Harding is leading an inclusive programme of work to set out a detailed workforce implementation plan, which will be published in the spring, but the plan is not about numbers.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): On the future workforce, I thank the Government for investing in our new medical schools. We are enormously proud of the new medical school in Chelmsford, which is training 100 doctors a year—I understand it is 12 times oversubscribed for next year. I am also pleased to hear that nursing numbers are up, but what will the Government do to target support at areas such as mental health nursing and adult nursing, where we have seen numbers drop?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend is right that we need targeted support, which is why we have looked not only at increasing the recruitment of nurses but at the retention packages that might be offered, particularly for certain specialties—she mentioned mental health nurses. We have looked at the possibility of issuing golden hellos, and we have looked at targeted support for childcare and travel.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): My hon. Friend has been generous in giving way. I welcome the workforce implementation plan, and I welcome the fact that Baroness Harding, the chair of NHS Improvement, will be taking this work forward. Will my hon. Friend ensure that Baroness Harding looks at the retention of senior, experienced general practitioners under the general practice forward view? That issue has been raised in a number of areas. We are losing too many of them too early in their career, and the situation is similar with experienced consultants in our hospitals. A contributing factor is the annual allowance for pension contributions, where tax payments take away the extra gross income staff receive as they progress through their later years. Will my hon. Friend pick that up with the Treasury?

Stephen Hammond: I have listened carefully to my right hon. Friend’s intervention, and he will be pleased to know that discussions with the Treasury are ongoing about certain potential incentives to senior serving staff.

The plan is not just about numbers; it focuses on getting the right people with the right skills in the right place, ensuring that our dedicated staff are supported, valued and empowered to do their best. It has clear commitments to tackle bullying, discrimination and violence, and a programme of work to sustain the physical and mental health of staff who work under pressure every day and every night.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): All good policies should be evidence-based, so let me ask the Minister about the national cancer advisory group, which prepares
an annual report detailing the progress of the cancer strategy each year. That report was expected in October/November but it has been delayed. When will it be published? It may well inform the work of the 10-year plan.

**Stephen Hammond:** The publication date has not yet been finalised. I understand that it will be soon, but I will write to the hon. Gentleman to confirm the date of publication.

Through the long-term plan, we will ensure that the NHS continues to strive to be a world leader. It will continue to push the boundaries between health and social care, and between prevention and cure. It will be at the cutting edge of technology and innovation, while providing high-quality service for all patients. More importantly, it will always be there in our hour of need, free at the point of use and based on clinical need, not on the ability to pay. I commend the long-term plan to the House.

**6.6 pm**

**Jonathan Ashworth** (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his brevity. I am sure the House will appreciate the way in which he both took a number of interventions and made his remarks speedily. I will endeavour to copy him. [**Hon. Members:** “Hear, hear.”]

I start where the Minister almost concluded, by thanking NHS staff for the work they do day in, day out. He is a relatively new Minister to the post—so new that you have given him a different surname, Madam Deputy Speaker, but we will gloss over that. He inherits his portfolio after a time in which the NHS has suffered the most severe financial squeeze in its 70-year history. At one point under the Conservatives’ spending plans for national health services the money was set to fall on a head-for-head basis, although they have now revised the spending plans. Because of that financial squeeze over many years, he inherits a portfolio where 4.3 million people are on waiting lists and 2,237 people are waiting more than 12 months for treatment, more than 2.9 million people waited more than four hours in an accident and emergency department, and nearly 27,000 people wait two months for cancer treatment. The 18-week referral to treatment target has not been met since February 2016, the cancer target has not been met since December 2015, the diagnostic target has not been met since November 2013, and the A&E target has not been met since July 2015. Those targets are all enshrined in the NHS constitution and in statute, and they were routinely delivered under the last Labour Government. Under this Government, they have, in effect, been abandoned.

**Gloria De Piero** (Ashfield) (Lab): People in my constituency have to wait longer than most people in the country for a GP appointment: 23% waited more than two weeks; and 15% waited more than three weeks. Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the many brilliant things the last Labour Government did was introduce the 48-hour target to see a GP?

**Jonathan Ashworth:** The last Labour Government put record investment into the NHS, which was voted against every step of the way by the Conservatives. That Labour Government delivered some of the best waiting times on record and some of the highest satisfaction ratings, and they increased access to GPs in constituencies such as Ashfield.

The A&E standard is important not only for patients waiting in an overcrowded A&E but because it tells us much about flow through a hospital. Last week we had the worst A&E performance data since records began, with just 76.1% of those attending type 1 A&E seen, discharged or admitted to a ward in four hours. Behind the statistics are stories of patients left waiting in pain and distress and of the elderly languishing on trolleys. In fact, we have had 618,000 trolley waits in the past year. Patients have been waiting without dignity, at risk of cross-infection. There is no road map at all in the long-term plan to restoring access standards. Of course, the A&E standard is being revised in the long-term plan, even though the Royal College of Emergency Medicine has said:

“In our expert opinion scrapping the four-hour target will have a near catastrophic impact on patient safety in many Emergency Departments that are already struggling to deliver safe patient care in a wider system that is failing badly.”

I hope that when the review reports we can have a full debate in the House.

**Dr Poulter:** The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the Blair Government’s injection of cash into the NHS and the meaningful difference that that made to many patients’ lives. On the waiting-time targets, if we are serious about parity for mental health and physical health, we should reflect on the fact that historically there have not been access targets for mental health of anywhere near the same standards that there are for physical health. Will the hon. Gentleman join me in urging a rethink of that and a much greater push for access targets for mental health services as a way to raise standards and improve the time within which patients get care?

**Jonathan Ashworth:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. There are elements of the long-term plan that we welcome, including the access targets for mental health. We also welcome the commitment to save 400,000 lives, although there is no detail in the plan about how those lives are going to be saved. We welcome the rolling out of early cancer diagnostic and testing centres—after all, it is a policy that I announced in the 2017 general election campaign. We welcome the roll-out of alcohol care teams in hospitals—a policy that I announced at the Labour party conference last year. We welcome the commitments on perinatal mental health—again, a policy that we announced previously. We welcome the commitment for preferential funding allocated to mental health services—another policy that the Labour Opposition previously announced—but we will need to study the details carefully, as the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) said.

The points about mental health from the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) were well made, because currently three in four children with a diagnosable mental health condition do not get access to the support they need. Child and adolescent mental health services are turning away more than a quarter of the children referred to them for treatment by parents, GPs, teachers and others. That is quite
disgraceful, so I hope the extra investment in mental health services reaches the frontline quickly, and I hope that in summing up the debate the Minister will give us more details about when we can expect to see progress on that front.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that for hospitals such as Southmead Hospital in my constituency, which is one of the largest hospitals in Europe, frontline delivery requires a workforce that is able to meet the demand? Does he therefore agree with the comments from the King’s Fund, which says that the Government not only failed the test on the workforce but did not even turn up for the exam?

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I will come on to discuss the workforce in a few moments. First, let me pick up the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh).

There is recognition in the plan that widening health inequalities are becoming a more important issue, which we need to confront. There is much in the document about widening health inequalities. After years of austerity, with poverty rates increasing and child poverty at 4.1 million, we now see life expectancy in this country stalling for the first time in a hundred years, and actually going backward in the poorest parts of the country. Child mortality rates for children born into the most deprived circumstances have increased. The truth is that poorer people get sicker and die earlier. For me, as a socialist and a Labour politician, that is shameful. We should be creating conditions in which people live longer, healthier, happier lives, which is why we need to end austerity across the board. The focus on health inequalities is therefore welcome, and that includes the stark recognition that inequalities are costing the NHS £4.8 billion a year in admissions—a remarkable figure.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I concur on the benefits of our Labour health policy and how the Government should do much more to fund healthcare in this country. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a particular problem of retaining public sector workers in many high-cost areas? In areas such as Reading and Oxford—my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) is sitting in front of me—there is severe pressure on the NHS because of the relatively low pay of many skilled staff.

Jonathan Ashworth: Absolutely. I will come on to the workforce in a second.

Overall, there are welcome commitments in the long-term plan. We have counted up to 60 commitments to improve, expand or establish new services, but sadly there is no detail on how they will be delivered. There are commitments to expanding access to general practice, but where is the plan to recruit the workforce we need in the national health service?

When the previous Secretary of State came to the House last June, he said that there would be a full workforce plan—not an interim plan shared by Dido Harding, but a full workforce plan to coincide with this long-term plan.

Hon. Members: Where is it?

Jonathan Ashworth: It has been delayed. There are no details about training budgets, because the Department has to wait for the spending review. We have 100,000 vacancies across the national health service, with think-tanks warning that we will have 250,000 vacancies unless we do something. We cannot wait for this workforce plan; we need action now.

Also missing from the long-term plan is any serious investment in public health services—this is picking up on another point that the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich made. Public health services are being cut again this financial year under this Government. When we take into account the cuts to public health services, the cuts to infrastructure, and the cuts to training, there is actually a £1 billion cut to health spending this year. The cuts to public health are equivalent to 1,600 fewer health visitors, 1,700 fewer school nurses, and 3,000 fewer drug workers. They mean that our constituents become sicker and demands on the wider NHS become greater. Drug and alcohol services will be cut by £34 million this year, even though the unmet need for treatment for alcohol problems has risen to 600,000 and admissions to hospital where alcohol is a primary factor have increased by 30%.

Also cut are smoking cessation services and obesity services. Cuts to health visitors and early years initiatives correlate with a fall in vaccination rates. Admissions to hospital for whooping cough are up by 59%. There have been deep cuts to sexual health services at a time when infections such as syphilis and gonorrhoea are increasing. These cuts to sexual health services are having an impact on women’s reproductiv health, with experts expressing concerns that the use of long-acting reversible contraception is decreasing. Abortion rates among the over-30s are increasing and 8 million women live in areas where funding for contraception has decreased.

Let me read the House a quick extract from the Health Committee involving my friend—I will still call her my friend—the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger). I am desperately sad that she felt that she had to leave the Labour party. I hope that the Labour party will get on top of this antisemitism issue. At the Health Committee, she asked about the health consequences of delays in accessing sexual health services. In responding, Dr Olwen Williams from the British Association for Sexual Health and HIV said:

“We are seeing neonatal syphilis for the first time in decades and neonatal deaths due to syphilis in the UK... We are seeing an increase in women presenting with infectious syphilis in pregnancy, and that has dire outcomes.”

These public health cuts were endorsed, not reversed, in the long-term plan.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con) rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: I will give way for the final time.

Paul Scully: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He talked about a few different topics, but I think that I heard him say that there was an overall cut in the health service—I think he did so when he was welcoming some of the Government’s measures. In the 2017 manifesto, Labour committed to a 2.2% increase, whereas this Government committed to a 3.4% increase, so I hope that he welcomes that increase as well.
Jonathan Ashworth: We committed more in our 2017 manifesto than the Tory party did in the manifesto on which the hon. Gentleman fought the election. The Tory party revised its spending plans because of pressure from the Labour Opposition. [Interruption.] Madam Deputy Speaker wants me to hurry up.

The final point that I want to make is this: the most intriguing part of the long-term plan is the remark that the Health and Social Care Act has created a complete mess, hindering integration; and it proposes scrapping the so-called section 75 provisions. We do not want to say, “We told you so,” but we did tell them so, and Tory MPs should apologise for voting to pass the Lansley Act. If they are going to support NHS England’s call to get rid of the section 75 arrangements, which put through a proposed privatisation, why do they not block the £128 million-worth of contracts that are currently out to tender? If they do not, it will be clear that the Tory party is still committed to privatisation in the national health service.

The truth is, the Tories have spent nearly nine years running down the NHS, refusing to give it the spending that it needs. They are privatising it still; there will be a £1 billion cut to the NHS this year. It is Labour who will rebuild the national health service.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this important debate. I welcome the 10-year plan, especially the emphasis on delivering care closer to home.

The future of the NHS is the greatest concern to my constituents in Telford because local health bosses have been deliberating for the past five years on whether to move our A&E and our women and children’s services out of the borough, in a project that they have named NHS Future Fit. On 29 January 2019, local health bosses announced that they will indeed remove those services and transfer them 19 miles away, to the other side of Shrewsbury, and that they plan to create in addition a new “super-hospital” on the same site. The project will cost a record £312 million.

My opposition to that project has been long-standing, because it does not meet local people’s needs. It does not improve health outcomes and it does not focus on narrowing health inequalities. I believe that if local hospital management understood the people of Telford better, they would not have come up with this plan. Telford is a rapidly growing new town—people are coming to live there all the time—and it has pockets of significant deprivation. By any measure, it fares significantly worse when it comes to health outcomes, life expectancy and the number of children living in low-income families than does Shropshire, which fares better than England’s average on measures of deprivation.

There are some very important points that we must consider when making a transfer of assets from an area of need to an area of affluence, because such an action is wholly inconsistent with the ethos and obligations of the NHS. Some have called my opposition parochial and territorial, and said that if I understood the plans, I might view them in a different light. But as a former non-executive director of a hospital trust, and as someone who has been working with constantly changing senior executives in the local hospital trust and engaging in the details of this plan since its inception in 2013, my opposition is based on an understanding of the healthcare landscape and local need.

We must ask these questions. Does this scheme meet the needs of local people? Is there any evidence that health outcomes will be improved? Is there any evidence that we will narrow health inequalities? Will out-of-hospital care make up for a reduction in planned medical beds and hospital staff? Put simply, the scheme may look good on paper, but will it work in Shropshire?

I have asked the Minister to call in the scheme for review, and I very much hope that he does.

6.23 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I welcome the principle of the long-term plan, as it certainly makes things easier for those who are running the health service, particularly after over eight years of real-terms cuts over the term of the last three Governments. It is trumpeted that there will be £20 billion extra by 2023-24, but that is still quite some time away, and on an annual basis that is 3.4% uplift. That is better than the real-terms cuts but less than what the NHS got in every year from its inception to 2010—and actually less than the 3.6% promised by the Prime Minister last August. It shows little recognition of growing demand and it should be considered per capita. In Scotland, we spend £163 per head more on health than is allocated in England. It is unfair to have just an overall figure and not recognise the growing demand on those services. It again focuses all the money on NHS England, basically to make it sound good, with cuts for public health and insufficient funding for training and for capital projects, and again insufficient funding for social care.

Social care will get a 2.9% increase, but it is estimated that the pressures are growing, at nearly 4%, and it cannot meet unmet need. Age UK estimates that 1.2 million people across the UK are not getting the care they need. In England, although need has almost doubled since 2010, the number of local authority-funded patients is down by over a quarter.

In Scotland, we have allocated £113 more per head for elderly care, which allows us to provide free personal care and keep people in their own homes for as long as possible. If they can stay in their own homes, rather than in hospitals or even in care homes, that is more cost-effective. We are still waiting for the Green Paper on adult social care—I seem to have been hearing about it almost since I was first elected.

The Secretary of State talks about the prevention agenda, and how prevention is better than cure, but public health funding will be cut by £200 million, and that comes on top of the £500 million cut it has already faced since 2014-15. The hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) mentioned alcohol and addiction services, and we have heard about cuts to sexual health services. The long-term plan talks about reducing the burden of cancer, but it makes no mention of cuts to smoking cessation services, or of an obesity strategy that does something to stop junk food being advertised to children on television before 9 pm.

The Secretary of State has mentioned the “making every contact count” approach, which has been in place for most of my career. When I am dealing with a breast cancer patient, I always get them to promise me that
they will come back, once we have got through the stress of their treatment, and that they and their partner will commit to giving up smoking, but I cannot deliver their smoking cessation; I still need a service that I can refer them to, such as Fresh Air-shire, where they will get support to achieve it.

As has been mentioned, the biggest challenge of all is workforce. It runs right through the long-term plan, which will not be deliverable unless the workforce challenge is dealt with. NHS England faces 100,000 vacancies, including 41,000 nursing vacancies, yet Health Education England is not facing an uplift in its funding and has previously faced a real-terms cut. The Minister talked about the move to community nursing, but there is a 50% cut in district nurses, and in 2021 none will graduate because the course is being lengthened. That will not support moving services into the community.

The nurse vacancy rate is 11.6% in England, which is more than twice the rate in Scotland. Indeed, Scotland has already reached what is supposedly the target for NHS England by 2028. In fact, the Royal College of Nursing estimates that in the next 10 years vacancies will grow to 48,000. That creates more stress on staff, encourages more people to leave, reduces quality of care and increases waiting times.

It is absolutely critical to tackle that, but what do we have? We have the removal of the nursing bursary and the introduction of tuition fees. We did not do that in Scotland, which is why we have a 14% increase in the number of students starting degree courses. In England the number is actually down by 4%. The Minister might well respond by talking about apprenticeships, but only 300 of those were taken up in 2017-18, instead of the thousands that were trailed, so they will not replace the drop of 900 in degree students. That means the Government are simply not producing enough nurses ever to fill the 41,000 vacancy rate. With a 90% drop in those coming from the EU, that will only get worse.

The Secretary of State loves to talk about digital. I have to say that I think he has a bit of an obsession with replacing GPs with apps. As a surgeon, I cannot promise that rubbing a mobile phone over the belly will diagnose appendicitis, so good luck with the app. But there are parts of the NHS where digital could really help. In Scotland, we have a system called PACS—the picture archiving and communications system—which allows radiologists elsewhere in the country to look at images. We have electronic prescribing, which saves time and effort as well as being a safety action, because we cannot prescribe a drug that the patient is allergic to, and it will pick up interactions. Electronic records make cancer pathways easier.

The Government’s response is integration and I have supported that on many occasions in the Chamber. However, it is important how it is done. The NHS in England has gone round and round the loop of reorganisation. It is critical that those integrated care systems have a statutory body at the top and that section 75 of the Health and Social Care Act 2012 is repealed to stop forcing the outsourcing of contracts. Tariffs also need to be tackled. Tariffs reward hospitals for admitting, when it is important that people are treated in the community.

We will make a difference only when the Government take a “health in all policies” approach. Poverty is the biggest driver of ill health, so stopping the welfare cuts would be a good start.

6.30 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I welcome the Government’s commitment to the 10-year plan and I commend Ministers for the way in which they have presented it. I also welcome the way in which the additional funding will provide a strong foundation for transforming the NHS and healthcare services across our communities.

One of the key challenges the NHS faces is how better to deliver primary care and integrate services locally and at a community level. Of course, the NHS must also meet growing demand and changing demographics.

The Minister will know that in my constituency, there is considerable population growth. The town of Witham is set to grow by 20%, but our healthcare services are naturally unable to keep up with that growth and demand. Among the four practices in Witham town, the patient-GP ratio is a staggering 2,500:1, which is 50% more than the national average. In other, more rural parts of my constituency, the ratio is 3,400:1. We all know about the pressures of growing demand. All hon. Members will have constituents who contact them when they struggle to get local appointments.

It is therefore right that the plan looks to a rethink on how to deliver primary care, for example, through bringing new partners on board, integrating services, including mental health services and other aspects of local delivery, and providing more of a one-stop shop for assessments, minor treatments and community services. The Minister will know about my campaign in Witham town to secure a new healthcare centre.

Importantly, the plan describes how it will improve outcomes for patients. No Member should lose sight of that. The plan includes reducing pressure on acute hospitals, integrating health, social care, and mental health and wellbeing services.

For my constituents, the litmus test of the plan is naturally the delivery of a new facility in Witham town. We must also ensure that the money will encourage better collaboration and investment in services, and improve the NHS in all our communities.

6.32 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): A couple of weeks ago in the train station café in Hartlepool, a constituent told me that her husband had stood outside their local GP practice for two hours to get her an emergency appointment, only to be told that there were none that day. That is not an uncommon occurrence in Hartlepool, where it is becoming increasingly difficult to access a GP. That is not the fault of GPs or practices, but a consequence of placing too great a burden on GPs over running clinical commissioning groups, and a fall in GP numbers.

The Government are calling for a major expansion of primary care and community services, saying that that is central to reducing the burden on hospitals and that they intend to introduce new 24/7 rapid response teams. Although we are making great strides in Hartlepool in
I turn briefly to heart disease. Heart and circulatory disease still causes a quarter of all deaths in the UK. On average, it kills one person every three minutes or 420 people each day. The number of people living with heart and circulatory disease also remains high, at 5.9 million people across England, and there are over 42,000 premature deaths from cardiovascular disease each year in the UK.

I am delighted to see that the NHS long-term plan has a renewed focus on the prevention and early detection of the risk factors for heart and circulatory diseases. Four in 10 adults with high blood pressure remain undiagnosed, and it is estimated that one in five of those who have been diagnosed are not being optimally treated. By identifying more people who have these conditions, we can help to manage their risk and save more money and, of course, crucially, lives.

I welcome the work that the voluntary sector does in supporting the NHS, and I am grateful to the Government for investing £20.5 billion more each year for the next five years in this very important service.

6.38 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me in this debate. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith). I declare an interest as one of the vice-chairs of the all-party group on radiotherapy, and as a cancer survivor who was successfully treated with both chemotherapy and radiotherapy, thanks to an early diagnosis.

About one in four people receives some form of radiotherapy during their lives, and almost half of us in the UK will be diagnosed with cancer at some point in our lifetimes. These stark facts will I hope remind the Government of just how important it is that we invest in modern and accessible cancer diagnosis and treatments. In the brief time I have, I want to talk about chapter 3 of “The Long Term NHS Plan”, particularly section 3.62 on more precise treatments using advanced radiotherapy techniques.

On investment, the Government have promised to complete the £130 million investment in radiotherapy machines and to commission the proton beam machines at University College Hospital in London and the Christie Hospital in Manchester. However, I must respectfully point out to the Minister that that simply recycles announcements that have already been made, so this is not a comprehensive 10-year plan for radiotherapy.

As set out in the APPG’s “Manifesto for Radiotherapy”, far more is needed over the next 10 years. We need an initial investment of £250 million and then an ongoing investment of £100 million each year. Reannouncing previous expenditure commitments falls far short of what is required and will not meet the stated objective, mentioned by other Members, of improving cancer patient outcomes through improved survival rates.

Although it is needed in over 50% of cases, access to advanced radiotherapy in England is very patchy, varying from 25% to 49%, depending on the region. It is far worse in some regions—in the south-west and in the Westmorland and Lonsdale constituency, the average is about 38%. Ideally, patients should not have to travel more than 45 minutes to access this form of treatment. Considerable additional investment will be required to
achieve that. At the moment, there is nothing specific in the plan to address that serious issue. The Government say they will increase the diagnosis of patients with stage 1 and stage 2 cancers. Again, we need more investment to do that.

I encourage all Members of the House, and indeed the Minister, to read the “Manifesto for Radiotherapy”, which highlights the importance and the important benefits of increasing the percentage spend on radiotherapy.

Several hon. Members rose—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):**
Order. The winding-up speeches will start at 10 to seven. If people take less than three minutes, it will help others.

6.41 pm

**Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): If we are asking the NHS to be speedy and agile, I am sure we in the House can be.

I am glad to stand here today to talk about the great British institution that is the NHS and about how we can improve and protect it under this plan. Of course, we need to constantly transform and improve the NHS as our population grows and ages, and as treatment costs soar as we discover new but ever more expensive ways to treat previously untreatable diseases.

In Worcestershire, our acute hospitals are under immense pressure, with 10,500 A&E visits in January alone and an overnight bed occupancy rate of 93.7%. That fits into a wider national trend, with a 28% increase in hospital admissions over the past decade and an NHS in England that deals with 1.4 million patients every 24 hours.

That is where the 10-year plan really comes in, with a £20.5 million cash increase, funding for primary and community care increasing by £4.5 billion a year by 2023-24 and an ambitious target to make sure that, in 10 years’ time, 55,000 more people will survive cancer each year. My ask of the Minister is that, as we increase this funding, Worcestershire also gets its fair share.

Of course, it is not all about hospitals and it is not all about funding, so I welcome the renewed focus on prevention, which we all need to take some personal responsibility for, as do the food and drink manufacturers and the advertisers. I also welcome the renewed focus on mental health and the parity of mental health. The £2.3 billion in extra funding will give 350,000 more children and 370,000 more adults the support they so desperately need.

In contrast to the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), I welcome all the changes we will have as a result of digital and technology investment, which is meant not to replace humans, but to enhance their productivity. That is a fantastic improvement, which we should all welcome.

I will keep my comments short. I have further comments to make, but I am sure I can write to the Minister. I am confident that, as always, he will respond. I really welcome these plans and the focus today.

6.43 pm

**Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): In May 2018, I introduced my private Member’s Bill on palliative care. Investment in palliative care will help save the NHS billions. While the long-term plan deals with some aspects of end-of-life care, it does not go far enough. There is still a postcode lottery when it comes to hospice funding, with some areas getting up to 50% of their funding from clinical commissioning groups, while other areas get as little as 1%.

We will all be living longer, so it is vital that we put in place proper funding for hospices and end-of-life care. I am very lucky to have North London Hospice’s health and wellbeing centre in my constituency. It provides excellent services for users, but I am still staggered that it has to constantly fundraise to keep them going. These services are vital and should not be dependent on people’s charity. I ask the Minister to commit to making all clinical commissioning groups assess the need for palliative care in their area and provide funds accordingly to meet that need.

Another area where we need additional investment is the NHS workforce. To address the anticipated rise in cancer, with the rise in life expectancy, the Government need to ensure that measures are in place to deal with training, recruitment and retention of staff. Macmillan Cancer Support states that currently 2.5 million people in the UK are living with cancer. That figure is expected to reach 4 million by 2030. That will put huge pressure on the NHS cancer workforce in the foreseeable future.

There is a particular concern about breast cancer specialists. For every three breast radiographers who retire over the next five years, only two are expected to replace them. Breast Cancer Now has called on the Government to invest £39 million in recruitment for the breast imaging and diagnostic workforce, as part of the plan to cover the cost of training to fill clinical radiologist vacancies and to address the current shortfall of radiographers. The problem is being compounded by the delay in the production of phase 2 of the cancer workforce plan, which should be an integral part of the long-term plan. Health Education England must produce phase 2 of the cancer workforce plan, which looks at how many staff are needed to meet growing patient demand. That can then be set out in the 10-year cancer workforce strategy.

Unless the Government get workforce planning right, I have serious concerns that patients will suffer. I urge the Minister to take action to deal with these matters urgently.

6.46 pm

**Will Quince** (Colchester) (Con): Colchester Hospital has always been a good hospital, with caring compassionate staff. It has not been without its difficulties—it was in special measures from 2013 to 2017—but I am pleased to report that our hospital has turned a corner. It took hard work, determination and passion to get Colchester Hospital out of special measures, and I must pay tribute to all those who made it happen: the doctors, nurses, healthcare assistants, porters, cleaners, administrators and managers. In particular, I would like to praise Nick Hulme, the chief executive, who displayed incredible leadership in helping to change the culture of the
organisation, moving the emphasis away from getting out of special measures and instead simply concentrating on improving care.

The future of our hospital looks really bright. We have a merger with Ipswich Hospital creating resilience in the organisation, a world-class radiotherapy centre and a new imaging centre—the first of its kind in the country. It is now one of the best-performing hospitals for delivering the A&E four-hour standards. It is one of the best in the east of England for ambulance handovers and we have one of the lowest nurse vacancies for years. Staff want to come and work in Colchester, and that is fantastic.

As for the future, a new cancer centre is being built. I would like to thank all the kind donors and members of the public in Colchester and beyond who are helping to fund it. We still have about £200,000 to go, so I encourage people to support CoHoC, the Colchester Hospitals charity. The merger with Ipswich will create economies of scale and the potential for specialism and resilience. It will make our hospital trust more attractive to current staff as well as for recruitment. I thank the Minister for the £35 million of capital investment, the largest and most significant investment in decades. That will see an open, modern spacious entrance, and additional space in our A&E and urgent care centre. The key to the future of Colchester hospital is investment in primary care. We want fewer people having to go to our hospitals. Instead, we want them to be treated locally at super GP practices.

Finally, we want to see real and demonstrable improvements in primary care, not just richer GPs. We want to make sure that we are not taking staff from our hospitals and ambulance service, but bringing new people into our NHS. Otherwise, that will be counterproductive.

6.48 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I shall be very brief and make one point.

I am pleased that this Government have seen the light. Whereas previous Governments made mistakes in going for large-scale reorganisations, this Government seem to have learned from them and I am very pleased about that. The problem is that trusts now seem to have turned local community hospitals into enclaves, which are really important to rural areas? It is vital that we see them play an integral part in our NHS.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) spoke about the importance of improving GP access—something we can all relate to—and the importance of mental health, a big driver of the 10-year plan. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) made important points about threats to services in his constituency, and we heard such points across the Chamber. I was particularly pleased to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Easting (Grahame Morris), who, of course, speaks about cancer treatment from personal experience. He rightly pointed out the deficiencies in the 10-year plan in relation to that. My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) was absolutely right to highlight the postcode lottery in palliative care. As with other areas such as neonatal care and IVF, it varies depending on where in the country someone lives. He also made a very important point about the cancer workforce.

I want to say a few words about the workforce. In recognising their invaluable work, which we thank them for, we also recognise—we on the Labour Benches do, at least—that without a fully staffed, respected and motivated workforce, the NHS would simply not be able to deliver the service that our constituents deserve. Last June, there was at last some Government recognition of the importance of the workforce, when the 10-year plan was announced. The then Health Secretary—now the Foreign Secretary—said:

“Alongside the 10-year plan, we will also publish a long-term workforce plan recognising that there can be no transformation without the right number of staff, in the right settings and with the right skills.”—[Official Report, 18 June 2018; Vol. 643, c. 52.]

We now know, however, that the workforce plan will not be with us until some time later this year, so is it not the case that without a workforce plan, we simply do not know how much of the 10-year plan is achievable?

As we know, the House of Lords Committee on the Long-term Sustainability of the NHS said that the lack of a workforce strategy “represents the biggest internal threat to the sustainability of the NHS”.

Amazingly, the 10-year plan makes no reference to the actual numbers of staff expected to be employed during this period, so I put in a written question to the Minister about how many staff the NHS expects to employ by the end of the period covered by the 10-year plan. I was told in response:

“The Department does not hold the data requested.”

So there we have it in black and white: the Government do not have a clue.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Does that not just underline the fact this evening’s debate has been so ridiculously short on such an important subject? We need more time; we need another debate.

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. Of course, we were not actually meant to be here at all this week, but it is absolutely right that this debate took place tonight. We need another one and we will very shortly need a debate on the social care Green
Paper, when that is published. We also need a debate on what we are going to do about some of the legislative changes that the Government have promised, because all these things need to take place in the public eye.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that we also need a debate on privatisation, given that we are seeing no public consultation on very significant changes, such as what is purported to happen to the PET—positron emission tomography—scan centre at Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, causing a huge amount of local concern?

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. She is absolutely right. The Secretary of State has said on the record that he wants to stop privatisation, but we have identified a number of very important contracts lasting many years and costing millions of pounds that should be halted if the Government are going to stick to their word. It has not happened and it should.

The timetable for the publication of the plan has itself not gone to plan. Again, when the Foreign Secretary was Health Secretary, he said: “we now intend to publish the social care Green Paper in the autumn around the same time as the NHS plan.”

I am not sure which autumn he was talking about for the social care Green Paper, but the intention was right, because, as he also said: “It is not possible to have a plan for one sector without...a plan for the other”—[Official Report, 18 June 2018; Vol. 643, c. 52.]

but here we are.

In conclusion, whatever fine words, gimmicks and spin we have in the 10-year plan, we know that the reality is that the NHS is on its knees and that it cannot survive another decade of Tory Government. It is time for Labour to come to the rescue again.

6.54 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): I thank hon. Members from across the House for their contributions to this debate. It is clear there is agreement on the importance and value we place on our national health service. That is why the long-term plan is such a historic moment for the public, for patients and, of course, for the staff who work tirelessly to make our NHS one of the most enduring British success stories.

I will try to respond to as many of the speakers as possible, but I agree we need a much longer debate to fully do justice to this important subject. It has been quite a collegiate debate, with Back Benchers from across the House having welcomed many of the promises in the long-term plan, although not so much the shadow Front-Bench team, whose attitude I will quickly sum up: they do not like it unless they thought of it first, and we are not putting in enough money, although considerably more than they promised in their 2017 manifesto until they did a back-of-the-fag-packet recalculation. Why can they not celebrate our NHS? Why can they not attend to this debate. It is clear there is agreement on the importance and value we place on our national health service. That is why the long-term plan is such a historic moment for the public, for patients and, of course, for the staff who work tirelessly to make our NHS one of the most enduring British success stories.

I will try to respond to as many of the speakers as possible, but I agree we need a much longer debate to fully do justice to this important subject. It has been quite a collegiate debate, with Back Benchers from across the House having welcomed many of the promises in the long-term plan, although not so much the shadow Front-Bench team, whose attitude I will quickly sum up: they do not like it unless they thought of it first, and we are not putting in enough money, although considerably more than they promised in their 2017 manifesto until they did a back-of-the-fag-packet recalculation. Why can they not celebrate our NHS? Why can they not attend to the fact that the Government are making the single biggest cash investment in our NHS in its history? Some will question, of course, whether the funding is enough for the health service to implement this vital transformation, but I remind them that this is a fully costed plan developed by NHS leaders and clinicians within the budget agreed by the NHS and with the Government.

We must also remember that the future of the NHS is not just about the additional £33.9 billion cash injection by 2023-24; it is about spending every single penny of taxpayers’ money wisely—in five years’ time the NHS budget will be £148.5 billion—which is important because our NHS is under more pressure than ever before. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) said, demand on A&E from type I attendances was 6.8% higher this January than last January—that is 2,700 more people through the doors every single day.

Of course, publishing one document will not translate all the long-term plan’s objectives into reality, which is why the NHS will develop a clear implementation framework by the spring to set out how the commitments should be delivered by local systems and ensure transparency for patients and the public. It is also why the Secretary of State has commissioned Baroness Harding, working closely with Sir David Behan, to lead a number of programmes to develop a detailed workforce implementation plan. The first stage of that will be revealed in the spring, and the rest will come forward in the autumn.

A key focus of the long-term plan is the importance of improving the patient experience, safety and flow through hospitals. The plan will support the reform of urgent and emergency care services to ensure that patients get the care they need quickly, relieve pressure on A&E departments and manage winter demands. Improving out-of-hospital care will ensure that people are treated in the most appropriate setting to avoid unnecessary visits to hospital and support quicker discharge.

Hon. Members spoke about the importance of local provision, community hospitals and local GP services. It is important that these services be decided and led by local NHS organisations that understand the local community healthcare needs, but of course we expect the NHS to work collaboratively to ensure that both urgent and routine care needs are met in a way that ensures the best possible use of NHS resources. Investment in primary and community services will increase by at least £4.5 billion, and spending on these services will grow faster than the rising NHS budget. Funding will be provided for an extra 20,000 other staff working in GP practices.

The long-term plan sets out how we will improve prevention, detection, treatment and recovery in respect of major diseases, including cancer, heart attacks and strokes—hon. Members have mentioned those today. Patients can expect the introduction of new screening programmes, faster access to diagnostic tests and new treatments and the use of technology, such as genomic testing. NHS England is already testing innovative ways of diagnosing cancer earlier, with sites piloting multidisciplinary diagnostic centres for patients with vague or non-specific symptoms, such as those common in blood cancers. The Government have pledged to roll out rapid diagnosis centres nationally to offer all patients a range of tests on the same day with rapid access to results.

Mental health has also been raised. The long-term plan renews the commitment to grow investment in mental health services faster than the NHS budget overall, with at least £2.3 billion in real terms.
The Government’s commitment to the health service is clear and undeniable. Our historic funding settlement has enabled the NHS to create a plan for the future of the system which will benefit patients now and generations to come. We will continue to support this system as it begins to put our plan into practice.

I thank the Members who have spoken this evening, and I will write to those to whose points I was not able to respond. Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the NHS Ten Year Plan.

**Business without Debate**

**SPEAKER’S COMMITTEE FOR THE INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY**

Ordered,

That the Motion in the name of Andrea Leadsom relating to the Speaker’s Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority shall be treated as if it related to an instrument subject to the provisions of Standing Order No. 118 (Delegated Legislation Committees) in respect of which notice has been given that the instrument be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

**DRAFT REGISTRATION OF OVERSEAS ENTITIES BILL (JOINT COMMITTEE)**

Resolved,

That this House concurs with the Lords Message of Tuesday 23 October 2018, that it is expedient that a Joint Committee of Lords and Commons be appointed to consider and report on the Draft Registration of Overseas Entities Bill presented to both Houses on Monday 23 July 2018 (Cm 9635).

Ordered,

That a Select Committee of six Members be appointed to join with a committee to be appointed by the Lords for this purpose;

That the Committee should report on the draft Bill by Friday 10 May 2019;

That the Committee shall have power:

(i) to send for persons, papers and records;

(ii) to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House;

(iii) to report from time to time;

(iv) to appoint specialist advisers; and

(v) to adjourn from place to place within the United Kingdom.

That the quorum of the Committee shall be two; and

That Peter Aldous, Emma Dent Coad, Mark Menzies, Mark Pawsey, Lloyd Russell-Moyle and Alison Thewliss be members of the Committee.—(Rebecca Harris.)

**St Helier and St George’s Hospitals**

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

7 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Let me start by putting on the record my respect and admiration for every single doctor, nurse, clinician and staff member at both St Helier and St George’s hospitals for their outstanding service and dedication to the health and welfare of my constituents. These remarkable individuals go above and beyond, despite facing extraordinarily testing circumstances—nine years of austerity have left our treasured NHS desperately short of staff, services and supplies.

For my constituents, however, the biggest threat to our local hospitals is far closer to home. It is in the wild west of south-west London’s NHS, which is once again pursuing desperate attempts to close all acute services, including the major A&E unit and the consultant-led maternity units at St Helier hospital. The impact that that would have on St George’s hospital, would, I believe, be devastating.

This evening I want to outline the reality behind the latest threat to St Helier, branded “Improving Healthcare Together 2020-2030”. I want to challenge every foundation on which that programme has been built, and I want to appeal to the Minister to step in before we see the decomposition of health services that are vital to my constituents. However, I want to start with some history.

For nearly two decades, the NHS in south-west London has pursued several irresponsible attempts to close the acute health services at St Helier hospital, on the border of my constituency, and move them to leafy, wealthy Belmont in Sutton. Under different titles and brands, and in the guise of countless NHS-funded marketing consultants, the proposal is on repeat, and an estimated £50 million has been wasted on almost identical consultations and programmes. Each one starts afresh, portraying to the public a neutral outlook when it is being decided where acute health services should be placed in south-west London.

The Minister may remember that, back in 2015, secret proposals to close St Helier and build a new super-hospital in Sutton were overheard by a BBC reporter on a train, which brought those plans to an embarrassing end. Fast-forward to 2017 and the programme was repeated, this time entitled “Epsom and St Helier 2020-2030”, and once again professing to assess the pros and cons of where to base acute health services. The public support expressed by chief executive Daniel Elkeles, the man running the programme, for moving the services to Sutton somewhat clouded the neutrality of the process.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Does the hon. Lady not agree that the proposal that immediately preceded this was to close facilities at St Helier and move them to St George’s in Tooting, which was universally unpopular? The proposal that is now on the table, on which I certainly hope there will be a public consultation, refers to one of three sites, and includes a reference to locating a new facility at St Helier hospital.

Siobhain McDonagh: My recollection of that particular consultation was that that was really the scorched earth strategy of deciding that St Helier and Epsom were going to close and St George’s would take the strain. I
thank God that that never happened, because we could be in an extraordinarily difficult position had it ever happened.

I might sound cynical when I talk about the NHS and its bias against my constituency and against services being at St Helier Hospital, but I have been here several times before. A freedom of information request revealed that those running the programme only distributed consultation documents to targeted areas around their preferred site and to just a handful of roads in my constituency. But my constituents care passionately about their local health services and will not be ignored, and 6,000 local residents responded to the programme by calling for St Helier to retain all its services on its current site.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. I sought her permission to intervene beforehand because I am always very interested in health issues, and I am here to support her as well. Centralising the health service means that the ill and the vulnerable and pregnant women are expected to travel for miles to get medical assistance. That is totally absurd.

Siobhain McDonagh: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, but it is about not just distance travelled but who is travelling that distance: do they have access to a car, or do they have public transport? The NHS constitution requires that equalities legislation is taken into account, particularly looking at disadvantaged people who are in poor health and how they access services, because they access services differently.

As I said, my constituents care passionately about local health services, and when they responded to the consultation 6,000 of them sent in cards explaining how they felt and saying that they wanted St Helier to retain all its services on its current site. Can you imagine the anger when I found out that their responses had been discounted by the programme? Why? Because they were not on the official documentation—the same documentation that had been disseminated in those targeted letterboxes far away from my constituency.

To the public, the trust portrayed a neutral stance whereby a suitable site across south-west London would be selected for their acute services. To the stakeholders in Belmont, it confessed its desire to move the services to their wealthy area, and to mine, it pretended that the consultation would genuinely seek the views of the public. But as my mum always says, much gets more. I would like to put on record that while I fundamentally disagree with the desire to take services away from my constituents, I do recognise Mr Elkeles’ hard work and dedication in leading St Helier Hospital.

We now fast-forward to the present day and the latest brand, “Improving Healthcare Together 2020-2030”, a programme built upon the unstable and unscrupulous foundation of its predecessors and that once again considers the pros and cons of moving St Helier Hospital’s acute services 7 miles west to Epsom or south to leafy Belmont in Sutton. The programme was launched last summer—they always choose the summer—undertaking an initial public engagement that is expected to transition to a public consultation this coming summer. But just 837 people responded to the public engagement, and that is including hundreds of NHS staff and 169 comments on Twitter or Facebook. That is an utterly abysmal response considering the £2.2 million of taxpayers’ money squandered on the programme already. Does the Minister agree that this is a complete misuse of taxpayer funds at a time when our NHS is under such overwhelming pressure?

This is about more than just the future of St Helier Hospital. My constituents tell me that if St Helier Hospital were to lose its acute services, they would turn not to Epsom or Sutton but east to Croydon University Hospital or north to St George’s. That is a completely terrifying prospect. Before Christmas, my constituent, Marian, was left queuing outside St George’s Hospital with her left leg badly infected, because the A&E was full. And that was the calm before the storm, with St George’s A&E facing its busiest ever week just a fortnight ago. We all remember the winter crisis last year, but the first full week of February this year was 16% higher than last year’s equivalent, with a simply staggering 600-plus visits every single day. This is a hospital that already relies on St Helier as its safety valve. The maternity unit at St George’s had to close temporarily in 2014 and 2015, directing women who were already in labour to St Helier Hospital.

That is why a letter sent in November from the chair of the St George’s trust to those running the programme is completely astonishing. In the letter, the chair expresses her concern that “there is no formal requirement to take account of the impact on other providers” when deciding where to relocate acute health services across south-west London. It is hard to put into words just how dangerous that disregard is. I should like to pause briefly to thank the chief executive of St George’s Hospital, Jacqueline Totterdell, for her hard work and tenacity in steering one of London’s largest hospitals at a time of such difficulty.

St George’s is a hospital already under immense pressure. The plumbing, ventilation and drainage facilities are at breaking point, leading to a bid for £34 million of emergency capital from the Treasury. Does the Minister agree that at a recent outflow of sewage in the hospital A&E is a clear sign that such emergency funding is justified and, more importantly, urgent? How busy does she think the same A&E would be if the local NHS were to get its way and move St Helier’s major A&E to wealthy, leafy Belmont? Will she step in today and require any proposal on reconfiguring health services to wholeheartedly take into account the impact that such a decision would have on all other nearby health providers?

Merton Council recognises the devastating impact that these proposals could have, and I would like to put on record my thanks to leader of Merton Council, Stephen Alambritis, the cabinet member for social care, councillor Tobin Byers, and the director of community support. It is so disappointing that those at Sutton Council can stand so idly by.

By law, when deciding where acute services should be based across a catchment area of this size, it is fundamental that the level of deprivation and local health needs are accurately understood and thoroughly assessed. So I read from cover to cover the deprivation and equality analysis produced by a range of external consultancy...
services as part of their £1.5 million programme fee. At a time when the NHS is so strapped for cash, it is extraordinary that my local NHS seems to have carte blanche to employ so many consultants on such extraordinary rates. But even I was absolutely astounded by the monumental gaps in the analysis that these consultants have delivered.

In the pieces of analysis on deprivation and equality, areas that rely on St Helier Hospital are either absent from the documents or actively described as falling outside the catchment area. Take Pollards Hill in my constituency, an area that would be considered deprived in comparison with much of Sutton or Epsom. Wide Way Medical Centre is the largest GP surgery there, and it directs 34% of its patients to St Helier Hospital, but Pollards Hill is deemed to be outside St Helier’s catchment area. Why does this matter? Because if areas that rely on St Helier Hospital are not even considered in the analysis, how can the potential impact of moving acute services from the hospital be adequately assessed? Pollard’s Hill is not alone. The report does not mention Lavender Fields despite almost a fifth of Colliers Wood surgery patients and Mitcham family practice patients being directed or referred to St Helier from the ward.

I urgently brought the gaps in the analysis to the attention of those operating the programme and Jane Cummings, the NHS’s chief nursing officer. I was pleased that everyone agreed that such significant analysis shortfalls would be addressed and rectified.

Paul Scully: The hon. Lady is being generous in giving way. Does she agree that Colliers Wood is pretty much smack-bang next to St George’s and that the proposal on which last year’s public engagement was based was that 85% of current patients would still be treated in their current hospital, whether St Helier, the proposed Sutton site or Epsom?

Siobhain McDonagh: There is no reason why the hon. Gentleman should know this, so I am not trying to be tricky, but Colliers Wood surgery is the title of a split-site GP surgery. One site is on Lavender Avenue off Western Road—the hon. Gentleman probably knows Western Road from driving up and down it a lot—in the heart of one of the most deprived areas in my constituency, and many people there go to St Helier hospital. The idea that we could remove an A&E and a maternity unit and keep what is left is complete nonsense, because all the blood and testing facilities and all the talented doctors and nurses simply would not stay there. Chase Farm Hospital, which is in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan), is a wonderful example of such a situation, and Members may want to have a look at it.

I pointed out that areas in my constituency and large surgeries had not been included in the analysis, and I was promised that they would be. However, months have passed, and the process has proceeded unscathed, with no indication of when such significant gaps will be remedied.

The icing on the cake came in December when three behind-closed-doors workshops based on the deficient evidence were run by the programme. They were designed “to inform the Governing Bodies decision making process about how the community and professionals ranked each of the three potential sites for acute hospital services”.

Let me be clear: hand-picked professionals and members of the public used incomplete evidence to rank Sutton as the preferred site for acute services. The Minister will not be surprised to hear that more participants in the workshops were from Sutton than from Merton or Epsom. How can a fair, balanced and rounded opinion be accured from workshops based on flawed evidence and disputable criteria and with an unrepresentative group of people? For the findings to be used in any capacity in the decision-making process would be completely unacceptable.

Of course, I understand that figures and analysis can always be skewed in one direction or another. Someone wanting to disguise the 76.5-year life expectancy of men in Mitcham West in my constituency could include the 84.4-year average in Wimbledon Park and classify the figures by the borough of Merton as a whole. They could count cancer rates, stroke rates, mortality rates by borough rather than by ward or lower super output area. They could ignore deprived parts of the catchment area and proceed full steam ahead with the programme.

When will the gaps in the analysis be completed? When will taxpayers’ money stop being splurged on flawed and biased consultations? When will the madness end? Here is the reality: there are over twice as many people with bad or very bad health within a mile of St Helier than there are living within a mile of the Sutton site, and almost four times the number within a mile of Epsom. Around St Helier, the local population is significantly larger, with considerably more dependent children and more elderly people. Furthermore, the population local to St Helier is far more reliant on public transport, with residents statistically less likely to have access to a car.

Despite all that, when I secured—I can hardly believe it myself—£267 million from the Department of Health and the Treasury under both the Labour Government and the coalition Government to rebuild St Helier Hospital, guess what happened? The local NHS sent the money back. Can the Minister confirm whether the hospital will again receive its funding this time round?

It is time for some accountability and for the Government to step in before even more money is wasted and the future of both St Helier and St George’s is thrown into jeopardy. Leave these vital services where they are most needed: at St Helier Hospital, on its current site.

7.20 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing this incredibly important debate on the future of St Helier and St George’s hospitals. I thank her for her continuing interest in healthcare services in south-west London over many years. She has been a passionate, highly motivated and extremely effective advocate for the interests of her constituents, and I am sure many of the points she has raised today will be heard beyond these four walls.

The hon. Lady is rightly concerned about the future of services at St Helier Hospital, which is run by Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust, and particularly about the future of its A&E service. She is
right that the organisation of acute services in south-west London appears to have been discussed for a number of years. In the interest of time, I will not set out the timescales and all the things that have occurred over that period, as she has already articulated it well.

In June 2018 the clinical commissioning groups published an issues paper, which outlined the challenges faced by the local healthcare system and the four key local aims: improving the health of the population; delivering care as close to patients’ homes as possible; ensuring high standards of healthcare across all providers; and maintaining the provision of major acute services within their combined geographies. The issues paper set out a provisional shortlist, with three potential options for acute care: locating major acute services at Epsom Hospital and continuing to provide all district services at both Epsom and St Helier hospitals; locating major acute services at St Helier Hospital and continuing to provide all district hospital services at both Epsom and St Helier hospitals; or locating major acute services at Sutton Hospital and continuing to provide all district services at both Epsom and St Helier hospitals.

The CCGs invited comments and suggestions from local stakeholders over a period of three months. The CCGs stressed that the proposals do not involve closing any hospital. At this stage, they say, they do not have a preferred local proposal. I understand they are continuing to work with local partners to further develop the proposals, which will include a full options appraisal, an impact assessment and the development of a pre-consultation business case that will, of course, have to undergo NHS England assurance. I am sure the hon. Lady will make her thoughts known to NHS England.

Paul Scully: Does my hon. Friend agree that one thing many people in Sutton and Merton do not have, because St Helier is such an old hospital, is a possible £400 million brand-new facility, which would bring benefits no matter where it is located?

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and that is why it is important that no significant changes are made without consultation so that local people’s views can be taken into consideration. The CCGs will need to consult the public fully before making any decisions about a new hospital or changes to the configuration of acute services, but clearly any form of investment is welcome.

Siobhain McDonagh: Lists of NHS capital programmes in London have appeared in various newspapers, with Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust at the top of those lists—Charing Cross and other hospitals are in that group. St George’s is desperate. Sewage came through the sinks and toilets in its A&E only a few weeks ago. It is not sure whether the electrics are going down, or whether the plumbing, the water and the water systems have caused considerable health problems to patients. Who is getting the money? Is it all going to south London? It would certainly all have to go to south London if there were to be a brand-new hospital anywhere.

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady asks an excellent question. The CCGs are working closely with NHS England and NHS Improvement to develop the programme’s capital scheme prior to the next spending review, with a view to NHS England and NHS Improvement presenting the scheme for funding. They expect the public consultation on their proposals not to take place until after the next round of capital bids is concluded, which is likely to be after the autumn. There is a duty to carry out a travel times analysis when developing proposals, and this will be included in the consultation. CCGs also have duties to reduce inequalities. She spoke a lot about the inequalities in her area, and an impact analysis of that has to be done.

I understand that the hon. Lady is also concerned that any potential changes could increase pressure on St George’s hospital, and she is absolutely right to raise that important point. The Department is clear that NHS England and local NHS organisations must think about potential impacts on other services, which is why we are developing a more strongly regional approach in designing NHS services. CCGs must consider the impact on neighbouring hospitals close to the CCG boundary, such as St George’s. Changes to A&E services at any one hospital potentially have an impact on a number of surrounding hospitals, so the three CCGs have to engage with their neighbours throughout this process. In addition, the neighbouring CCG can respond to any public consultation and its response must be taken into account.

On the next steps, the hon. Lady will be aware that the reconfiguration of services is a matter for NHS England and local NHS bodies. Such matters have to be addressed at local level rather than in Whitehall because local organisations understand the needs of their community. No changes to the services people receive can be made without formal public consultation. They must have support from GP commissioners, demonstrate strengthened public and patient engagement, and have a clear clinical evidence base. They must also be consistent with the principle of patient choice. The NHS England test on the future of use of beds requires assurance that the proposed reduction is sustainable in the longer term. The Department is very clear that throughout the service change process local NHS organisations have to engage with the wider public and with the local MP on these issues, so I am sure that she and her constituents will take part in any local engagement plans move forward.

The challenges facing the health economy in south-west London have been widely understood for a number of years. I recognise and appreciate that potential changes to local health services are often a cause of great worry and that they inspire impassioned debate among those involved. It is time for local partners to work together to find a solution which, as the hon. Lady said, has to be right for the people of south-west London and will secure a sustainable configuration of health services in the future. I thank her again for her continued dedication to these health matters.

Paul Scully: The Minister mentioned the fact that the consultation might be done after the spending review. I have written to the Secretary of State asking whether he would consider looking at that again, because the mayoral election is coming up next year and the purdah period will mean that this will, in effect, be delayed for a whole year. Anything more that can be done to bring it forward would be very helpful.

Caroline Dinenage: In the nick of time, my hon. Friend makes that point well, and I will definitely make sure that it is passed on.
Siobhain McDonagh: Will the Minister unequivocally put on the record that any consultation document has to go everywhere or nowhere, and that some consideration must be given to how much things cost? I am amazed that the NHS gets so few people to turn up to events that it spends so much money on.

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. It always amazes me how few people engage in some of the consultations, which are often discussing huge sums and affect really important day-to-day provision of essential care services in their area. Yes, consultation has to go to the whole area—indeed I have already spoken about how it needs to go beyond the area and look at the impact on other local services and the people who use them. She is absolutely right to say that consultation has to be effective and it has to ask everybody who might be affected by any changes. With that in mind, I thank her again for her continued dedication to her constituents.

Question put and agreed to.

7.29 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

The Secretary of State for Scotland was asked—

Leaving the EU

1. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Prime Minister on the effect on Scotland of the UK leaving the EU. It is good to see the Benches so busy for Scotland questions.

2. David Mundell: I agree that we should leave the EU with a deal. The SNP position is to contrive to bring about a no-deal Brexit, and the chaos and disruption that they know that would bring to Scotland.

3. Peter Grant: It is just as well that the three-strikes-and-you’re-out rule does not apply here, or the Secretary of State would be one dodged question away from an early bath. On other occasions, the Secretary of State has been very keen to know what plan B was, so what has he told the Prime Minister his plan B is when—not if, but when—the Prime Minister’s rotten deal is rejected again? Is his plan B no deal or is it to extend article 50, and why is he so coy about telling us what it is?

4. David Mundell: First, I absolutely refute the hon. Gentleman’s description of the Prime Minister’s deal. The Prime Minister’s deal is a good deal. This House, by a majority, has set out changes it wants to that deal, and the Prime Minister is seeking that deal. But if SNP Members really do not want no deal, they should be backing a deal.

5. Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Can the Secretary of State confirm that, having spent months propping herself in front of every TV camera going, demanding a seat at the table, the First Minister of Scotland was extended an invitation to a series of key meetings by the Prime Minister, which she could not even be bothered to attend?

6. David Mundell: My hon. Friend is correct. For whatever reason, the First Minister has chosen not to attend the Cabinet Sub-Committee chaired by the Prime Minister on EU exit preparedness. What she has been prepared to do, however, is to go on television and say that she would not accept any deal; no matter what that deal contained, she would not accept a deal. To me, that is a most powerful advocate for a no-deal Brexit.

7. Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Her Majesty’s Government’s Agriculture Bill will give essential legal clarity for farm payments after 2020 and safeguard the UK frameworks as we leave the EU. Does the Secretary of State agree that that is in marked contrast to the SNP Scottish Government who, even at this late stage, have refused to be part of the Bill, leaving Scottish farmers in the dark and at risk?

8. David Mundell: My hon. Friend has become a powerful advocate for Scottish agriculture in this Parliament. He is correct. We have offered the Scottish Government the opportunity to join us in taking forward the UK Agriculture Bill and providing certainty for Scottish farmers. Instead, they prepare to play politics with Scottish farming and leave farmers with great uncertainty.

9. David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): In line with the Prime Minister’s ongoing commitment to supporting the growth of the fisheries sector outside the common fisheries policy, may I ask my right hon. Friend what discussions he has had with the Prime Minister, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Treasury about future financial support for the sector, and how best to progress with that and invest in the industry in Scotland?
David Mundell: As my hon. Friend knows, both the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs have made very clear their support for the industry. Indeed, this afternoon I am meeting the Secretary of State, and that will be one issue on our agenda.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): We have seen over the past few weeks the large number of businesses that have been warning about Brexit and the Government’s strategy on Brexit. I keep being told by the leave campaign, “Don’t worry; businesses will adapt.” Well, they are adapting. They are adapting by moving their holding companies and their brass plates to other European Union countries. What will the Secretary of State do in the Cabinet to try to sort this mess out before it is too late? While his party and the SNP fight over flags, some of us are going to have to fight for jobs in our constituencies.

David Mundell: I did anticipate that I would have a question from the hon. Gentleman, but I was not sure whether he would ask it from the Labour Benches. What he needs to do, if he is concerned about avoiding a no-deal Brexit and the disruption and chaos that that would bring to Scottish businesses, is back the Prime Minister’s deal.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Coming back to Brexit, the Secretary of State seems to be completely incapable of answering a simple question: given the choice between no deal and extending article 50 to avoid that scenario, would he choose the latter option? Leaving that to one side, the papers report that he and three colleagues went to see the Prime Minister on Monday this week to discuss this very matter. Did he request that the Prime Minister take no deal off the table, and what was her response?

David Mundell: I am very clear about the implications of no deal for Scotland and the United Kingdom, which is why I want the Prime Minister to achieve a deal. That is why any Member of the House who does not want a no-deal outcome should support a deal.

Tommy Sheppard: The right hon. Gentleman seems to be incapable of answering a simple question. If he did indeed tell the Prime Minister to take no deal off the table, let me commend him, because for once—a rare occasion—he is in tune with public opinion in Scotland. He has threatened in the past to resign over matters of detail. When it comes to a matter of principle—having a deal or not—is he prepared to stay in the Cabinet and implement a no-deal scenario?

David Mundell: The hon. Gentleman puts his finger on the key question. It is about having a deal or not. When that question has been asked, the SNP has always been in the no column, contriving to bring about a no-deal Brexit for Scotland. I am in the deal column. I voted for the deal in the meaningful vote, and I will do so again.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is high time that Members in all parts of the House, in the words of the head of Make UK, set aside “selfish political ideology ahead of the national interest and people’s livelihoods”, and voted for an EU withdrawal agreement to prevent the catastrophic event of leaving the EU without a deal?

David Mundell: Yes.

Lesley Laird (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Lab): On the 12 October 2016, when questioned about the sweetheart deal that the UK Government struck with Nissan, the Secretary of State stood at the Dispatch Box and told the House that whatever support is put in place for businesses in the south of England “will apply to businesses in Scotland.”—[Official Report, 12 October 2016, Vol. 615, c. 287.]

In the light of the news that Nissan was offered a financial package worth up to £80 million to ensure that it would not be adversely affected by Brexit, can he detail the financial support that he has made available to Scottish businesses to ensure that, like Nissan, they are not adversely affected by Brexit?

David Mundell: I am pleased to see the hon. Lady on the Labour Benches, as it has been reported that she would be willing to give up her seat to the SNP so that there could be a Labour minority Government propped up by the SNP. I stand by what I said previously: we stand ready to support businesses in Scotland. A huge amount of Government support has gone into supporting businesses in Scotland since the Brexit vote, and that will continue to be the case.

Mr Speaker: May I gently say to Members on both sides of the House that the style is altogether too languid? A lot of people want to get in: short questions, short answers, and let us move on. I call Lesley Laird.

Lesley Laird: Let me reassure the Secretary of State that I am going nowhere—I am Labour through and through. [Interruption.] He should not believe everything that he reads in the newspapers.

Recently, Nissan, Honda, Jaguar Land Rover, Airbus, Sony, Panasonic, the Federation of Small Businesses, the CBI and many others have said that the Government’s incompetence over Brexit already means that jobs are being lost. Everyone here knows that the Prime Minister’s deal is dead, so is the Secretary of State going to let this circus continue or is he going to pull his head out of the sand and take no deal off the table, because that is what business wants, it is what Parliament wants, and it is what the country wants.

David Mundell: What the country wants is to have this sorted. They want to leave the EU with a deal, and the hon. Lady and her colleagues should support the Prime Minister in her endeavour.

Immigration Bill

2. Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of provisions in the immigration Bill on Scotland.

Lesley Laird: Let me reassure the Secretary of State that I am going nowhere—I am Labour through and through. [Interruption.] He should not believe everything that he reads in the newspapers.

Recently, Nissan, Honda, Jaguar Land Rover, Airbus, Sony, Panasonic, the Federation of Small Businesses, the CBI and many others have said that the Government’s incompetence over Brexit already means that jobs are being lost. Everyone here knows that the Prime Minister’s deal is dead, so is the Secretary of State going to let this circus continue or is he going to pull his head out of the sand and take no deal off the table, because that is what business wants, it is what Parliament wants, and it is what the country wants.

David Mundell: What the country wants is to have this sorted. They want to leave the EU with a deal, and the hon. Lady and her colleagues should support the Prime Minister in her endeavour.

Immigration Bill

5. Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of provisions in the immigration Bill on Scotland.

Lesley Laird: Let me reassure the Secretary of State that I am going nowhere—I am Labour through and through. [Interruption.] He should not believe everything that he reads in the newspapers.

Recently, Nissan, Honda, Jaguar Land Rover, Airbus, Sony, Panasonic, the Federation of Small Businesses, the CBI and many others have said that the Government’s incompetence over Brexit already means that jobs are being lost. Everyone here knows that the Prime Minister’s deal is dead, so is the Secretary of State going to let this circus continue or is he going to pull his head out of the sand and take no deal off the table, because that is what business wants, it is what Parliament wants, and it is what the country wants.

David Mundell: What the country wants is to have this sorted. They want to leave the EU with a deal, and the hon. Lady and her colleagues should support the Prime Minister in her endeavour.
The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The Immigration and Social Security Co-Ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill will help us deliver the new single, skills-based immigration system we want, one that maximises the benefits of immigration and demonstrates that Scotland and the UK are open for business.

Drew Hendry: I have heard the Secretary of State’s answer, but what faith can the people of Scotland have in the new immigration Bill or his Government when even after the issue was raised with the Prime Minister, with a promised intervention from the Home Secretary, the Home Secretary’s office told me yesterday that it has lost the file on Denis Omondi, the serving British soldier in 3 Scots whose young daughter has been denied a visa? Will the Scottish Secretary now get personally involved in this travesty?

David Mundell: I am disappointed to hear what the hon. Gentleman has said, and yes of course I will.

Stuart C. McDonald: Last week, the National Farmers Union Scotland told the Bill Committee that free movement works and should continue, that the Government’s seasonal workers pilot was not nearly enough and that post-Brexit immigration proposals do not make sense and are “very obstructive”. Given that the UK-wide system is not working for Scotland’s farmers, will the Secretary of State argue for different immigration rules to apply in Scotland?

David Mundell: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman references the seasonal workers scheme, which my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) did so much to champion, but he is very selective in the evidence he cites. The clear view of businesses giving evidence to the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs is that they do not want a separate Scottish immigration system.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the CBI has said that a UK-wide immigration policy is the correct route, including for businesses in Moray and across Scotland?

David Mundell: My hon. Friend is right: that is the position of the CBI and of business organisations in Scotland, because they want workers to be able to move around the United Kingdom. There is no justification for a separate Scottish immigration system.


Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con) indicated dissent.

Mr Speaker: A bout of shyness has afflicted the hon. Gentleman.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): In both Scotland and Cornwall, many low-paid but skilled jobs are provided by immigrants to the UK. What assurance can the Secretary of State give that that will continue after Brexit?

Mr Speaker: The question is purely about Scotland.
what is he going to do to ensure that this ridiculous, arbitrary salary cap is consigned to the bin, where it belongs?

David Mundell: The hon. Gentleman makes valid points, and I am sure they will all form part of the one-year consultation that is ongoing. I certainly will be advocating those sorts of points in that consultation.

Borderlands Growth Deal

3. Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): What progress the Government have made on the borderlands growth deal. [909251]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): Growth deals lie right at the heart of the UK Government’s support for Scotland, which is why we have committed £1.3 billion to support the existing seven city and region growth deals. We remain committed to the borderlands growth deal.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The borderlands deal is a wonderful opportunity to help economic growth across what we in the borders consider a completely invisible line and not a border at all for practical purposes and day-to-day living. Will the Minister assure me—it is lovely to have a Treasury Minister answering the question—that we will get full support from the Treasury to ensure that we have a really strong, well-built growth deal?

Mel Stride: As a Treasury Minister, I can certainly reassure my hon. Friend. Friend that the Treasury remains firmly engaged with local partners in ensuring that we have the best possible deal for the borderlands, including her part of the UK.

Rural NHS Hospitals: Public Transport

4. Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the provision in Scotland of public transport servicing rural NHS hospitals. [909252]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Transport and healthcare policy both fall within the competence of the Scottish Government. Nevertheless, the UK Government remain open to discussing best practice with the devolved Administrations.

Robert Halfon: NHS car parking charges were scrapped in Scotland in 2008, saving patients, visitors and staff £35 million. Will my right hon. Friend work with the rest of the UK Government to scrap hospital car parking charges across the UK?

David Mundell: I am sure that my colleagues in the Cabinet with the relevant responsibilities will have heard my right hon. Friend’s plea. He has in the past been a very effective campaigner on such matters.

Foreign Direct Investment

6. Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage foreign direct investment in Scotland. [909255]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The UK promotes UK FDI throughout the world. In 2017, 76,000 new jobs were created in the UK as a consequence. There are 141 FDI projects in Scotland, creating about 4,000 jobs in Scotland.

Theresa Villiers: Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the reasons behind record levels of foreign direct investment into Scotland is its place in the United Kingdom, the most successful political union in history?

Mel Stride: I agree entirely with that. Scotland benefits enormously through being part of what is the world’s fifth largest economy and one of the most dynamic and successful economies in the world.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Does the Financial Secretary agree with me that the First Minister has an important role to play in bringing foreign investment to Scotland and that any criticisms, including those from his own colleagues in Holyrood, border on the provincial to the ridiculous, unless of course they believe that the office of First Minister is a stay-at-home job?

Mel Stride: The First Minister of course has a critical role in ensuring that investment is channelled towards Scotland, but I do not believe that promoting Scottish independence is a way of attracting investment.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): On the First Minister’s recent trip to Canada, it was reported that she did not mention Scotland’s proudest export, Scotch whisky, once. Does the Minister agree with me that the best way for the First Minister to secure more foreign direct investment into Scotland is to stop prancing around the world flogging independence, and do what she is supposed to be doing, which is to be back in the country she is supposed to be leading? She should be reducing taxes, bettering our public services and making Scotland a more lucrative place in which to do business?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is entirely right. Increasing investment in Scotland is not about promoting Scottish independence; it is about promoting Scottish products and business. We froze duty on whisky at the last Budget—whisky itself represents about 20% of all the food and drink sales from the United Kingdom. We will stand behind that and other Scottish exports.

Scottish Veterans

9. Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Defence on the welfare of Scottish veterans. [909260]

11. Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Defence on the welfare of Scottish veterans. [909262]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): As members of the ministerial covenant and veterans board, the Secretary of State for Defence and I have worked closely together and with the devolved Administrations on the ambitious UK-wide veterans strategy, encompassing
devolved areas, including housing, education and mental health, to address the needs of veterans in all parts of the UK, including Scotland.

**Bill Grant:** My right hon. Friend will be aware that, sadly, some veterans may find themselves homeless. What engagement has he had with the Scottish Government and local authorities in Scotland to help resolve this matter?

**David Mundell:** My hon. Friend will be aware that housing is a devolved area and the responsibility of the Scottish Government. However, the UK Government support the veterans gateway, which, among other things, provides advice to veterans on housing and accommodation in Scotland and across the UK.

**Chris Davies:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that the first ever UK-wide veterans strategy is a fantastic example of the significant collaboration that occurs every day between the UK and the Scottish Government?

**David Mundell:** Yes, indeed—I am very happy to confirm that. Although we see a lot of politicking in this Chamber and in Holyrood, the fact is that on a day-to-day basis the Scottish Government, the UK Government and indeed the Welsh Assembly Government can work productively together.

**Santander Branch Closures**

10. **Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with representatives of Santander on that bank’s proposed branch closures in Scotland.

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury** (Mel Stride): Bank branch closures are commercial decisions; they are not for the Government. However, we do recognise the difficulties that they bring. That is why we are committed, among other measures, to banking facilities within a Post Office network—[**Interruption.**]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. A lot of noisy, private conversations are taking place. That is unsound on two counts. First, it is rather a discourtesy to a senior member of the Government and, although he seems modest about it and unperturbed, I am not. Secondly, it means that the House is deprived of the joy of listening to the Minister’s mellifluous tones. The Minister is welcome to continue, at a suitable pace, with his answer.

**Mel Stride:** Thank you very much indeed, Mr Speaker. I was concluding by saying that we are fully committed to the 11,500 post offices up and down the United Kingdom, most of which provide banking services.

**Angela Crawley:** Santander will be closing 15 branches across Scotland, including in Lanark in my constituency. People and businesses across Clydesdale depend on this service, which cannot be delivered by post offices. Will the Secretary of State call a halt to these closures?

**Mel Stride:** As I have already outlined, these are commercial decisions to be taken by Santander and other banks. We have supported the access to banking protocol, which sets out clear measures that banks must take when they do close branches, to ensure that local customers are supported.

**Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): As my right hon. Friend said, some of these decisions are commercial ones, on which the Government cannot intervene. However, they can intervene on the Post Office side. Will he meet me to discuss access to cash and the campaign that Which? is running, as well as how we can support the communities impacted by bank closures, such as Comrie and Alloa in my constituency?

**Mel Stride:** Yes.

**Mr Speaker:** I gently point out that the issue extends beyond the particular bank branches with which the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) is concerned. If, however, there is a sudden outbreak of unexpected shyness and reticence, the House will note that. It is a most unusual state of affairs: when previously there were significant numbers of Members bobbing up and down, with a view to taking part—

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP) **rose**—

**Mr Speaker:** Ah! I call Mr David Linden.

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): Will the Minister, since he has been so generous in agreeing to meet hon. Members, agree to meet me to discuss protecting the Santander branch in Parkhead and telling the bank to save our Santander?

**Mel Stride:** I would be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman.

**Mr Speaker:** We are grateful to the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and to the Minister for his characteristically pithy reply. We are much obliged to him for it.

**PRIME MINISTER**

The Prime Minister was asked—

**Engagements**

Q1. [909334] **Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 20 February.

**The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May):** First of all, I am sure the whole House will want to join me in paying tribute to our former colleague Paul Flynn. He was an outstanding parliamentarian and a tireless campaigner, and he championed his constituency of Newport West, and Wales, with energy and enthusiasm for over 30 years. Paul spent the vast majority of his career as a Back Bencher and wrote a helpful guide in his book “Commons Knowledge: How to be a Backbencher”, before being made shadow Leader of the House and shadow Secretary of State for Wales. But of course he will be remembered for one of the great parliamentary quotes. When he left Labour’s Front Bench in 2016, he said:

“Our glorious leader, in an act of pioneering diversity, courageously decided to give opportunities for geriatrics on the Front Bench and this was so successful that he decided to create opportunities for geriatrics on the Back Bench. I’m double blessed.”
This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Stephen Doughty: May I add my tribute to the words of the Prime Minister for my former constituency neighbour, friend and Welsh Labour colleague Paul Flynn? He was a remarkable man. He will go down as one of the great parliamentarians of the past 40 years and was an inspiration to many of us. He once gave me a copy of that book when I was a teenager, so he must have seen something in me, Mr Speaker. I am rebellious, although maybe not quite as rebellious as him. He was a great man and he will be missed by all of us.

In the midst of political crisis, it is ever more important that we put our country first. With thousands of jobs at risk and our international reputation in question, will the Prime Minister now stop playing Russian roulette, rule out no deal, and put a deal back to the British people so they can have the final say?

The Prime Minister: First of all, the hon. Gentleman knows there are two ways in which it is possible to ensure that we do not see no deal. One is to stay in the European Union, which is not what the referendum result said, and the other is to agree a deal. What I am working on at the moment is taking the view of this House of Commons about the concerns on the backstop in the deal and working with Brussels to resolve that issue, such that this House will be able to agree a deal.

Q2. [909335] Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): This afternoon, the House will debate antisemitism. With that in mind, I quote from the statement of the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan), who explained Labour inactivity on this issue:

“Given a choice between the support of antisemites and ridding Labour of Jew-hate, they have decided to side with antisemites.”

In the light of that, will the Prime Minister join me in urging Labour to rid its party of this scourge once and for all?

The Prime Minister: I think this is a very important issue that everybody in this House should take seriously. I never thought I would see the day when Jewish people in this country were concerned about their future in this country, and I never thought I would see the day when Jewish people suffer a great deal as a result, and we should remember—that is, the concern that was expressed in this House about ensuring that we could not find ourselves in the current backstop indefinitely. There a number of ways, as I have identified on a number of occasions at this Dispatch Box, to deal with the concern that has been raised by this House.

Jeremy Corbyn: As I was saying, antisemitism has no place whatsoever in our society or in any of our political parties, and my own political party takes the strongest action to deal with antisemitism wherever it rears its head.

Last week, an EU official said the UK Government were only “pretending to negotiate”, adding that there was “nothing on the table from the British side”, so with just 37 days to go, can the Prime Minister be clear about what she will actually be proposing today when she travels to Brussels?

The Prime Minister: Of course there are a number of meetings taking place in Brussels. My right hon. Friend the Brexit Secretary and the Attorney General were in Brussels earlier this week and had a constructive and positive meeting with officials in the European Commission on the issue of alternative arrangements and work on alternative arrangements. The issue that I am taking to Brussels is the one I have been speaking to EU leaders about over the last few days—that is, the concern that was expressed in this House about ensuring that we could not find ourselves in the current backstop indefinitely. There a number of ways, as I have identified on a number of occasions at this Dispatch Box, to deal with that. I have referenced the work on alternative arrangements. There are also the options of an end-date or a unilateral exit mechanism and legal work—what matters in all of this are legally binding changes that ensure that we address the concern that has been raised by this House. That is what I will be discussing with the European Commission and will continue to discuss with it and European Union leaders.
The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman points out that, as I just said in my response to his question—he could have listened to that answer, but I am happy to repeat it—there are a number of ways in which it is possible to address the issue that has been raised by this House of Commons. Work is being undertaken on those various issues. On the alternative arrangements, for example, the Commission has raised questions, particularly about the extent to which derogation from European Union law would be necessary to put those in place, and there is concern about being able to achieve that if we are going to leave in time. Nevertheless, we have agreed that a workstream will go forward on those matters. We are also exploring the other issues, but the point is a very simple one. It is not just a question of saying to the European Union, “Actually, this is just the one thing.” It is a question of sitting down with the European Union and finding a solution that is going to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland and Ireland, that is going to ensure that we deal with the concern that has been raised here in this House of Commons and that is going to enable a deal to be brought back to this House of Commons that it can support so that we leave on 29 March with a deal.

Jeremy Corbyn: Last week, a Foreign Office Minister said categorically:

“We are not leaving without a deal”,

but sadly he does not speak for the Government. The Prime Minister’s Business Minister says he is “very conscious of the damage that not ruling out a hard Brexit is having on business and industry”. People’s jobs and livelihoods are in the Prime Minister’s hands. Will she stop playing games with people’s jobs and make it very clear that no deal is absolutely ruled out?

The Prime Minister: People’s jobs and futures are in the hands of every Member of this House. Once again, the right hon. Gentleman could have listened to an answer I gave earlier, to the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). There are only two ways to take no deal off the table: one is to back a deal, the other is to revoke article 50 and stay in the EU. The right hon. Gentleman has refused to back a deal, so the obvious conclusion is that he must want to revoke article 50. He can stand up now and tell us what his policy is—is it to back the deal or to stay in the EU?

Jeremy Corbyn: I did write the Prime Minister a very nice letter setting out our views. I am sure she received it and read it and I hope she will think on it. It appears that the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) was right when he said last week that in the event that the Prime Minister’s deal does not succeed “this Government…and this Prime Minister…would prefer to…head for the exit door without a deal”. [Official Report, 14 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 1108.]

He went on to say that it was “a terrifying fact”. Thousands of car workers in Derby, Sunderland, Birmingham and Swindon are facing redundancy. Does that matter to the Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: We have seen decisions taken by car manufacturers, and obviously Honda’s decision this week is deeply disappointing, but it has made it absolutely clear that this is not a Brexit-related decision, but a response to the change in the global car market. Of course jobs matter to the Government. If the right hon. Gentleman wants to talk about jobs, perhaps he would like to change the habit of a lifetime and stand up at that Dispatch Box and welcome the excellent job figures we have seen this week under this Government.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister does not seem very interested in listening to those companies and industry bodies that are saying they need a customs union. When she talks about jobs, will she also talk about those doing two or three jobs to make ends meet, those on zero-hours contracts, those so low paid they have to access food banks just to survive and those suffering from in-work poverty—on her watch, under her Government?

Last year, investment in the car industry halved. Brexit uncertainty is already costing investment, and where investment is cut today, jobs are cut tomorrow. That uncertainty would not end even if the Prime Minister’s rejected deal somehow got through, because it promises only the certainty of a “spectrum” of possible outcomes. Will she see sense and offer business and workers the certainty of a customs union that could protect jobs and industry in this country?

The Prime Minister: What the right hon. Gentleman will also have heard from car manufacturers is their support for the deal the Government negotiated with the EU. If he wants to talk about jobs, I am very happy to talk about jobs, because what do we see in the latest figures? We see employment at a record high and unemployment at its lowest since the 1970s; we see that 96% of the increase in employment in the last year has come from full-time work; we see youth unemployment almost halved since 2010, and female employment is at a record high. [Interruption.] It is all very well shouting from the Front Bench, but let us look at Labour’s record in government. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Lavery, calm yourself. You have applied to be a statesman, but there is an apprenticeship, and you have to undergo it, but it is not assisted by such sedentary ranting.

Mr Speaker: [Interruption.]

The Prime Minister: Let us look at Labour’s record in government on employment: unemployment rose by nearly half a million; female unemployment rose by 26%; youth unemployment rose by 44%; and the number of households where no one had ever worked nearly doubled. That is the record of a Labour Government under which working people pay the price of Labour.

Jeremy Corbyn: Child poverty halved under the Labour Government. We invested in Sure Start—in children’s centres—and a future for young people. The Prime Minister should get out a bit more and hear the anger of so many young people around this country at what they are suffering under her Government and on her watch.

The chair of the manufacturers’ organisation Make UK said yesterday:

“I am saddened by the way that some of our politicians have put selfish political ideology ahead of the national interest and people’s livelihoods and left us facing the catastrophic prospect of leaving the EU next month with no deal.”
The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, the Food and Drink Federation, the National Farmers Union and the CBI all want a disastrous no-deal ruled out. Along with the TUC, many also support the UK being in a permanent customs union.

There is a little over a month to go and the Government have failed to put the country first. There is the crisis of jobs going and industries under threat, and the Prime Minister indulges in what her own Business Minister calls “fanciful nonsense”. When is she going to put the interests of the people of this country before the interests of the Conservative party?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman has consistently put his party political interest ahead of the national interest. We can take no deal off the table by agreeing a deal, yet at every stage he has acted to frustrate a deal. He has acted to make no deal more likely, but that is not surprising from this Labour party. What do we see from his Labour party? Hamas and Hezbollah are friends, and Israel and the United States are enemies; Hatton a hero, and Churchill a villain. Attlee and Bevan will be spinning in their graves. That is what the right hon. Gentleman has done to a once-proud Labour party. We will never let him do it to our country.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know from Shelter that many people in receipt of benefits are blocked from renting in the private sector. These people are often carers or have a disability. I know that No. 10 is working with Shelter to resolve this problem. Will the Prime Minister give all her officials her support to resolve this pressing issue?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. We are working with Shelter. I urge that work to go ahead to a fruitful conclusion. Stuart Carroll, one my local councillors, has raised this issue with me and has come in to work with No. 10. It is an important issue and we are working on it to find a satisfactory resolution soon.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): My right hon. Friend knows from Shelter that many people in receipt of benefits are blocked from renting in the private sector. These people are often carers or have a disability. I know that No. 10 is working with Shelter to resolve this problem. Will the Prime Minister join me in thanking the Home Secretary for making it very clear that those who join or support terrorist organisations abroad do not deserve British citizenship and that this Government are not a soft touch for terrorists?

The Prime Minister: It is an important message for us to give that we are very clear that we will take action against those who are involved in terrorism. Obviously, each Home Secretary deals with the question of deprivation on a number of occasions; I dealt with deprivation cases myself, and there is a very clear set of criteria on which the Home Secretary considers that matter. But the overall point my hon. Friend makes is absolutely right: how important it is for this Government and this country to make it very clear that we will take action against those who are involved in terrorism.

Q7. [909341] Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister join me in thanking the Home Secretary for reminding us that those who are involved with those involved in terrorism abroad do not deserve British citizenship and that this Government are not a soft touch for terrorists?

The Prime Minister: It is an important message for us to give that we are very clear that we will take action against those who are involved in terrorism. Obviously, each Home Secretary deals with the question of deprivation on a number of occasions; I dealt with deprivation cases myself, and there is a very clear set of criteria on which the Home Secretary considers that matter. But the overall point my hon. Friend makes is absolutely right: how important it is for this Government and this country to make it very clear that we will take action against those who are involved in terrorism.

Q3. [909336] Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): Before going into my question, may I say a few words about our colleague Paul Flynn? I went to Bangladesh with him and his wife and it was absolutely lovely. He was a very nice person and surely will be missed. I give my condolences to his wife, Sam, and hopefully she will get in contact with me as soon as she can. Thank you.

Right, Prime Minister: Heidi Prescott is a little girl who is my constituent, and she was born with a rare muscular wasting spinal disease called spinal muscular atrophy. She is 10 years old and her condition is worsening. Heidi is now losing the ability to walk and is spending most of her time in a wheelchair. There is a treatment that could help Heidi, slow down the deterioration and prolong her life; it is called Spinraza. It is not available in England but will be in Scotland in April 2019. Why can this treatment not be accessible to my constituent Heidi and other children in England with this disease?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady has raised a particular case about Heidi, her constituent, and obviously I am sorry to hear that Heidi is in these circumstances. On the question of the drugs and treatments that are available, obviously we have a robust independent process through the National Institute for Health and Care
Excellence reviews to look at new medicines that are possible, and this is the case with Spinraza. I am pleased that Biogen has, as I understand it, submitted a revised submission for the NICE appraisal committee to consider and a meeting has been arranged for 6 March when those recommendations will be considered.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): All parliamentarians should be horrified that any human being would spend the night sleeping on a pavement. In that regard, will my right hon. Friend take the opportunity, following the visit from the relevant Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), to acknowledge that Southend-on-Sea Borough Council together with its associated bodies has reduced rough sleeping by 85%, and that is another reason why Southend should become a city? And will the Government do all they can to address issues of alcohol abuse and mental health?

The Prime Minister: First, well done to my hon. Friend for once again getting in his bid for Southend to be a city. He raises very important issues; we are addressing the issues of alcoholism and mental health, and of course these are often connected when people find themselves homeless or rough sleeping. I am happy to congratulate Southend council on the work it has done to reduce rough sleeping in its area. I am pleased to say that the rough sleeping initiative which the Government have introduced, where we are working with the local authorities with the highest levels of rough sleeping, has seen rough sleeping falling by 23% in those areas, so action is being taken and that is having an impact. Of course there is more to do, and we focus on those issues that underlie the problems that those who find themselves rough sleeping are experiencing.

Q4. [909338] Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Hundreds of leaseholders in my constituency, and many thousands more across the country, are still living in privately owned buildings covered in dangerous Grenfell-style cladding, and they have no idea whether they will have to pay the full cost of the remedial works and interim fire safety measures. I am sure that the Prime Minister will tell me that she has heard me respond to a similar issue before. We have introduced, where we are working with the local authorities with the highest levels of rough sleeping, has seen rough sleeping falling by 23% in those areas, so action is being taken and that is having an impact. Of course there is more to do, and we focus on those issues that underlie the problems that those who find themselves rough sleeping are experiencing.

The Prime Minister: First, I thank my hon. Friend for his campaign to create an armed forces ombudsman, so that those who have served our country will know that they are valued.

The Prime Minister: First, I thank my hon. Friend for the way in which she has worked to champion the armed forces covenant and the interests of the armed forces. Of course we should all recognise the sacrifice and dedication of our armed forces and the work that they do for us, day in and day out. I would be very happy to meet her to discuss her proposal.

Q5. [909339] Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Alongside the tributes paid to our late dear colleague Paul Flynn, I hope that the Prime Minister will join me in recognising his dogged determination in his fight for the legalisation of medicinal cannabis. Since November, however, the rescheduling of medicinal cannabis has not changed anything. Not a single new NHS prescription has been issued, and this is causing the families of children with epilepsy, in particular, unbearable suffering. It is evident that someone, somewhere, is blocking this. Did the Government mean to block this life-changing medicine for those children? If not, what will they do about it?

The Prime Minister: Of course the Government have taken action in relation to the issue of medicinal cannabis, but the important thing is that decisions are taken on the basis of clinical evidence by those who are best able to take those decisions, rather than by Ministers. A process has been put in place to ensure that, where there are cases, those cases are looked at very carefully and that decisions are properly taken by the clinicians who are best placed to do so.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The Home Secretary is to be congratulated on his swift and decisive action in removing British citizenship from Shamima Begum, but the fact remains that, of the 900 British nationals who have gone to support Daesh fighting against British armed forces in Iraq and Syria, only 40 have been prosecuted. With 400 of those individuals set to return to this country in the near future, will the Prime Minister revisit the provisions of the Treason Act to ensure that these appalling activities receive suitable and just punishment?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, our priority is to ensure safety and security here in the UK. We also recognise that anyone who has travelled to Syria not only puts themselves in considerable danger but potentially poses a serious national security risk. Any British citizen who returns from taking part in the conflict must be in no doubt that they will be questioned, investigated and potentially prosecuted. It is right that we follow that process, but I am sure that my hon. Friend will accept that one of the issues in looking at prosecution is ensuring that there is evidence to enable a prosecution to take place. Decisions on how people are dealt with are taken on a case-by-case basis, to ensure that the most appropriate action is taken. We are ensuring that, in every decision, we put the protection and safety of the public first.

Q6. [909340] Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Prime Minister is correct: history will judge us all, and those in positions of authority will be
particularly harshly judged—people such as the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition—for dividing the country and their parties. Will the Prime Minister finally rule out no deal and stem the bloodletting in British jobs, dismiss the nonsensical notion of a jobs-first Brexit and extend article 50 to enable the people finally to vote, given that her sole justification for backing Brexit is the will of the people?

The Prime Minister: If the right hon. Gentleman is so concerned about ensuring that we do not leave the European Union without a deal, he has a simple route through this, which is to back the deal that the Government bring back from the European Union.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Will the Prime Minister join me in paying tribute to my late old friend Steve Dymond, a haemophiliac who was infected by contaminated blood? He fought for over 20 years, showing great bravery and resilience, and was supported throughout by his wife Su. He was grateful when the Langstaff inquiry was set up, so does the Prime Minister agree that it is vital that all the NHS documents and medical notes that the inquiry may need are made available so that it can be fully comprehensive?

The Prime Minister: I join my right hon. and learned Friend in paying tribute to Steve Dymond. The contaminated blood scandal was an appalling tragedy that should never have happened, and it is vital that the victims who have suffered so much and their families get the answers and justice they deserve, for which, as we all know, they have waited decades. I am assured by the Department of Health and Social Care that it has already sent thousands of documents to the inquiry and will send more when necessary, but we are committed to being open and transparent with the inquiry and have waived the usual legal privileges to assist the process. It is important that the inquiry is able to get to the truth.

Q8. [909342] Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): Prime Minister, Conservative Governments have taken £6 billion out of the north-east since 2010. Can we have it back, please?

The Prime Minister: This is a Government who are ensuring that we are working across the whole country and that we are delivering an economy for everyone across the whole country. The hon. Gentleman talks about billions of pounds in relation to the north, but he may just want to reflect on the £13 billion being put into transport in the north of this country.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Will the Prime Minister join me welcoming Councillor Anne Meadows, who has today left the Labour party in Brighton and Hove City Council, crossing the floor to join the Conservatives, who are now the largest group on the council? Councillor Meadows left the Labour party because of the rise of Momentum activists—so much so that only seven of the 23 councillors will be standing again in May. Does the Prime Minister agree that antisemitism is rife throughout the whole Labour party?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend. As she says, Anne Meadows, a long-serving Labour councillor on Brighton and Hove City Council, has today chosen to leave Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour party and join the Conservatives, due to the bullying and antisemitism that she has received from Momentum and the hard left. That is the harsh reality that decent, moderate Labour councillors are having to face every day, due to Jeremy Corbyn’s failure to stand up to bullying and racism in his party. We welcome Councillor Meadows into the Conservative party with open arms, and I am sure that she will be an excellent Conservative councillor.

Q9. [909343] Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): I have a constituent who was left doubly incontinent following a serious and violent sexual assault. She previously had a lifetime award for disability living allowance. However, recent personal independence payment assessments have concluded that she is not entitled to DLA or the mobility components of PIP, despite her extremely difficult condition, which dominates every aspect of her daily life. Will the Prime Minister please ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to look urgently at the Department’s failure to recognise the impact of this serious condition?

The Prime Minister: I am sure the hon. Lady will appreciate that I am not able to respond to the individual details of the case at the Dispatch Box, but I will ensure that the Department for Work and Pensions and the relevant Minister look at the case and respond to her.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Improving mental healthcare has rightly become a priority for the Government, but are the Government doing anything to improve the mental health situation of hard-pressed NHS staff who deserve support?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Our dedicated NHS staff, day in and day out, are delivering an unwavering commitment in caring for us all, and obviously it is necessary that we ensure their mental health is looked after. We are setting up a dedicated mental health support service, which will offer NHS staff confidential advice and support 24 hours a day. It will be staffed by qualified professionals who have had training in situations that are unique to the NHS and will ensure that mental health referrals for NHS employees, from either a general practitioner or an occupational health clinician, are fast-tracked. It is right that mental and physical wellbeing is at the forefront of our health service, and it is right that we are taking this action to support our dedicated NHS staff.

Q10. [909344] Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Local Government Association has identified a potential £1.6 billion deficit for special needs education, but the Government responded with a paltry £350 million. As a result, headteachers in my Brighton constituency are literally having sleepless nights. Vital reading programmes for children with special educational needs are being cut and crucial support staff are being lost. Instead of repeating her usual line on schools funding, will the Prime Minister agree to meet a delegation of headteachers from Brighton so she can hear direct from them about the real pain that is being caused?

The Prime Minister: I am sure the hon. Lady will look forward to working well with the largest group on Brighton and Hove City Council, which is now the
Conservative group. She raises the issue of education funding, and she refers to answers I have given in the past. We have been putting more funding into education, and we have been doing it in a number of ways. We have announced extra support, as she says, for children with complex special educational needs, and that is building on the £6 billion in place for it this year—the highest level on record. She says it is not enough, but it is the highest level on record. We are also putting money into new school places and better facilities for children with special educational needs.

Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Communities across the country are installing defibrillators. The village of Brompton in my constituency has one in former telephone box that is a stone’s throw away from the main road but is not directly visible from it. Does the Prime Minister think it is a good idea to have a nationally approved defibrillator road sign so that these lifesaving devices can be quickly accessed in the event of an emergency?

The Prime Minister: I commend the action being taken in my right hon. Friend’s constituency, and I see the same action being taken in my constituency, with people ensuring that defibrillators are available. He raises a very interesting point, and I will ask the Department for Transport to look at it seriously.

Q11. [909345] David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Recent research from the charity Bliss shows that two thirds of dads have to return to work while their premature or sick baby is still in a neonatal intensive care unit. Does the Prime Minister think that is unjust? Will she work with me to ensure a change in employment law so that dads and parents of premature babies, like me, get the support they need to support their family?

The Prime Minister: This issue is close to the heart of many Members, and it is particularly close to the heart of the hon. Gentleman. I know that he met Ministers to discuss this issue last year. Officials in the Department for Education, Energy and Industrial Strategy are undertaking a short, focused internal review of provision for parents of premature, sick and multiple babies to obtain an understanding of the barriers to participating in the labour market. They are working with organisations such as Bliss, the Smallest Things and the Twins and Multiple Births Association to better understand these issues, and they have held focus groups with a number of parents. They have offered to discuss their conclusions with those interested parties in due course, and I am sure that they will be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss this in taking it forward.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): In 2017, during the election, we learned what the Prime Minister’s definition of “strong and stable” was. As our automotive industry disintegrates before our eyes, as investment is put on hold and as growth slows, are we now learning what the Prime Minister’s definition of “smooth and orderly Brexit” is?

The Prime Minister: I say to the hon. Lady, as I say to every Member of this House, that there will come a further point, in this Chamber, when every Member will
have a decision to take on whether we want to ensure that we deliver on the vote of the referendum—most Members stood on a manifesto to do that—by leaving the EU with a deal. That will be a decision for all Members of this House. I know where I stand: I believe we should be leaving with a deal. I hope that the hon. Lady agrees.
Leaving the EU: Economic Impact of Proposed Deal

12.44 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP) (Urgent Question): To ask the Prime Minister if she will make a statement on the economic impact of her Government’s proposed deal for the UK exiting the EU.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): At the end of November, the Government published our analysis that assessed the economic impact of leaving the European Union. It not only included an analysis of the Government’s negotiating position, as set out in the July 2018 White Paper, but went further still and considered three other scenarios: a free trade agreement, a European economic area-type relationship, and a no-deal scenario.

Specifically, the analysis showed that the outcomes for the proposed future UK-EU relationship would deliver significantly higher economic output—about seven percentage points higher—than the no-deal scenario, which would result in lower economic activity in all sector groups of the economy compared with the White Paper scenario. That is why we should pass the deal, to avoid no deal and support jobs and the UK economy.

In publishing the work, the Government delivered on their commitment to provide an appropriate level of analysis to Parliament. In addition, the House has had plenty of opportunity to debate both the analysis and the deal that is on the table. As the Prime Minister has said, we will bring a revised deal back to the House for a second meaningful vote as soon as we possibly can.

In the meantime, it is right that the Government are afforded the flexibility and space to continue our negotiations. That is because the agreement of the political declaration will be followed by negotiations on the legal text. The UK and the EU recognise that that means there could be a spectrum of different outcomes. We need to approach the negotiations with as much strength as possible. The focus must now be on the future, planning and prioritising that which matters.

Let me remind the House that we will have an implementation period, a new close relationship with the EU and, crucially, the ability to strike trade deals around the world. We are bringing back control over our money, borders and laws to mould a prosperous and ambitious future, planning and prioritising that which matters. Specifically, the analysis showed that the outcomes for the proposed future UK-EU relationship would deliver significantly higher economic output—about seven percentage points higher—than the no-deal scenario, which would result in lower economic activity in all sector groups of the economy compared with the White Paper scenario. That is why we should pass the deal, to avoid no deal and support jobs and the UK economy.

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Let me remind the House that we will have an implementation period, a new close relationship with the EU and, crucially, the ability to strike trade deals around the world. We are bringing back control over our money, borders and laws to mould a prosperous and ambitious new path for our country, and on our terms. No matter what approach we take, the UK economy will continue to be strong and grow into the future.

Ian Blackford: With respect to the Minister, this was of course a question to the Prime Minister, and it is the Prime Minister who should be answering. This is a matter of the utmost importance, because this House is going to be asked to vote on the Prime Minister’s deal. The specific question I asked was about the economic analysis that the Government have done on their deal. It is quite clear from the Prime Minister’s answer that the Government have done no analysis on this deal. On arguably the most important matter that this House has voted on since the second world war, we do not have an economic impact assessment from the Government. It is, once again, this Conservative Government treating this House and the United Kingdom with contempt. It is a disgrace that the Government have continued to duck and dive in respect of their responsibilities.

Economists are clear: the Prime Minister’s deal is set to hit GDP, the public finances and living standards. Analysis published by the London School of Economics estimates that “the Brexit deal could reduce UK GDP per capita by between 1.9% and 5.5% in ten years’ time, compared to remaining in the EU.”

The National Institute of Economic and Social Research has warned that “if the government’s proposed Brexit deal is implemented, then GDP in the longer term will be around 4 per cent lower than it would have been had the UK stayed in the EU.”

Bank of England analysis states the UK Government’s deal will raise unemployment by 4% and inflation by 2%. The Prime Minister is running for the truth, with her Government refusing to admit the damage that her deal will do.

The Government cannot claim that their November document covers their deal. Let us look at the facts. Page 17 of the Treasury analysis looks at the modelled average free trade agreement and states:

“As such, it does not seek to define or model a bespoke agreement.”

But the Prime Minister tells us she has a bespoke deal. The Treasury analysis continues:

“This scenario is not indicative of government policy, as it would not meet UK objectives including avoiding a hard border” in Northern Ireland.

There we have it in black and white: the Treasury analysis conducted last year does not account for the Prime Minister’s deal. So, I say to the Government, where is the analysis? MPs continue to be expected to vote on the proposed deal without the Government explaining the economic consequences. That is the height of irresponsibility.

The deal would be a disaster for Scotland, taking us out of the EU single market and customs union. We know that up to 100,000 jobs in Scotland are under threat. The Government are sticking their head in the sand. Everyone knows this Government are bringing our economy to its knees. We cannot allow the Tories to drive us off the cliff edge.

No Government can be allowed to bring forward a vote on such a significant matter without an economic assessment. It must be published. Shame on the Prime Minister if she fails to protect our economy; shame on those on the Government Benches if they allow businesses to collapse and jobs to be lost; and shame on any MP, including the Leader of the Opposition, if they march through the Lobby to deliver a deal that secures economic catastrophe.

No Member should believe that there is a binary choice; there is not. This is not a choice of no deal or this deal. Both are bad. Both will plunge our economy into an unmitigated disaster.

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I ask the Minister to reply, I very generously did not interrupt the flow of the right hon. Gentleman’s eloquence—or, indeed, for that matter the eloquence of his flow. However, by way of a public information notice, may I say to the House—this is not directed particularly at the right hon. Gentleman, as I have seen this burgeoning phenomenon in recent times—that an urgent question is supposed to be that, not an urgent oration? With whatever rhetorical force and insistence it is delivered, it is supposed to be a
question and I have noticed over recent times an increasing tendency on the part of Members who have secured such an opportunity, through the courtesy of the Chair, to launch into a lengthy preamble, sometimes constituting the entirety of their remarks.

For future reference, because in future I will have to cut people off if they abuse the parameters, however inadvertently, it is supposed to be a question; a sentence of preamble is one thing, but thereafter a Member should put a series of inquiries to the Minister on the subject of preamble is one thing, but thereafter a Member should put a series of inquiries to the Minister on the Treasury Bench. We will leave it there for now. The right hon. Gentleman has made his point, but I know that he will not misbehave again.

Mel Stride: I thank the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) for his vociferous oration, but vociferous orations are no substitute for the facts. Let me remind him of some of the facts in respect of the points he made. He says that we have made no analysis of the impact of these arrangements on the United Kingdom economy, and that is simply not the case. The information we have come forward with is a robust analysis of the future outcomes of the four different scenarios that we consider in that analysis. He levels the charge that we are in some way treating the United Kingdom with contempt, and that is certainly not the case. The House has been very deeply preoccupied with matters of Brexit and the nature of how we might exit the European Union, and the Prime Minister has set out that there will be further debate this time next week to be followed, in the event that we do not pass a meaningful vote, with another amendable motion to be considered by the House.

The right hon. Gentleman also says that the deal, as he terms it, would have a negative impact on the UK economy. The analysis clearly shows that, under every single scenario it analyses, it is better to have this deal than no deal or any of the alternatives. Finally, he decried the fact that we had not put forward a bespoke deal for analysis within our analysis, and that illustrates his lack of understanding of what the future political declaration is all about, which is a range of possible outcomes. That is entirely what the analysis models.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): It is perfectly obvious to all those involved in the negotiations, both the British negotiators and the EU negotiators, that if Britain were to leave the EU with no deal, it would be disastrous for the British economy in the medium to long term and extremely damaging to the economies of many EU countries, particularly those nearest the UK. Does the Minister accept that it is rather silly to think that it is useful in these negotiations to take up the simplistic view that we must pretend we are threatening to leave with no deal to improve our bargaining position? Will he reassure me that the negotiations are proceeding on the basis that both sides know that they do not want no deal and that they are therefore trying to limit the damaging consequences of risking that? What we should really pursue is retaining the benefits of the customs union and the single market and continued free trade with our largest customer in the world, as it will always be, as is being urged on us by every industrial leader in this country.

Mel Stride: My right hon. and learned Friend is entirely right that no deal would be a very unsatisfactory outcome. Of course, what the House will appreciate is that the only way to avoid a no deal is to secure a deal. That is why the Prime Minister will shortly return to Brussels to have further discussions with the EU Commissioner, Jean-Claude Juncker, in pursuit of one.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): For more than two years, businesses and trade unions have called for clarity about the Government’s Brexit deal, and for two years there has been nothing but delay and a total lack of clarity. What has been clear from the wide range of independent analyses that we have received is that the Government’s Brexit deal is not good news for our economy. Even the Government’s own modelling said that the economy would be nearly 4% smaller if the Government’s deal was agreed, equivalent to £83 billion if it happened today. It is no surprise that the Prime Minister’s deal has struggled to command any widespread support, leading to the largest ever defeat in the House of Commons.

The climate of uncertainty created by the Government’s Brexit blundering, particularly their refusal to take no deal off the table, led first to businesses delaying investment decisions. Now, decisions are being taken, but as a result of the uncertainty and insecurity created by the Government, those decisions are to cut investment and jobs. The result, as the Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, told us this month, is that business investment in 2018 fell by 3.7% in year-on-year terms.

Let us go through some of those decisions. Jaguar Land Rover has cut 4,500 jobs, Ford cut 1,000 jobs in Bridgend and Honda’s Swindon closure, supposedly not related to Brexit, will mean that 3,500 will lose their employment. In financial services, HSBC has announced that it will move seven offices from London to Paris in 2019. Deutsche Bank has said that it is considering moving 75% of its balance sheet from London to Frankfurt.

This is not just about Brexit. It is about how the Government have failed to produce an economic plan that tackles our productivity crisis and increases investment for the long term. They are a Government putting our economy at risk through failed economic management and failing to secure a Brexit deal that would protect jobs and the economy.

May I ask the Financial Secretary first, what happened to the promise of frictionless trade? Secondly, where is the detail businesses need about the promised customs arrangements? Thirdly, can the Government tell us what mysterious technology will facilitate their proposed customs arrangements? Fourthly, why have the Government failed even to mention the issue of intellectual property protections in the future partnership agreement? Finally, will the Government confirm that there has been a dilution of protections from road hauliers and passenger transport operators since the earlier Chequers commitments?

It is the role of the Government’s Treasury team, above all others, to stand up to protect our economy. It is as though the Chancellor has run out of time. The Government have run out of time. We cannot wait any longer for the answers we need and the country cannot wait any longer for the answers it deserves.
Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman accuses Government Members of having a lack of clarity on the issues around Brexit. I find that slightly rich coming from the Labour Front Bench, given that the position of the Leader of the Opposition has flip-flopped as to whether to be in or out of the customs union, and whether or not to honour the pledge that he appeared to make at his party conference for a second referendum, which appears to have been parked now. It seems to me that the Opposition are trying to ride at least two horses on this issue, if not more, and we know what happens if you do that. Mr Speaker—it tends to get rather painful in the end, as we are perhaps seeing in more recent events.

The hon. Gentleman refers to the parliamentary defeat that the Government suffered more recently. He chose to overlook the fact that the House did unite around a particular way forward, and that is to seek changes to the backstop arrangements. That is now the main focus of the negotiations that are continuing in Brussels. He referred to various impacts of employers’ decisions and changes, and the impact on the economy and employment, which gives me a good opportunity to remind him of some facts. As a country, we have about the highest level of employment in our history; we have the lowest level of unemployment since the mid-1970s; and we have halved youth unemployment since 2010. Lest it be forgotten, every Labour Government in history have always left office with unemployment higher than it was when they entered office.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Treasury issue a codicil or a clarification of its economic forecasts, looking at what happens if we leave in March under the managed World Trade Organisation model, when we spend the £39 billion-plus of the withdrawal agreement on boosting public services and boosting our economy at home? Are we bound to be better off—is that not true?

Mel Stride: It is important to recognise that the modelling is on the basis of the status quo, so the model would not take into account factors of the kind that my right hon. Friend has raised, or indeed changes in productivity or trade flows and other factors. It will be for individual Members to assess the specific issues that he raised, in that context.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Things have come to a pretty pass when here we are, 37 days from Brexit, and the House of Commons is actually discussing which of several options—all of them economically damaging—we should choose for the future of our country’s economy. Since it is the Government’s policy that they are planning for a no-deal Brexit, could the Minister explain to the House what possible justification there is for that? Given that their own economic assessment shows that it would have the most damaging impact on the British economy, how could such an act of economic self-harm ever be justified?

Mel Stride: What the right hon. Gentleman overlooks is that whilst he is absolutely right that no deal, in essence, is something to be avoided, and indeed is not in the interests either of the United Kingdom or of the European Union, that is not the same thing as saying that we should be reckless and not make sure that we are prepared for it, should it happen. That is precisely what we are doing.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Will the Financial Secretary undertake to publish to the House, in good time for the meaningful vote, the decisions that he and his colleagues are currently taking on the tariffs that would apply in the event of no deal, including which industries would be protected, at what rate, and what the impact would be on prices?

Mel Stride: Tariff policy in the event of no deal is clearly something that we are heavily engaged with. My right hon. Friend rightly identifies the aspects or elements of tariffs that relate to protecting domestic producers, and that of course will be a very important part of the considerations that we are undertaking at the moment. We will come to the House in due course with the details of those tariffs.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Brexit uncertainty is one of several factors contributing to the crisis in the car industry, which previous Governments—Conservative, Labour and coalition—did so much to promote. What assurances have the Government had from Toyota, BMW and Vauxhall that they are not going to follow the pattern of disinvestment that we are now seeing?

Mel Stride: I think the right hon. Gentleman’s question would be most appropriately directed to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy as to the specifics of the companies that he listed. Honda, a company that has already been mentioned in this respect, has made it clear that its decision to leave the United Kingdom is not a consequence of Brexit; it is more to do with international changes around cars and the position of diesel, and of course the deal that Japan has struck on zero tariffs in a few years’ time for exports from Japan to the European Union.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What would be the economic impact of membership of a customs union where access to our market was conceded to a third party without any reciprocal arrangement of our access to theirs?

Mel Stride: My right hon. Friend asks a specific, interesting question, which prompts many other questions on exactly the form of the model that he is postulating. The important thing, when it comes to access to our markets in future, is that we have a tariff policy that protects domestic producers in our economy where they require protection, and ensures that our trade remedy regime is robust, so that we can prevent the dumping of products into the UK market, and also is sufficiently liberalised such that the cost savings that would accrue from liberalised tariffs are there for the benefit both of consumers and those who use those products in their production processes within the UK market.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am sorry that the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) is not in her place to ask this question herself. Last week, she withdrew her amendment asking the Government to publish their papers on the impact of no deal. Will the Government still hold to their promise, even though she has defected from the Tory party?

Mel Stride: The analysis that the hon. Lady refers to is contained in the cross-Government analysis that we are discussing as part of this urgent question.
Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): As the Treasury’s forecasts before the referendum were woefully inaccurate, and the Office for Budget Responsibility was set up specifically to stop politicised reports coming out, would it not be better to consult a newspaper horoscope than Treasury forecasts?

Mel Stride: I hate to disappoint my hon. Friend, ingenious and amusing though his question is, but I should point out just one fallacy in the premise of his question: these are not forecasts.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): In the search for a withdrawal agreement that we can all support, can the Minister now confirm that the draft proposals have been put forward to Europe that would make a legally binding textual change to the withdrawal agreement?

Mel Stride: We have made it clear that our ambition is to strike an amended deal with the European Union, so that we put beyond doubt the issue of how permanent or otherwise the backstop arrangements might be. I am not in a position to comment on the specifics of the ongoing negotiations because I am not intimately involved with them.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): We know, of course, that the economic impact assessment on the Chequers deal showed that there would be no impact on growth in Scotland. However, does the Minister agree that nationalists have made it very clear that they will accept no deal that is put on the table, and—as I know, the Minister knows, my constituents know and businesses in Scotland know—this is all just to cause the ultimate chaos to pave the way for independence?

Mel Stride: The analysis shows that in all the scenarios being considered, including no deal, a deal based on the 2018 White Paper will give a better result for our economy for every sector, for every region and for every country—including Scotland—of the United Kingdom.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): As the Chairman of the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union said, today is D minus 37, so in some five weeks from today we will have honoured the wishes of 17.4 million UK citizens and left the European Union. Military veterans living in Cyprus will also be affected by some of these changes, not least because we recently signed a double taxation treaty with the Cypriot Government. The Minister personally intervened in that negotiation, to allow a five-year transition period for military veterans receiving state pensions to have longer to adjust. He played a blinder and honoured the covenant, and on their behalf I thank him today for everything he did to look after them.

Mel Stride: I sincerely thank my right hon. Friend for his extremely kind words. As ever, he is too modest. It was not my effort alone that secured the result that we achieved for those very important veterans in Cyprus—he raised the issue, brought it to my attention in Committee, and worked hard with me to make sure that we achieved the right, just and desired outcome.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Of course, the economic effects are already being felt. I have spoken to businesses in my constituency that have gone from profit to loss and others that have cut investment. This week I spoke to Cardiff University, which cited Brexit as a factor in the job losses that it has proposed. This is very serious, so does the Minister accept that we need to get serious? Ministers know that no deal would be a catastrophe. They know that every single Brexit would lead to a worse economic outcome for this country, so do they accept that the issue needs to go back to the people so that they can decide, based on the facts?

Mel Stride: If I may summarise, the hon. Gentleman makes the point that uncertainty is not good for business. He is entirely right, and that is all the more reason why we should get behind the deal, and get it sorted. We would then have an implementation period in which nothing would change until the end of 2020. The businesses in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency to which he referred could then begin to increase employment and invest with confidence.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): There are a great many voices in the international investor community that have made it clear that the fundamentals of the British economy remain sound, but they warn that we are in a period in which investment decisions have been put on hold, and trade deals are in abeyance. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the single most important thing that we can do right now to unlock new investment in the economy is to pass the deal?

Mel Stride: My right hon. Friend hits the nail firmly on the head. What we must do to move from uncertainty to a situation in which we can begin to concentrate on negotiating our future relationship with the European Union while everything remains stable and the same until the end of 2020 is to pass the deal as he suggests.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The fundamental problem with the British Government’s policy as it stands is that the deal offers certainty only for the duration of the transition period. Owing to the chaos in the Conservative party, is it not the case that all the deal does is move the cliff edge to the end of the transition phase?

Mel Stride: No, not at all. The deal would, first, resolve the three critical issues on which the withdrawal agreement focuses: the Northern Ireland-Ireland border; the situation as it relates to EU and UK citizens; and the financial arrangements that we will enter into as we leave the European Union. Critically, it would give us time to put into effect the political declaration, which is the other part of what has been negotiated, until the end of 2020.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): With the Scottish economy growing at half the rate of the rest of the United Kingdom, can my right hon. Friend offer any advice on economic growth to the Government north of the border?

Mel Stride: My advice, although I doubt very much that the Scottish National party will take much advice from me, is, first, get behind the deal and let us get certainty and increase investment; and secondly, accept
the result of the 2014 referendum, stay with the United Kingdom and do not end up in a situation that creates a border between the country of Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): In response to the Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee, the Minister said that it would be reckless of the Government not to plan for no deal. However, the detailed work of the Public Accounts Committee has clearly shown that the Government are not prepared for no deal and are woefully prepared for a deal. Would not the responsible thing be to delay any exit or extend the transition period and take stock, and make sure that the D-minus-37 uncertainty that is hanging over our country is resolved? It is too late just to pass the deal—uncertainty is now built in.

Mel Stride: I do not accept that we are not adequately prepared or are not deeply preparing for the possibility of no deal. This work has been going on for many months, and in far greater depth than many people appreciate. In my area of ministerial responsibility, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and borders, we have staffed up, and we have 4,500 more personnel ready for this work. There will be over 5,000 in place by 29 March. We have engaged with stakeholders across the piece by making sure that we have the most facilitated possible customs arrangements in place, particularly in respect of the short straits crossing—Dover and Calais—and so on. An immense amount of work has been carried out.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): In considering the economic impact of the proposed deal, has the Minister reflected on the key drivers of economic performance and the policies that we decide domestically—on productivity, business structure and tax structure? We need only look at what the SNP is doing in Scotland to realise where we could go wrong.

Mel Stride: I will not be drawn into the Scottish National party again, but I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is absolutely right—fundamentally, the way in which we manage the economy is one of the most important things that we do as a Government, which is why we have record levels of employment and the lowest level of unemployment since 1975. It is why we have halved youth unemployment since 2010, reduced the debt and have reduced the deficit by 80%, and it is why the economy is moving in the right direction.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): As many of my hon. Friends have said, all credible economic analysis shows that a no-deal Brexit would be disastrous for the economy. The draft withdrawal agreement would be only slightly less disastrous for the economy. Given that the report published by the Resolution Foundation today predicts an increase in child poverty of 6% by 2023—that is equivalent to an additional 1 million children living in poverty since 2016—what are the Minister’s estimates of the additional effect on child poverty of no deal or the draft withdrawal agreement?

Mel Stride: Absolute poverty is at a record low. The Government have an enviable record of helping those who require work to get into work, and I have outlined at length our success in that area. We have made sure that work pays with the benefit system and our roll-out of universal credit. Underpinning the hon. Lady’s question is a denial of the result of the 2016 referendum. The country made a decision to leave, and on that basis the decision has to be whether we have a sensible deal, as we have negotiated, or whether perhaps we end up with no deal, which I think the vast majority of Members in the House would not want to happen.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): My right hon. Friend knows, and the people of Scotland know, that the SNP Government, by their refusal to contemplate any form of withdrawal agreement whatsoever, are deliberately dragging Scotland to a no-deal situation—a crisis of their making—which they would use as a platform to demand independence. What possible excuse, to the best of my right hon. Friend’s knowledge, does the First Minister of Scotland have for not attending the Prime Minister’s Brexit cabinets?

Mel Stride: It is for the First Minister of Scotland to answer on the reasons why she attends functions and to deal with the points that my hon. Friend made. There is no doubt that this is a matter that affects the entire United Kingdom, including Scotland. I believe that the vast majority of us in the House wish to avoid a no-deal Brexit. The Scottish National party could play a pivotal role in helping us to do so by supporting the negotiated deal.

Marsha de Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is no secret that the Government’s deal will hit people’s livelihoods and jobs, along with economic growth. All credible economic analysis says that a no-deal Brexit would have a devastating effect. With just 37 days to go, does the Minister agree that we need to get serious and that we need to consider extending article 50?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady urges us to get serious. We have been extremely serious in negotiating a deal with the European Union for a considerable amount of time, and we continue to engage in that endeavour. She is absolutely right to say that most of us in this House wish to avoid no deal, but the way to do that is by Opposition and Government Members uniting and making sure that we avoid no deal and have a good deal for our country.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): We know that the Government have done no economic impact analysis of the proposed deal, but has the Minister done an economic analysis of the failure of the Secretary of State for International Trade to secure the 40 roll-over trade deals he promised would be signed one minute after 11 o’clock on 29 March?

Mel Stride: The right hon. Gentleman says that we have done no analysis of the deal, as he refers to it, but as he knows, the deal is actually the political declaration, which inherently will include a range of particular possible outcomes for that deal. That is modelled in the sensitivity analysis that we have brought forward to Parliament. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Seely, sit down young man. It is very discourteous. The Father of the House comes in—[Interruption.] Order. Do not sit there looking at your phone, man. I am speaking to you. Show some respect and manners in the Chamber.
Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): rose—

Mr Speaker: No, I do not need the hon. Gentleman to get up. Remain seated and behave with courtesy. What on earth has got into you?

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): As the Minister will know, 23% of all the European funding that comes to the UK goes to Wales. He said that discussions on the shared prosperity fund would start before Christmas; I wonder whether he has played any part in that. Leave campaigners said that Wales would not be a penny worse off if we left the European Union, so will the Minister set out how the fund will work and who will make decisions to ensure that the Welsh economy does not tank if we are to have this botched Brexit deal?

Mel Stride: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we will set out those details in due course.

Chris Elmore: Sod all!

Mr Speaker: Order.

Chris Elmore: I am sorry, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: It is not really a matter of order but very poor taste, and I expect somebody as culturally sophisticated as the hon. Gentleman to behave better than that.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Scotch Whisky Association recently reported that the value of Scotch whisky exports to Mexico last year was £131.5 million—which is up 18.5% on 2017—and that Mexico is the fourth largest export market by volume for Scotch whisky. However, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) has confirmed by letter to the Procedure Committee that the Government “do not…expect to replicate the existing Mexico spirits agreement in time for 29 March”.

What assessment has the Financial Secretary made of the impact that will have on geographic indicators for Scotch whisky and on the wider Scottish economy?

Mel Stride: This Government totally understand and get the significant importance—not just to Scotland but to the entire United Kingdom—of Scotch whisky exports, which account for some 20% of all exports of food and drink from our country. That was also signalled in our recent Budget, which once again froze duty on Scotch whisky. The hon. Lady can rest assured that we will make sure that we do the right thing by Scotland’s most important export.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Department’s assessment is that any form of Brexit will leave us worse off than if we stayed in the European Union. Will the Minister simply confirm that that is his Department’s view?

Mel Stride: The analysis, quite rightly, does not assess staying in the European Union, and there is an obvious reason for that, which is that in June 2016 the country took the decision—17.4 million people voted—to leave the European Union, and that is an outcome that this Government will respect.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Will Operation Stack have to be replicated across all major ports in the event of no deal?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady can rest assured that an extensive amount of contingency planning has gone on, and will continue to go on, in terms of the arrangements that we may have to bring into force at our ports to make sure that goods keep flowing.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): We have heard the usual nonsense of “SNP bad” from Conservative Members because we do not support this Government’s so-called deal. If the deal is so good, why are the UK Government not brave enough to take control and publish evidence on the financial impact? Has the Minister seen the Bank of England analysis that his deal will raise unemployment by 4% and inflation by 2%? If the UK Government do not agree with that analysis, why do they not disprove it by publishing their own evidence?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman says that we have not had the courage to produce an analysis of the deal, as he terms it, but we have done precisely that, as was required by this House, with a range of potential landing points for the deal set out in broad terms in the future political declaration. The Government have done just that.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Father of the House knows better than others that Margaret Thatcher was instrumental in creating the single market and in encouraging Japanese companies to come here to platform into it. Given that the EU now has a free trade agreement with Japan and the Government intend to Brexit, is not the loss of Japanese investment and associated jobs painfully predictable? Is it not now incumbent on the Government to give business and the people, including Honda workers and others, the final say on whether this botched deal is really what they want, or whether they want to stay in the EU to secure future jobs?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman overlooks the fact that the trade deal with Japan has been struck at a time when we are members of the EU. There will be an impact on car producers, and we see that as part of the reason why Honda has taken its decision. The most important thing is that we enter into an arrangement with the EU where we minimise the frictions at our borders, have a free trade agreement with the EU27 and make sure that trade continues to flow. The best way to do that is to support the deal we are negotiating with the European Union.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): The Government’s letter to Nissan promised that its ability to export to and from the EU would not be adversely affected by Brexit. How on earth can that possibly be reconciled with the Prime Minister’s red lines?

Mel Stride: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has a clear commitment to entering into a future trading relationship with the European Union based on the political declaration, which has at its heart a free trade area—tariff-free trade—and to making sure that we have the customs facilitations in place to ensure that that trade flows as freely as possible.
Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): In spite of Conservative Members shouting, “SNP bad,” the UK Treasury analysis does not cover the PM’s deal; it covers no deal, a free trade agreement, the European economic area without a customs union and the Prime Minister’s failed Chequers plan. Does that mean that the Prime Minister plans to ditch her plan for one of those or to proceed without knowing the consequences?

Mel Stride: The analysis needs to model the future political declaration, upon which the negotiations will rest. Of course, that is a relatively broad document with a number of potential outcomes. The analysis has quite rightly taken a range of possible outcomes to make that assessment and most accurately reflect the range of outcomes of where the deal itself may land.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Unlike the EEA or single market model, the PM’s deal assumes that regulatory checks will be essential to the proper functioning of separate EU and UK markets. Does not the Minister agree that we need to understand the impact of such trade barriers now?

Mel Stride: That is precisely what the analysis is setting out—a series of potential outcomes and the economic impacts thereof. Some Members are suggesting that we should analyse where we are at the moment, but that would not be appropriate given that we are leaving the European Union. At the same time, it has to be recognised that we have not yet fully concluded the new trading relationship with the European Union—the EU27—and therefore the analysis sets out a range of possible landing points for those negotiations.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): My sense is that the Minister is actually starting to admit that there is no analysis of the withdrawal agreement, so I just want to press him. The withdrawal agreement was laid before the House on 26 November, so on what specific date did the Government publish their specific economic analysis on that withdrawal agreement, and what title or Command Paper number should I ask for in the Vote Office or the Library to see the analysis?

Mel Stride: The analysis, as demanded by the House, sets out the different possible outcomes, including modelling a range of options between those contained in the White Paper of June last year and an FTA, as well as a point somewhere between the two of them, to allow an informed look at the likely impact of the various outcomes implicit in the future declaration. The hon. Gentleman will know that that is, of necessity, the way in which this analysis has to be conducted, given that we have a period during which we will be negotiating a precise exit arrangement with the European Union.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): This is Schrödinger’s analysis—even the Minister does not know whether or not it exists at this moment in time. Will he answer a simple question: does he believe that the UK would be better off if it were to leave the EU with the Prime Minister’s deal or if it were to stay in the EU?

Mel Stride: I have been asked this question a couple of times, and the reality is that it is entirely hypothetical. To end up staying within the European Union would be to fly in the face of the result of the June 2016 referendum—the referendum had a higher turnout than any other electoral event in our country’s history—and this Government are going to respect the outcome of that referendum.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): This urgent question was aimed at the Prime Minister, so I can only assume that the Minister is undergoing an audition as the future leader of the Conservative party. On that basis, if he were Prime Minister, would he take cognisance of the analysis published by the London School of Economics that shows a 5.5% hit on GDP due to the incumbent’s plan, or would he, like her, simply ignore it?

Mel Stride: What we must do is to make sure that we conclude a good deal for our country; what we must do is to make sure that we avoid a no-deal scenario; and what we must do is to make sure that we respect the result of the June 2016 referendum. That is the mission of this country and of this Government. We are negotiating the final elements of that, and as, I hope, the Prime Minister comes back with changes to that deal in relation to the backstop, if we are to do the right thing and the best thing for the whole United Kingdom, we should support it.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I am stunningly impressed by the Minister’s performance at the Dispatch Box. We can tell a big Downing Street lollipop is on its way when that intellectual heavyweight, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), has nodded in agreement with everything the Minister has said for the last three quarters of an hour.

Let me ask the Minister this: the deal ends freedom of movement—one of the reasons why I will not support it—but where can I find the economic analysis of the impact of ending freedom of movement on Scotland and on the city of Glasgow? Following his answer to the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), will the Minister also tell me, as well as the discussions he has had with HMRC, whether Revenue Scotland has been consulted?

Mel Stride: On the impact of immigration, if the hon. Gentleman looks closely at the analysis, he will see that the various scenarios I have outlined during this urgent question are analysed both in terms of the current free movement arrangements and in terms of more restrictive arrangements that would be expected to follow on from the further negotiations we will have with the European Union.

May I just make one very important point on immigration? There will have been a multitude of reasons why 17.4 million people voted to leave the European Union in 2016. There is little doubt in my mind that immigration was one of them, and it is absolutely vital that this Government stick, as we will, to our commitment to ensure that we put an end to free movement and gain control of our borders.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: There’s a big lollipop coming your way.

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman continues to chunter from a sedentary position about the merits or otherwise of lollipops, but when his appetite has been satisfied, and perhaps even if it has not been, we will move to the next urgent question.
Deprivation of Citizenship Status

1.35 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD) (Urgent Question): To ask the Home Secretary to make a statement on his use of the power to deprive a person of citizenship status.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): To keep this country safe, we must be prepared to make tough decisions. As I told the House on Monday, there must be consequences for those who back terror. More than 900 people travelled from the UK to engage with the conflict in Syria and Iraq. At least 20% have been killed in the region. About 40% have returned. They have all been investigated, and I can reassure this House that the majority have been assessed to pose no or a low security risk.

Those who stayed include some of the most dangerous, including many who supported terrorism, not least those who chose to fight or to raise families in the so-called caliphate. They turned their back on this country to support a group that butchered and beheaded innocent civilians, including British citizens; tied the arms of homosexuals and threw them off the top of buildings; and raped countless young girls, boys and women.

I have been resolute that, where those people pose any threat to this country, I will do everything in my power to prevent their return. This includes stripping dangerous individuals of their British citizenship. This power is used only in extreme circumstances, where conducive to the public good. Since 2010, it has been used about 150 times for people linked to terrorism or serious crimes.

We of course follow international law. An individual can be deprived of British citizenship only where it will not leave that individual stateless, where they are a dual national or, in some limited circumstances, where they have the right to citizenship elsewhere.

It would not be right to comment on any individual case, but I can say that each one is carefully considered on its own merits, regardless of gender, age or family status. Children should not suffer, so if a parent does lose their British citizenship, that does not affect the rights of their child.

Deprivation is a powerful tool that can be used only to keep the most dangerous individuals out of this country, and we do not use it lightly. However, when someone turns their back on fundamental values and supports terror, they do not have an automatic right to return to the UK. We must put the safety and the security of our country first, and I will not hesitate to act to protect it.

Sir Edward Davey: I thank the Home Secretary for his reply. On the legal grounds to remove citizenship because it would be "conducive to the public good", can he set out the criteria he must use to make such judgments on the public good?

As the Home Secretary knows, the law prevents him from making someone who is British by birth stateless. In November, the Home Secretary lost a case before the Special Immigration Appeals Commission on a similar decision made by his predecessor to strip two terror suspects of their British citizenship. Then, as now, the Home Office contended that the two had Bangladesh citizenship by descent, but the court ruled that that was not the case and that stripping them of British citizenship was therefore unlawful. Will the Home Secretary tell the House what changes have been made to the decision-making process since that case to give him confidence that he is acting lawfully now?

In removing British citizenship, the Home Secretary is essentially saying, “She’s somebody else’s problem,” but in the words of the former Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne:

“Which other country is supposed to look after her on our behalf?... Can you imagine the fury here if we took a French or Italian citizen who joined Islamic State?”

Surely a British citizen, born in Britain, is a British responsibility. The Home Secretary mentioned national security in his answer. Can he explain what evidence he used to conclude that this 19-year-old mother and her new-born baby would be a threat to national security? Will he confirm that the evidence required to prosecute Ms Begum for supporting terrorism is readily available from the media? Will he explain why he is so unwilling to bring her to justice?

Finally, will the right hon. Gentleman please tell the House what he expects to happen to Ms Begum’s new-born baby boy? This child is an innocent British citizen, and we have a clear responsibility to ensure his wellbeing. What steps is the Home Secretary taking to uphold that important responsibility?

Sajid Javid: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his questions, which I want to go through. But let me say to him and the House that these decisions are never taken lightly, and I am not just speaking for myself.

The power has been in place for more than 100 years. It was set out properly in the British Nationality Act 1981, since when it has been used by successive Home Secretaries. Although I will not know every decision that every Home Secretary made in the past, I can be certain that none would have taken decisions on deprivation of British citizenship lightly. There are a number of things to weigh up: national security, moral issues and legal issues all need to be carefully taken into account. No decision of this type—as serious as this—can be taken lightly.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the grounds for a citizenship decision. As I have said, I cannot talk about an individual case, although I am happy to try to answer his questions. Almost all these decisions, depending on how far back one goes, are made on what is called the “conducive test”: conducive to the public good. The test can apply to a number of issues—to the case prominent in the papers now, but also to many recent cases, including the ones that he mentioned, to do with terrorism and national security. In each of those cases, I would look at the evidence put in front of me: some of that would be secret intelligence and some would be more publicly available information. That would be used to determine the threat that the individual might pose to the country. Alongside that, officials from the Home Office, working with other partners and partner agencies, would put together a case, including a legal case, to look at a number of issues but of course
absolutely to make sure that if we went ahead and took the decision to deprive someone of their British nationality, that person would not be left stateless.

In every decision that I am aware of—I cannot think that any of my predecessors would have taken a different decision—that has been applied, every single time. Our lawyers are expert in this field and would look carefully at judgments in previous cases—the right hon. Gentleman referred to those—if they have been challenged, to see whether there are lessons to be learned. Those would be taken into account. When a decision then is to be made, I have to be, in every case, absolutely confident that it is not only conducive to the public good, but legally proper and correct, and compliant with both international and any relevant domestic law.

The right hon. Gentleman may be interested to know that Lord Carlile, an individual whom he will know well, has already made a public comment—I can refer to public comment—about the case in the press at the moment and other such cases that he has been familiar with. He is worth listening to on how this practice has taken place in the past.

The right hon. Gentleman also asked about minors. Again, I cannot talk about any particular individual or case, but in the case of a minor, clearly even more care must absolutely be taken. It is absolutely paramount in all cases to take into account the welfare of minors. I cannot refer to any particular case, but that is also in domestic legislation: in any immigration decision, including about deprivation, the welfare of a child is taken into account where that is relevant.

Finally, I say gently to the right hon. Gentleman that he was a senior member of the previous Government. He was not only in the Cabinet: for almost three years, if I remember correctly, he was a member of the National Security Council. He would have discussed counter-terrorism issues in that council on countless occasions, and it would be hard to think that the issue of deprivation never came up. Not only was he a member of a Government who made decisions on deprivation, many on terrorism grounds, but he even voted for the Immigration Act 2014, which extended the powers of deprivation. Now he stands here pretending that he knows nothing of that and trying to play politics with such an important issue. He should reflect on that.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): When I was Home Secretary, I did not deprive anyone of their citizenship, and although the power is necessary, it is being used with ever increasing frequency. Every patriotic British citizen has to accept that we have fellow citizens who are extremely unpleasant and have very unpleasant and dangerous ideas. We deal with them through the rule of law—international law and domestic law. Some people are mass murderers, but we have given up transportation or exile as a response to such cases.

As this woman is only one, but several hundred have already come back and hundreds of various western nationalities are now stranded in Syria, is it not right that we should begin at least from the position that we should accept back the people who are obviously British, by every ordinary test of the world, and that others have to accept that everybody who is obviously a national of their state? Somehow leaving these people to disperse through Syria seems to me quite a serious threat to future security. We can use the full force of the criminal law— we must—and the full resources of the intelligence services once these people have got back here. That is how my right hon. Friend is going to be able to protect the British public.

Sajid Javid: First, I should say that I always listen carefully to my right hon. and learned Friend, who is very distinguished in the House and served as a distinguished Home Secretary as well as in many other positions of responsibility. As usual, he has made an important point. All I would say is that each case should be looked at on a case-by-case basis. That is exactly what happens in the Home Office: I look at each case very carefully against what tools are available that will help protect our national security and citizens here at home and in regard to what can be done to help bring people to justice.

My right hon. and learned Friend is right to point out that many hundreds of people from the UK—more than 900, we believe—have gone in recent years to Iraq or Syria to join terrorist organisations. There are many more from other European countries and countries such as the US and Australia. We work closely with our allies. I hope he welcomes the fact that we are trying to work even more closely with them following the recent news that Daesh is being defeated in the region, in the expectation that more people may want to come back to the UK or other European countries. We must work with our allies and see how we can co-ordinate and have a more unified approach.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): On the general question of returning foreign fighters and ISIS supporters, the President of the United States said:

“The United States is asking Britain, France, Germany and other European allies to take back over 800 ISIS fighters that we captured in Syria and put them on trial.”

Does the Home Secretary accept that what the security services have been calling for is a very specialised programme of questioning, interrogation, de-radicalisation and quite possibly putting these people on trial, fashioned for this group of foreign fighters and their supporters? What is not helpful is to strip them of their nationality, which on the face of what he has said appears to be on a wholly arbitrary basis.

On the particular issue of Shamima Begum, there is no question but that she has said some very reprehensible things in the media, particularly about the Manchester bombings. However, the Home Secretary knows that the Home Office lost two cases where it attempted to strip people of their nationality on the basis of Bangladeshi nationality by descent, so why is he going forward with the same strategy now? Let me remind the Home Secretary of article 15 of the universal declaration of human rights:

“(1) Everyone has the right to a nationality.

(2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality.”

Can the Home Secretary explain how his actions are not in breach of the articles of the declaration?

Sajid Javid: I thank the right hon. Lady for her questions. She will know—I have said this at the Dispatch Box before—that we estimate about 900 people of national security interest left the UK at some point to join terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq. We estimate that about 40% have returned and approximately 20% have
dealt with. Where there is enough evidence, they have been prosecuted for their actions.

The right hon. Lady referred to the UN declaration of human rights. We absolutely abide by that and it is incredibly important that all Governments abide by it. She quoted the declaration by saying that no one should be made stateless. That is absolutely correct. No one should ever be made stateless and that is not something we would ever do. We would never take a deprivation decision if someone, as a British national, has only one nationality. We would not do that. We would not leave anyone stateless. She also suggested that these decisions are somehow arbitrary. As I said to the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), each decision is taken incredibly seriously. The facts are weighed on a case-by-case basis. It is anything but arbitrary.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I draw the attention of the Home Secretary and the House to an important article just published online in The Independent by the self-described liberal journalist Ahmed Aboudouh, who says that Egypt paid a terrible price in taking back jihadists who begged to be allowed home after the Afghan and Chechen campaigns? He points out that in November 1997, 58 western tourists were slaughtered in Luxor by returned jihadists who only a year earlier had been begging to come back. Clearly, there is a danger in letting radicalised people come back. However, given that not everyone can have their citizenship withdrawn and not everyone who has been out there can be successfully prosecuted because of the lack of evidence of what goes on in a place like that, does the solution not have to be a change in the law so that the act of giving support, aid and comfort to terrorist groups is itself a prosecutable offence?

Sajid Javid: I thank my right hon. Friend for drawing the attention of the House to that case in Egypt and for his question. He outlines that in cases—again, I am not talking about any particular case—where the only opportunity to keep out a dangerous individual is through deprivation, thereby preventing re-entry into the UK, then any Home Secretary would weigh that option very carefully. Ultimately, my No. 1 responsibility is to do everything I can to keep everyone who lives in Britain safe. The last thing anyone would want to see—he cited the example of Egypt—is a situation where someone returns who could not be kept out and goes on to kill, murder and destroy lives. The duty to keep their constituents safe should be paramount in the mind of every hon. Member. That is why the House has supported successive Acts of Parliament that allow deprivation. As I said, the Immigration Act 2014—not that long ago—actually extended the powers of deprivation. That was the will of the House. My right hon. Friend referred to changes in the law. I know he welcomes the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019, which became an Act just last week. That also gives the Government further powers to prosecute terrorists.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Let there be no question: everyone in this House deplores Daesh and this young woman’s choices in going to join them, and of course there are security issues that must be addressed. However, the young woman we are talking about is British. She was radicalised in Britain. Daesh is a worldwide phenomenon, but she is our problem. Why is the Home Secretary not bringing her home to put her on trial here to be judged by a jury of her peers? Apart from anything else, she may have valuable intelligence and insights into how she was radicalised. Why is he washing his hands of this problem? He cited what Lord Carlile had to say, but if he, like me, was listening to the “Today” programme this morning, he will have heard Baron Anderson of Ipswich, the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation from 2011 to 2017, suggest that we ought to be dealing with our own problems here.

I respectfully say that there is nothing that the Father of the House said with which I would disagree. The rule of law is fundamental to our democracy and if the Home Secretary thinks he can overlook the results of previous decisions, I would very gently suggest to him that he might want to seek a lecture about the doctrine of precedent from the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), who is sitting beside him on the Treasury Bench. Unless this young woman holds dual citizenship, he may be found to have acted in breach of UK and international law by rendering her stateless. My question is this: is that a risk he is willing to take? Is he more interested in playing to the populist gallery than respecting the rule of law?

Sajid Javid: Let me say a couple of things to the hon. and learned Lady; again, I cannot talk about an individual case, but I will try to answer her questions. Every decision on deprivation is not taken casually. Every Home Secretary who, under successive Governments, has made decisions on deprivation—are weighed up very carefully. The Government and officials in the
Government—these decisions have been made over a number of years under successive Governments—will be looking at legal cases individually, on a case-by-case basis. Of course, that would take into account any judgments in court that may be relevant. I am not proclaiming to be an expert on the law in this matter, and a decision like this would not be taken—certainly not by me—without my officials, who are the experts in the law. I know that the hon. and learned Lady is a distinguished lawyer, but I do not think that she is an expert on this particular issue, and it is important to listen to experts on this.

I also gently say to the hon. and learned Lady that it was in July, not that long ago, when another case was considered in an urgent question—the Kotey/Elsheikh case, again, related to foreign fighters—and in a similar way to now, she accused the Government of “departing from” Government policy. That was her language at the time. She went on to talk about how we were ignoring “our long-standing policy on the death penalty”—[Official Report, 23 July 2018, Vol. 645, c. 726.]

That was her accusation at the time. She will know that many months later, that case was looked at by the courts, quite properly—as is their job—and they ruled in the Government’s favour on all five counts, so if anyone is trying to play politics with this judgment, I think it is the hon. and learned Lady.

Joanna Cherry: Disgraceful. Ad hominem remarks with no basis whatsoever.

Mr Speaker: Order. Criticism by one right hon. or hon. Member of another is not a novel phenomenon. I have heard what the hon. and learned Lady said, but she has other colleagues who can pursue these matters in questioning and I am sure that she will take that opportunity. It would not be right for me to intercede at this point, other than to request that the House hears from Sir Desmond Swayne.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The Home Secretary is right to want to prosecute anyone who has been involved in terrorist activity here or abroad and we should support him in doing so. However, on the citizenship issue, he said that he will accept that the same principle would apply to other people who might be citizens of Bangladesh or the Netherlands, who might either have potential citizenship in the UK or actual dual citizenship rights, and that if those countries removed their citizenship first—even though this was somebody who had committed crimes in that country who had never lived here—we would somehow be expected to accept those citizens?

Sajid Javid: I understand why the right hon. Lady referred to a particular case and I will not comment on that, but on her broader question, it is worth reminding the House that every time such a decision is made, it is done on a case-by-case basis. By definition, each case is going to have a different set of facts—sometimes completely different—and we will take all those into account. In every single situation, there is no question of making anyone stateless under any circumstances. Not only would making someone stateless be unlawful, it would be morally wrong, and that is not something that we would do. In any case, and certainly with any decision that I have made, I am perfectly comfortable that the analysis is done properly by expert legal advisers. I would not make such a decision unless I was absolutely confident on the statelessness issue.

The right hon. Lady also referred to citizenship of other countries and how that may or may not work. She will know, as the Chair of the Select Committee on Home Affairs, that the citizenship rules can be very complex. They are complex in our country and have similar complexity in many other countries. However, we make sure that we work with lawyers, sometimes including foreign lawyers, if necessary, to make sure that our interpretation of how citizenship laws work is correct.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): As somebody who served in the ISIS campaign, I am very aware of the difficulty of extraditing and prosecuting returning UK ISIS fighters. Does the Home Secretary agree that the priority is monitoring those 400-plus fighters who are back in the UK? Is he aware of how many of them were actually fighters? How many of those people are likely to be prosecuted, and if he cannot supply the information now, would he be able to give it to me or the House in some form at a later date? Does he agree now that there is also a case for an updated and renewed treason Bill or Act to cope with these sorts of incidents in future?

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for his question. As I mentioned a moment ago, we estimate that of the 900 or so people who left the UK to join terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq, approximately 40% have returned. He asks how many have been prosecuted. Each one is investigated—that does not necessarily lead to a prosecution, but anyone who returns should absolutely expect to be questioned and investigated, and prosecuted where possible. I believe that around 40 have been successfully prosecuted. Some have received very significant sentences. I am aware of at least one case in which I believe a sentence of more than 10 years on terrorism-related charges was given by the courts. I will also see whether I can provide any more information to my hon. and gallant Friend.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): As the shadow Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), noted, in Greater Manchester we have
particular reason to find the conduct and utterances of Ms Begum abhorrent. We also want to understand why and how she apparently became radicalised in this country, as indeed, have young people from my constituency who have also tragically gone to Syria to fight with the jihadis. How can the Home Secretary assure us that we are taking every possible step to understand how that home-grown radicalisation occurs and what we can do to prevent it in future if we are not able to bring back our own citizens and interrogate, investigate and, if appropriate, prosecute them?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady raises a really important point. We have been talking about cases that hon. Members have raised in the House involving people who sadly went on to join terrorist organisations, but how we prevent that from happening in the first place is just as important.

The hon. Lady will know that intensive work is being done across Departments, including through programmes led by the Home Office. We are doing our best. There are many people, especially young people, who seem vulnerable and are preyed upon by extremists. The first thing is to find out who they are—that is what we try to do with the Prevent programme, particularly through the Prevent duty—and then to develop bespoke programmes working around those individuals. Each case will be different. In the most intense cases, people move into the Channel programme. Last year, 7,000 people were referred to Prevent and of them about 400 went into the Channel programme. Many of those referrals were to do with Islamist terrorism, but almost half of the Channel referrals last year were to do with right-wing terrorism and extremism. We want to fight all types of extremism, and we work throughout the country, including in Greater Manchester, to do so. Just a few months ago, I went to Bethnal Green and looked carefully at the programme there, and I am very happy with what I have seen so far.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): This country is admired around the world for its sense of decency, fair play and the rule of law, which is why I am concerned about this case. I realise the Home Secretary cannot talk about this specific case, but can he tell us how many other people have had their nationality withdrawn, be it British or dual?

Sajid Javid: It is worth pointing out again—it cannot be said often enough—that nationality will be withdrawn only where the Home Secretary is satisfied that it is conducive to the public good and that such action will not leave the individual stateless. As I said at the start of the urgent question, this power has been used more than 150 times since 2010. I do not have the number for before 2010, but it was used by successive Home Secretaries under successive Governments prior to 2010.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I am sure that many of us recall the attack in Manchester, and I am sure I speak for everyone in saying that security in relation to such attacks is a priority. That goes without saying. That said, how can the Home Secretary defend the dangerous concept of what is now in effect a two-tier citizenship system and invoke the name of national security in doing so? Surely—I am thinking how people might perceive this outside—this plays to the sense of injustice and the brainwashing imperative of those seeking to radicalise young people in communities across the United Kingdom. How does he anticipate remediating the underlying causes of radicalisation when he opts to act unilaterally instead of making use of a rigorous justice system? It is through justice that we achieve what we want, which is a sense of fairness in society, and if we are unfair in society, he loses the moral high ground. I beg him to consider how he uses justice to best effect.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady lays down a fair challenge in asking that in such cases we—whether me or Ministers more generally—think very carefully about fairness and the impact of our decisions. I understand why she raised the issue of people who would look for excuses to try to radicalise populations and communities. That should weigh heavily in any decision on deprivation as against the Government’s responsibility to keep their citizens safe. It is worth keeping something else in mind. Let us imagine a hypothetical case where there is the possibility to keep a terrorist out of the country, but the Home Secretary decides not to, for some reason, and that that individual returns, continues to preach extremism and radicalise others, and potentially even carries out terrorist attacks. It is worth thinking about the impact of that on communities and how it could radicalise people.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Earlier today, several Labour MPs said that removing British citizenship from dual nationals accused of terror offences and acts against the British state could harm dual nationals residing abroad who get themselves into serious trouble. Is it not the case that, typically, countries deport back to this country British citizens convicted of serious crimes in those countries?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend asks me about deportations. In the case of deportations from the UK, we are talking about individuals who, for one reason or another, if they have broken laws, we would seek to deport. The best example in the UK is probably the deportation of serious foreign national offenders once they have served their sentence in a British prison. We take a case-by-case approach, but where appropriate we would look to deport. As he pointed out, many countries seek to deport back to the UK British citizens abroad who have committed offences once they have completed their sentence.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I have been tackling radicalisation and terrorism since 9/11. What sets us apart from those radicalisers and terrorists and their barbaric ideology is the rule of law. We need to tackle them with the rule of law, not kneejerk reactions to tabloid headlines. The Government could have done something about this in the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019, but there is no mention of it in that Act. You have the terrorism prevention and investigation measures. How many of the people you are looking at in terms of radicalisation are currently on a TPIM? You have no records of people—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not looking at anything. I have no record of anything. The hon. Gentleman has been in the House long enough to know that debate
goes through the Chair. He should not say “you” because “you” does not refer to the Minister; it refers to me, and I am an innocent in this matter.

Mr Mahmood: My apologies, Mr Speaker.

The Home Secretary has no idea what is going on with TPIMs. How many people who have been radicalised are having no action taken against them in relation to their capability to strike terrorism and radicalisation in this country? Will he give me some figures on TPIMs, and what control does he have over those?

Sajid Javid: I have seen for myself some of the work the hon. Gentleman has done, particularly in the west midlands, to help with deradicalisation, and I commend him for it. It is important that he and others continue such work and continue working with local authorities and other partners in doing so.

The hon. Gentleman asked me about deprivations generally and talked about the rule of law. Of course we operate according to the law, as does any Government, and that law is set by this House. I referred earlier to the British Nationality Act 1981 and the Immigration Act 2014. Both talk about deprivation. The 2014 Act extended the provisions for how deprivations can be done. He was a Member of the House in 2014. I am not suggesting he voted for the Act—I do not know; the point is it was debated and is now the law. This is the rule of law. As well as that, we are signed up, quite rightly, to a number of international conventions that we care deeply about. The right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) mentioned the UN universal declaration of human rights. There is also the convention on the rights of the child, which is relevant in some cases. Those are all hugely important, and we absolutely abide by them.

I cannot stress enough that we would not make a decision that had not been looked at carefully by Government lawyers—experienced lawyers who have worked for many Governments—and which we did not feel to be absolutely lawful. I do not pretend for a second that Governments—and which we did not feel to be absolutely lawful. I do not pretend for a second that Governments—sometimes declared unlawful if challenged—that has happened under many Governments, and when it does happen, Governments have to listen—but we strive every time to make a completely lawful decision. We have in the past published transparency reports in the House on deprivations—the last one, which was published in May, I think, gives year-by-year numbers—and we will continue to be transparent. The hon. Gentleman also asked about TPIMs. I do not have the exact numbers, but I will write to him.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): In fighting Daesh, we faced a new phenomenon. People through their own actions decided to join and embrace a new foul and warped state. It was a matter for them to choose. May I therefore commend my right hon. Friend for the bold action he has taken, which I am sure is supported across the country? Will he reassure me that our position on these difficult issues will be rooted in British values and proper judicial processes?

Sajid Javid: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that reassurance. He is right to talk about the threat from Daesh. It is not the first and will not be the last terrorist organisation that we have to confront, but the number of people who left Britain to join that vile terrorist organisation, and to commit the most horrific crimes either themselves or by supporting what it wanted to achieve, was unprecedented. I do not think that any country that has faced a similar problem—citizens leaving to join such organisations—that has a perfect answer to deal with it, which is why it is important that we work with other countries, which we will do. I assure my hon. Friend absolutely that we must always uphold our values. As I said in answer to the previous question, we must ensure every single time that we act properly and at all times within the law.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The actions and words of Shamima Begum are reprehensible and almost undoubtedly illegal, but we are not to know because the Secretary of State has rejected due process and the law that it is his duty to uphold, and has instead chosen to treat British citizenship as a privilege accorded to those with whom he agrees. He is also abandoning our responsibility to pursue and prevent terrorists made in Britain, and in the process ceding the moral high ground to President Trump. Do the Secretary of State’s actions do justice to Britain or to his political ambitions?

Sajid Javid: I have had some dealings with the hon. Lady in the past. She is a wonderful woman, and she is a lot better than that question. Perhaps it is a Whip’s handout—that is not her. Much of her question has already been answered in this urgent question, but I am happy to say it again. We must ensure that at all times we are fair, that we are acting morally and also lawfully. As I have said, such important a decisions cannot be taken lightly. The facts must be weighed very carefully, and decision taken only when all alternatives have properly been taken into account.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): The Home Secretary has an incredibly difficult job. The interests of the public in this country are paramount and he must keep them safe. We have a fine tradition in this country of not exporting our problems around the world, but of trying to solve problems around the world. Does he consider that we have sufficient powers to ensure that people coming from abroad who may pose a risk are contained? If so, does he also consider that it may be worse for humankind if individuals with problems are exported to parts of the world where there are not such safe containment laws as ours?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend asks whether we have sufficient powers. It is right that we keep our powers under review at all times. If we feel that things need to change, and if that change can be brought about, we would bring it to the House, as we did very recently with the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019.

It is worth saying that no matter what powers we have, any prosecution would require sufficient evidence because of our absolute commitment to due process. That is incredibly difficult when people have gone abroad, joined terrorist organisations and carried out the most horrific attacks. It can be incredibly difficult to achieve justice by obtaining evidence that we can present in a court of law under whatever powers we have. That is why, as Home Secretary, I must look carefully at all the powers at my disposal. In some cases—and only in some cases—when it is deemed that the best way to keep
this country safe is through deprivation of citizenship for someone who has more than one nationality, that should be taken as a serious option.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): May I bring the Home Secretary back to the answer he gave to the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), who is no longer in her place? He referred to the Prevent programme. It clearly does very valuable work, but, as far as I am aware, it is a UK-based programme, so the question remains: in what way can he find out why or how a young woman was radicalised when she was a child if she is in a camp in Syria? What assessment has he made of the risks of a large number of people remaining in a camp in Syria and developing networks there that provide us with a risk here at home?

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Gentleman rightly brings to the attention of the House the fact that these are tough decisions that have to be made after weighing a number of factors. I will not refer to an individual case, but he talks about people in camps abroad who are members of terrorist organisations. We might have limited evidence of what they have done as members of those organisations, but we know that they have joined. I hope he accepts that there are risks of their staying in the region and of returning to the UK—there are risks both ways, which is why each case should be looked at individually and judged on its own facts. I do not pretend for a second that these are easy decisions. Any Home Secretary must take all factors into account and everything should be balanced out, but ultimately it is my responsibility to keep our citizens safe. That must be paramount in my mind when making decisions.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I strongly welcome the action taken by the Home Secretary. There has been a lot of use of the word “arbitrary”, but surely the key point is that the young lady chose voluntarily to go out and join and live among a terrible regime that has behaved in a barbaric fashion. Has he reflected on whether she wants to come back because she has regret and feels remorse, or whether she wants to come back because the caliphate is being defeated? My constituents and feels remorse, or whether she wants to come back because she has regret—

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend will understand if I do not talk about a particular case. As I said earlier from the Dispatch Box, we believe that more than 900 people have gone to Syria and Iraq to join terrorist organisations, many of whom have promoted that fact. As I said a moment ago, it is hard to gather evidence on what they may or may not have done, but we know the cause with which they have aligned. We know what those terrorist organisations stand for, their objectives and the kind of things that they do.

It is worth recalling that Daesh is a lot weaker than it was even a year ago, but certainly a lot weaker than it was when many people went out and joined it two or three years ago. It is not surprising that those who are there and who seem to be being pushed out of the region want to come home. They might have that thought, but we must know about each individual. It is our duty and our right to think carefully about the best interests of this country and how best to protect our citizens.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I have listened for the last while to many people from the Father of the House to honourable, right honourable, learned and gallant Members, and I have listened carefully to the Home Secretary’s responses to each and every one of them, but I still cannot get over the fact that the case that he will not refer to, as is proper, but that everyone else is referring to and the press are referring to, concerns a 15-year-old girl who was radicalised, went to Syria, has lost two children and is now a lactating mother—and she requires that her citizenship be rescinded? The Home Secretary keeps talking about security; can he explain to me in what regard she will affect the security of this country if she is allowed back in?

Sajid Javid: Again, I hope the hon. Lady will understand that I cannot talk about an individual case; I hope she recognises that. But if individuals have voluntarily left this country, joined a terrorist organisation and have for a number of years been supporting that terrorist organisation, it is self-evident that individual is a risk by dint of the fact that they have joined a terrorist organisation. As I said a moment ago, some of the acts of this organisation are there for us to see. I therefore hope that the hon. Lady can understand why such individuals could be a threat to this country if they returned, and that if I have a proper reason, based on the facts put in front of me in each case—this should be done on a case-by-case basis—that the best way to protect our national interest, and in particular the security of people living in the UK, is to exclude someone from re-entering the UK, that surely has to be the right decision.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I was eager anticipation. Meanwhile I call Rehman Chishti.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: We have not got to points of order yet, but if the right hon. Gentleman wishes to pose an inquiry, having consulted his scholarly cranium, he is welcome to do so.

Sir John Hayes: I wanted to raise a point of order, Mr Speaker, but I am very happy to wait until you feel it is the right time to do so. I seek your advice, Mr Speaker: now or later?

Mr Speaker: No, no, what I was saying to the right hon. Gentleman, I thought clearly in terms that brooked no misunderstanding, especially by one of his perspicacious intelligence, was that now was not the time for a point of order, but if he wanted to put a question he could. If he wants to wait for his point of order, we will all wait with bated breath, beads of sweat on our brows and eager anticipation. Meanwhile I call Rehman Chishti.

Rehman Chishti: Having previously successfully pushed the Government to accept the correct terminology, Daesh, to defeat the idea, the ideology and the appeal that is sucking in hundreds of individuals from the UK to
Sajid Javid: Each case is looked at individually on a case-by-case basis. My hon. Friend mentioned France, and the UK and France have probably had the most people go from their countries to Syria or Iraq as foreign fighters, so we work closely with our French counterparts, and other European friends, on whether there can be a more co-ordinated approach to this challenge that we face. Cases involving individuals who may have the nationality of other countries as well are again dealt with on a case-by-case basis. As I have said, we would need to satisfy ourselves that they do genuinely have the nationality of another country before they can be deprived of their British nationality.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has now acquired the dubious distinction of being known in the House, I think for ever after, as among other things a cheeky chappie, as he somewhat abused my generosity in asking a question of that length. But never mind, he has done it now, and he can repent at leisure.

Sajid Javid: Points of Order

2.35 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am saving the hon. Gentleman; it would be a pity to squander him at too early a stage of our proceedings. We will come to him in due course, but I think the House is in a state of great animation at the point of order that is going to be forthcoming from the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes).

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): On a much trailed and therefore much anticipated point of order, Mr Speaker. Last April, the Prime Minister announced a children’s funeral fund to give support and solace to those who have loved and lost. Despite the fact that the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), I and others have raised this matter subsequently in this Chamber, nothing more has been heard. Have you had notice, Mr Speaker, of a statement from Ministers, and if you have not, what further steps might I take to ensure that this pledge is honest and honoured, because no one should break promises to the broken-hearted?

Mr Speaker: Indeed not, and the right hon. Gentleman expresses himself with his customary eloquence. The short answer is that a number of recourses are available to him. If he believes the matter warrants the urgent attention of the House, he could seek to use the mechanism that would secure, with my agreement, the presence of a Minister in the Chamber to answer his question on the matter; the earliest he could possibly do that would be tomorrow, and it is open to him to do that. Alternatively, it may be that the right hon. Gentleman will take his customary seat in the Chamber for his usual participation in the business question tomorrow morning. We have become accustomed over a substantial period to hearing the eloquent and often very poetic inquiries from the right hon. Gentleman, often infused with some philosophical reflections and even references to his favourite authors as well, and that is a treat that I think might lie in store for the House.

Craig Mackinlay: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last week at Prime Minister’s questions, the right hon. Gentleman the Leader of the Opposition chose to mention my constituency of South Thanet, whereupon graciously, Sir, you allowed me the very last PMQ. I will quote what the right hon. Gentleman said:

“The Secretary of State’s decision to award the contract to Seaborne has increased the budget deficit of Thanet Council, the owners of Ramsgate port, by nearly £2 million.”—[Official Report, 13 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 877.]

That figure was clearly incorrect, as in a period of just 51 days that would amount on an annualised basis to £4.6 million, which represents some 70% to 80% of the entire revenue of the council.

As a courtesy to the right hon. Gentleman, I alerted him to my concern that he might have misled the House, and I did that within an hour of him making that statement. I also alerted you, Mr Speaker, to my concerns on this matter. A week later, I have heard nothing from the right hon. Gentleman, nor has he, upon my request,
pointed me to the figures on which he has relied to make a statement to the House from the Dispatch Box.

On that same day, the right hon. Gentleman also highlighted the fact—at least from his point of view—that £800,000 had been spent with appropriate professionals on due diligence for the Seaborne contract. That is again factually incorrect; that money was spent to do due diligence across the three contracts of over £100 million, not just on the very small Seaborne contract.

I alerted the right hon. Gentleman to my concerns both last week and this morning by hand-delivered letter, and I also delivered the same letter to you, Mr Speaker. I note that the right hon. Gentleman, having been alerted to my concerns, is not in his place to redress the issue at hand, and I now seek your guidance on how the error can be addressed in this place and what other measures I might take at your leisure.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving notice of his intention to raise this point of order. That was typically courteous of him. I also note that he had informed the Leader of the Opposition of his intention to raise the matter. Moreover, I am conscious—[Interruption.] It would be helpful if I were able to communicate this point to the hon. Gentleman without the background hubbub coming from the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier), who is conducting what is no doubt an absolutely fascinating conversation, but which can wait. I am conscious that the hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) has written to the Leader of the Opposition because I have received the copy that he sent to me.

The short answer is that if the Leader of the Opposition believes that he has inadvertently misled the House, it is open to him to correct the record. Each and every Member takes responsibility for the veracity of what he or she says in this place. I simply make the point—I am not trying to argue the toss with the hon. Gentleman; that is not for me to do—that the Leader of the Opposition might have a different view of this matter and that his exegesis of the facts might differ from that of the hon. Gentleman. After all, that is very much in the nature of political discourse and argument. This is a subject of dispute, and perhaps of continued scrutiny.

All I can say to the hon. Gentleman is that it is perfectly open to him to continue to write letters to the Leader of the Opposition if he feels that that would be a productive exercise or if he finds it therapeutic. It is alternatively open to him to take the short journey from here to the Table Office to put down some written questions. That is something that I once did myself on quite a substantial scale, so I would certainly not cavil at him doing it; it is absolutely his right. Meanwhile, he has put his concerns and his view of the facts on the record with his customary force.

Asylum Seekers (Permission to Work) (No. 2)

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

2.41 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for certain asylum seekers to be granted permission to work; and for connected purposes.

Prior to my election as an MP, I worked for a number of years with refugees and asylum seekers who had fled violence and genocide in the former Yugoslavia. Those people left behind their homes, their friends and in most cases their wider families as they searched for safety upon our shores and, crucially, the chance to rebuild their lives. In my own constituency, we have a long history of welcoming refugees. At a meeting in Muswell Hill led by Lord Alf Dubs—himself a refugee from Czechoslovakia who was brought to the UK in 1939 by the Quaker-led Kindertransport train—the audience was asked who among them had a family connection with refugees. Nearly everyone raised their hand.

A group of my constituents runs Haringey Welcomes Refugees to provide a warm welcome for Syrian refugee families and to help with practical support and friendship. As we marked Holocaust Memorial Day in Haringey last month, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and I gathered with our community to hear the personal stories of survivors of totalitarianism. We also heard the stories of survivors of the genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia, and of many others who have found sanctuary here in the UK. As I remember and reflect on the stories of those families, I am immensely proud that my first ever ten-minute rule Bill seeks to support asylum seekers by empowering them to rebuild their lives by allowing them to work and contribute to society.

I am pleased to have cross-party support for the Bill. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), who has been making the case to lift the work ban for some time, as well as to the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for his work, most notably on the Syrian refugee crisis, and of course to the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), who presented her Bill on asylum seekers’ work rights on 10 January. I also pay tribute to the excellent work of the all-party parliamentary group on refugees, under the fantastic chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), who leads a great coalition of supporters, as well as to the many charities and stakeholders who have really pushed on this issue.

Under the current rules, asylum seekers are able to apply for the right to work only after they have been waiting for a decision on their claim for over a year. Even then, the few people who are granted such permission are rarely able to work in practice because their employment is restricted to the narrow list of highly skilled professions included on the Government’s shortage occupation list. We have an effective ban on asylum seekers working. I am sure that all hon. Members present today will have their own experiences of people attending their advice surgeries to express their deep frustration at this reality.
Just before Christmas, an old gentleman attended my surgery who had been waiting for a decision on his asylum application for over 12 years. He is desperate to work, but has now been referred to mental health services to be treated for depression. He is in utter despair at a system that has forced him out of employment and into poverty for so many years.

Comparatively, the UK receives far fewer asylum applications than our European neighbours. We know that the total number of UK applicants represents a very small fraction of our national population—just 0.03% of the current UK labour force. In lieu of the right to work, asylum seekers can access a support payment of £5.39 per day. That allowance needs to cover clothing, transport, food, personal hygiene and often the cost of their asylum application. It is inhumane to force people who are seeking safety from persecution into poverty. It also reduces the chances of smooth economic and social integration and, in doing so, causes longer-term problems.

The OECD has found that legal barriers to employment create the risk of people resorting to informal and sometimes illegal work, which can manifest itself in the form of modern slavery. A change in the law would help to strengthen the Government’s strategy on tackling modern slavery. It is our duty to ensure that our asylum system is morally sound. Whether an asylum application is successful or whether it is ultimately rejected, we must remember throughout the process that the applicants are human beings with needs. There is strong public support for a change that provides refugees with the human dignity of being able to provide for themselves and their families.

Beyond the strong moral case, there is an equally compelling economic argument. Currently, we have around 11,000 adults who have waited more than six months for a decision on their asylum application. The average annual cost of supporting one such person is approximately £5,563, including support payments and accommodation costs. In a scenario in which we extended the right to work to this relatively small group of people, the financial picture would be quite different. Assuming that an individual worked full time on the national minimum wage, they would pay a total tax and national insurance contribution of £1,400 into the Treasury.

In reality, we know that many asylum seekers are highly educated, with university degrees in the fields of law, pharmacy and optometry to name but a few, but those associated professions often fall outside the occupation shortage lists. Lifting the ban would provide an opportunity for the Government to generate larger tax revenues, given that the average UK earner pays £5,745 in tax and national insurance into the Treasury. Estimates indicate an annual economic gain of £42.4 million for the Government as a result of benefit savings and additional tax revenues. This concept has fiscal and moral merit.

I now appeal directly to Government Front Benchers as I quote the words of the then Secretary of State at the former Department for Communities and Local Government—now the Home Secretary—from his “Integrated Communities Strategy” Green Paper. He stated that it was the Government’s ambition “to build strong integrated communities where people—whatever their background—live, work, learn and socialise together, based on shared rights, responsibilities and opportunities.”

That is an important statement of intent, which we can all agree to. The Home Secretary also indicated his desire to review asylum policy when he responded to my oral question in December 2018, and I hope that the Government will take forward my Bill’s proposal at the earliest opportunity.

Before concluding, as I still have a tiny bit of time on the clock and as it is half term, even though one would not think this was supposed to be a recess week with all the goings on, I thought that I would briefly read from a poem called “Changed” by Miss Grace Barry, a student at Our Lady of Muswell Hill Catholic Primary School, from the “Welcome to Haringey! Poems from our schools” competition. She wrote:

“I watch her step off the bus on the 1st of May,
A permanent scowl etched on her face,
Eyes of coldness looking around,
Knotted, rough hard and a worn-out suitcase...
I watched her step off the bus on the 1st of September,
A permanent grin etched on her face,
Eyes of warmth looking around,
Brushed, silky hair and a brand new suitcase,
As she laughs and jokes, ‘What are you looking at?’
Her accent light and her tone friendly,
Her light footsteps skipping away,
With friends by her side,
Changed by a Haringey welcome.”

I hope that we can all go forward with the spirit of Miss Grace Barry from the constituency of Hornsey and Wood Green and be hopeful and positive. Instead of bigotry being emboldened, perhaps we can be positive about the newly arrived in our communities and think about making this Bill law.

Question put and agreed to.
Ordered.

That Catherine West, Mr Andrew Mitchell, Dame Caroline Spelman, Anna Soubry, Christine Jardine, Kate Green, Mr David Lammy, Alex Sobel, Deidre Brock, Alex Cunningham, Janet Daby and Caroline Lucas present the Bill.

Catherine West accordingly presented the Bill.
Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March, and to be presented (Bill 338).

ESTIMATES (LIAISON COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 145(3)).

That this House agrees with the Report of the Liaison Committee of 19 February 2019: That a day not later than 18 March 2019 be allotted for the consideration of the following Estimates for financial year 2018-19: Department for Education, and Department for Work and Pensions.—(Amanda Milling.)

Question agreed to.
The proposed amendments fall into three main categories. First, cross-references to EU instruments are amended so that they are operable after EU exit. The amendments modify cross-references to the 2006 directive contained in the principal regulations. The modifications are essential to ensure the operability of the principal regulations following the UK’s exit from the EU. They are common amendments that appear throughout Northern Ireland, England and Wales and Scotland EU exit statutory instruments. For example, the amendments substitute references to “Member State” or “Member States” with “Northern Ireland”, the “Competent Authority” or the “UK or a constituent UK territory”, and references to the EU are changed to the UK. The amendments also include the substitution of references to articles in the directive with references to provisions in the domestic Northern Ireland regulations that transposed the directive to ensure a reference point in the regulation itself, rather than to an EU directive. Some cross-references contain further cross-references to the directive and, in these cases, the cross-references have been followed through to modify all the necessary provisions.

Secondly, a group of provisions will be redundant or inoperable in Northern Ireland law after EU exit. This instrument makes an amendment to the Alien and Locally Absent Species in Aquaculture Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 to remove the reference to a representative of the European Commission being able to accompany an inspector of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, because it will no longer be appropriate for such an official to attend after we leave the EU.

Finally, there are cross-references to directly applicable EU instruments to reflect technical amendments made to such instruments by other UK-wide SIs. Part 2 of annex 4 to directive 2006/88 contains listed diseases. It was replaced with a new annex 1A inserted into regulation 1251/2008 by the Aquatic Animal Health and Alien Species in Aquaculture (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 to enable the UK to amend the list of diseases in retained EU law following exit from the EU. The amendments are made to replace references to annex 4 of the directive to annex 1A to the regulation, which will ensure correct references to retained EU law in the domestic Northern Ireland regulations.

Given the unique biodiversity of the island of Ireland, DAERA officials work closely with their Irish counterparts on a range of fish health issues, especially with regard to contingency planning, trade matters, disease issues and biosecurity. Co-operation on such matters was in place long before we joined the EU and will continue when the UK leaves the EU. There is a close working relationship across the island of Ireland on fish health and aquaculture.
The intention of the regulations is to maintain the status quo and keep the aquatic animal health and alien species in aquaculture regimes functioning much as they do now. The regulations do not create new policy or change existing policy. As a result, no significant impacts are expected to arise from them. In moving this statutory instrument, a workable legal framework underpinning business as usual in the aquatic animal health and alien and locally absent species in aquaculture regimes will be preserved after exit.

John Redwood: I seek to clarify my earlier question, which did not seem to get through. Is the Department working on a better regime for fishing in general, and for fish health in particular, for once we have left? This is a great opportunity, and fishing is an area that has been very badly damaged by EU membership.

George Eustice: My right hon. Friend will be aware that the purpose of these regulations is to ensure that we have an operable law book on day one after leaving the European Union, but he will also be aware that, separately, the Fisheries Bill is going through the House—it has completed its Committee stage and will return shortly on Report. I can confirm that the Bill has a dedicated provision that gives the Government power to legislate on the current regime and make any necessary changes. These regulations are simply about ensuring we make retained EU law operable, and I commend them to the House.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): I put on record the Opposition’s general concern about how the Government are scheduling secondary legislation and the limited means of scrutiny it offers. Given the serious dangers that would accrue if we get any of these statutory instruments wrong, it is regrettable that, nearly two years after invoking article 50, we are now having to rush everything through in the last few days. Neither Opposition parties nor other stakeholders can have any confidence about when each statutory instrument will be debated. Even when they have been scheduled, we sometimes do not know from hour to hour.

The explanatory memorandum states:

“Without this instrument… This may prevent trade between Northern Ireland and the EU and Third Countries after the UK leaves the EU.”

It also states:

“If this legislation is not progressed then this would result in an incomplete statute book on Day 1 of the UK’s withdrawal from the EU.”

The Opposition will support these regulations today, but I would be grateful if the Minister addressed our questions about the process, about what replaces EU procedures and, specifically, about the replacement for Council directive 2006/88.

Some stakeholders were not able to comment on this statutory instrument because they needed to prioritise many other much larger, more contentious pieces of secondary legislation, such as the Floods and Water (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 and the Fisheries (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, both of which we opposed recently. We run the risk of exposing ourselves to unintended consequences if we continue to pass rushed legislation that has not had external scrutiny.

We have, at most, 90 minutes to consider this statutory instrument, and there is no real chance for amendments. There has been no time for impact assessment and only very limited consultation. Can the Minister be absolutely certain that no mistakes have been made, such as the blunder on the revocation of some of the powers of the inshore fisheries conservation officers as part of the Government’s so-called red tape challenge?

The explanatory memorandum states that this statutory instrument has “no, or no significant, impact”.

Can the Minister tell us how significant an impact would have to be before it is reckoned to be significant?

One consequence of leaving the EU will be the potential loss of pan-European scientific expertise. We currently have access to Europe-wide research and analysis to shape our decisions. What steps are being taken to ensure that the scientific advice will be of the same technical and authoritative standard after these regulations are transposed? What additional funding will be allocated to Northern Ireland research to plug this gap? How will we continue to tap into EU scientific expertise, and what negotiations are taking place on continued participation in the EU’s intelligence-sharing networks?

Although we do not doubt our scientific community’s expertise on aquatic animal health and plant life, unless we adhere doggedly to European Union standards, over which we will no longer have any control, we will be placing an extra workload on our scientific advisers, which they may not have the resources to fulfil.

The Minister mentioned the changes to directive 2006/88 but, for the avoidance of doubt, what will replace the EU standing committee on the food chain and animal health in Northern Ireland? Given that the Northern Ireland Assembly is not sitting, and probably will not be sitting after 29 March, what elected body will take on the responsibilities of the European Parliament in this matter, as per the procedure referred to in article 62(2) of the directive?

The explanatory memorandum states:

“Whilst the UK will be under no legal obligation to adhere to EU rules for aquatic animal health following EU exit, failure to do so could result in the UK being unable to trade in aquaculture…products with EU Member States and third countries.”

The UK exports a very large proportion of fish and shellfish, so it seems important that there should be a similarly rigorous system for establishing disease-free zones—one that mirrors the current EU process—otherwise there would be a very real likelihood that the EU would refuse to take Northern Ireland’s produce in future. What plans does the Minister have to mirror the current level of scrutiny for declaring disease-free zones?

This statutory instrument changes the Northern Irish law that implements directive 2006/88, and it is designed to preserve the existing level of environmental protection by maintaining the current approach to aquatic animal health and the management of aquaculture. The Minister mentioned regulation 2016/249, which will apply from 2021, and I fail to understand some of the links in this statutory instrument—I apologise for that, but I could not find anyone who does understand them—so will he explain what his Department will do?

What are the Minister’s plans to introduce UK legislation to implement the commitments provided for in the new EU animal health strategy? What assessment has the
Department made of the influence of climate change on the emergence of new diseases, the prevalence of existing diseases and the geographic distribution of disease agents and vectors, as mentioned in the EU animal health strategy 2007 to 2013? If the Department has not undertaken any such assessment, and has no plans to do so, does it not mean that we will need to continue to rely on the EU to do this work for us and that we will have to adhere to whatever further directives the EU comes up with?

We will support these regulations because we need to address the deficiencies in domestic legislation that will arise from Brexit. Northern Irish law must be able to operate after the UK leaves the EU, and it must not leave Northern Ireland unable to trade with European Union countries including, of course, the Republic. We must be careful there are no unintended consequences that would risk the health of aquatic animals or that would fail to facilitate trade, so I would be grateful if the Minister addressed the points I have raised.

3.8 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the details set out by the Minister. As we know, aquaculture is not a big sector of the fishing industry in Northern Ireland, but it is a critical part of it. Aquaculture creates a large number of jobs and, more importantly, it boosts the local economy—the 36 licences have been mentioned.

The Minister mentioned mussels and oysters, and we have an excellent, disease-free product in Northern Ireland. Strangford lough, which gives its name to my constituency, has a strong oyster base, and I want its importance to increase for the export market. The statutory instrument refers to alien species, an issue that often comes up in this important sector, because waters can bring in invasive species. The Minister outlined how the regulations will continue things.

The co-operation between the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the fisheries Department in particular, and the Republic of Ireland is of some interest to me, as it should be to everyone in this House. Can the Minister confirm that the Republic of Ireland accepts the rules as put forward in the SI? I understand the issue he referred to in respect of the Northern Ireland Assembly and devolution. I thank him for his confirmation about the process of secondary legislation and about no delays. It is important that we have no delays and that we have a fluent system that flows easily into the new devolution and new position we will have after 29 March. With the secondary legislation in place, will the licences continue to be issued by the fisheries division at the Northern Ireland Assembly? The “nothing changes” regulations and scrutiny, to which the shadow Minister referred, mean that the produce can continue to be exported, and that is very important. Our mussels and oysters in Northern Ireland have excellent health and our markets remain open.

The Minister has always had at heart the interests of the fisheries sector and, in particular, the aquaculture sector, which although small is significant in what it does. I have spoken to the local fish producers organisations and asked for their opinion, and they are quite happy with what is going forward. If we have the support and blessing of the local fishing sector—those who are involved in aquaculture, and the mussels and oysters sector—we should let this SI make its way through the House of Commons, ever mindful of the importance of having these things in place come 29 March.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) is poised like a panther. Does he wish to speak?

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: Yes, well then I call Mr Alan Brown.

3.11 pm

Alan Brown: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will be brief. The way these SIs have been presented today sums up the chaos and farce of this UK Government. The one that merited the most debate was the one on motor insurance, but it has been pulled by the Government at the last minute, leading us to the one before us. In principle, I do not like this place legislating for Northern Ireland when something should be undertaken by the devolved Assembly. I suggest that the UK Government should be doing much more to get the devolved Assembly up and running, to allow it to take responsibility where it has the right competences.

Despite that, I accept that we are dealing with mainly technical amendments, bringing EU legislation into domestic legislation. For that reason, I certainly would not oppose this SI. Leaving aside the technical amendments, one reason why this SI has come here for debate is that the Commons sifting Committee expressed concerns about the legislative function of appropriate buffer zones to prevent the introduction of exotic diseases to aquatic species in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister say what the implications are for the competent authority in Northern Ireland? Will he confirm what the outcome of his consultation with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs officials was? The consultation is referred to in the explanatory notes, so will he confirm its outcome?

Finally, if we are looking at a potential no-deal scenario, I suggest that the UK Government should be absolutely focused in their efforts on ruling out a no-deal outcome. They should get it off the table and listen to the will of this House, because that will have a far bigger potential impact on the aquaculture industry and it really should be the focus for this Government. Their focus should be on taking a no-deal scenario off the table.

3.14 pm

George Eustice: First, let me address the points made by the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown). This is an important issue and I take exception to the suggestion that a transport issue could be more important than aquaculture. As I said at the beginning, it is an important industry in Northern Ireland, but it is also an important industry in Scotland. He will be aware that the Scottish Government have brought forward their own regulations to ensure that these EU regulations are operable in UK law and that Scottish authorities can continue to regulate the aquaculture sector in a way that is important.
The hon. Gentleman raised an important issue about the sifting Committee, which had indeed recommended that this SI be debated on the Floor of the House and is an Enemy of erudition, rather than a new power, as was the initial proposal. As he said, the Committee picked up on the reference to the ability to establish buffer zones. It raised a concern that this was a new power, but I can confirm that it is not a new power. This power already exists and it was probably a misunderstanding of the way the provision is phrased that led the Committee to consider that this was a new power being taken. In fact, DAERA, on behalf of Northern Ireland, has always been able to exercise this power. That said, given the importance of this issue, we chose not to challenge the sifting Committee recommendation that it should be debated, even though we believe it may have been based on a misunderstanding. I am happy to clarify here on the Floor of the House that the power to establish appropriate buffer zones is not a new power, but one that already exists.

Turning to the points made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I can confirm that his understanding is exactly right: officials in DAERA will continue to be responsible for the licensing of aquaculture activities. The whole purpose of all these Brexit SIs is that they maintain the status quo and that there will be no change. Indeed, without them, there would be some doubt about whether DAERA would be able to exercise the full suite of powers available to it, because elements of the retained EU law that it will rely upon would become inoperable. This SI corrects any of those said deficiencies.

Finally, let me address the comments made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin). He asked what we will do when we do not have the EU to give us the science in these areas, to make regulations and to tell us what we ought to be doing. I simply say that as we leave the EU it will be for us to decide these things and we have some of the best fisheries science in the world. Across the UK, the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science is our lead fisheries science agency. It is a world-leading agency and is responsible for the licensing of aquaculture activities. The whole purpose of all these Brexit SIs is that they maintain the status quo and that there will be no change. Indeed, without them, there would be some doubt about whether DAERA would be able to exercise the full suite of powers available to it, because elements of the retained EU law that it will rely upon would become inoperable. This SI corrects any of those said deficiencies.

As I pointed out in my opening remarks, the Northern Ireland Administration and the Irish Government have had long-standing co-operation on building joint management plans for sectors such as mussels that predate the EU. These arrangements will continue; they do not need the EU to stand behind them. The island of Ireland is a single epidemiological area, and there has always been close co-operation on these matters.

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There is a tendency for all these debates to cover lots of technical detail, as the hon. Gentleman said. However, it is important to remember that all we are doing with these SIs is substituting the words “United Kingdom Government” for “the European Commission” and making other such amendments. We are not making substantive changes. Members need to bear in mind that probably the most pernicious so-called Henry VIII power of all was the European Communities Act, because section 2(2) of that Act meant that with negative instruments all over the place the European Commission was in effect able to rampage through our domestic law book. The irony is that when any of these regulations were introduced in the House via a negative SI, sometimes to implement delegated Acts from the European Union, there would have been little or no parliamentary scrutiny. It is only now, as we seek to make those regulations that have been in place for some time operable, that Members seem to be concerned.

Jim Shannon: To reiterate and strengthen the opinion the Minister has just rehearsed, it is important to note that the local fish producers organisations that I referred to endorse what the Minister is putting forward today. If they have faith in the Minister and what he is putting forward, we in the House should have the same faith.

George Eustice: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that confirmation. There was indeed consultation, but it was led by DAERA. It is important to recognise that we are doing this on DAERA’s behalf and at its request. DAERA has co-operated and consulted widely with stakeholders in Northern Ireland, and I understand that the regulations have their support. In conclusion—

Sandy Martin: The Minister has not fully answered my question about the way in which directive 2006/88 is being replaced by regulation 2016/249. He mentioned something about an automatic carry-over, but I do not really understand how that works. The statutory instrument says:

“After regulation 21(6), insert—
(7) For the purposes of paragraph (1), regulations 19(3)(c) and 21(1) and paragraphs (1)(c)(iii) and 4(d) of Schedule 1A, Part A of Annex 3 to Directive 2006/88”

and so on. It is almost impossible for anybody to work out what is actually happening. Will the Minister describe how we are going to take on regulation 2016 rather than directive 2006, as a result of this statutory instrument?

George Eustice: The point that hon. Gentleman describes in some detail is a point that I explained in my opening speech when I talked about cross-references. If the retained EU law retained a reference to an EU directive, that would no longer be operable, because EU directives would no longer apply in the UK. The only way to make such provisions operable is to have a reference point in UK law. The 2006 regulations will become retained EU law on a UK legal basis. All we are saying is that we will change references to the original directive that gave rise to the regulation and make them references contained within the regulations themselves, so that they will remain operable. It is quite complicated, but essentially it boils down to this: EU directives will cease to have effect in the UK after we leave, but retained EU law will continue to have effect, so if there are provisions in directives that we wish to retain, we must bring them over in the retained EU law. In this case, we do that with the regulation concerned.
We have explored some of the key areas of this statutory instrument. I hope I have been able to reassure Members not only that this instrument is essential to ensure that we have an operable rulebook in this area on day one of exit, but that we are not creating any policy changes or new policy through this statutory instrument. We are simply ensuring that the arrangements that pertain today can continue. I therefore commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.
member states and the Commission are amended to refer instead to UK authorities. A requirement on the language to be used on labels is also amended. It replicates the EU framework in UK law, replacing the “EC fertiliser” label with a new equivalent “UK fertiliser” label. The requirements will otherwise remain the same.

The instrument also amends the EU framework to include a provision that preserves the ability of relevant bodies in the UK to continue to be able to take certain actions such as prescribing how specified fertilisers should be identified. Part 4 amends domestic legislation as a result of exit, ensuring continuity of supply by recognising the EC fertiliser label for a two-year transitional period after exit day. This will minimise burdens on businesses and enable suppliers to use up existing stocks, both of fertilisers and packaging. The amendments in the statutory instrument do not change the definition, compositional requirements, or labelling or packaging rules for fertilisers, whether they are marketed under the existing domestic framework—the 1991 regulations—or the EU framework.

Ammonium nitrate fertilisers are additionally covered by domestic safety regulations, since they can be misused as improvised explosives and pose safety risks if mishandled in manufacture, transport or storage. It is worth noting that part 4 of the instrument also amends the regulations surrounding ammonium nitrate fertilisers with high nitrogen content in Great Britain, to treat imports from EU member states the same as imports from other third countries in line with World Trade Organisation obligations.

Under the GB ammonium nitrate regulations, the rules for imports from the EU are different from those for imports from outside the EU. In the light of WTO rules, it would not be possible to retain these differences, so the instrument amends some aspects of the ammonium nitrate regulations, in particular the detonation resistance tests, to apply the more stringent of the two regimes to all imports after the end of the two-year transition period and to uphold current safety standards.

The definition of what constitutes a “batch” of ammonium nitrate differs depending on whether the import comes from the EU or elsewhere.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): This is a very important issue for the fertiliser industry. Could the Minister clarify whether this provision would give the opportunity to Ministers and the Department to charge fees to cover the costs of tests needed for official control measures?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point. That is why the regulations were referred by the sifting Committee for debate. There is already a power in the existing regulations for authorities to make charges for that testing. All we sought to do in drafting was retain that ability. Broadly speaking, the testing we do here in the UK is run by the Health and Safety Executive at our facility in Buxton and it tends to be a commercial choice for the fertiliser companies whether to use that or to use an alternative at their own cost. There is not really a cost recovery mechanism that is deployed beyond that; it is simply based on research done by the companies. We have clarified and made a change to the drafting of the regulations to be clear that we simply seek to retain the existing abilities to charge rather than to create new ones.

Continuity of supply is ensured by a transitional period for imports from the EU, which provides 99% of imported ammonium nitrate to the UK. That allows the continuation of current rules on the time limit for detonation resistance tests and the ability to recognise EU laboratory test certificates. These arrangements give manufacturers time to prepare for compliance with the import rules post exit and reduce any burdens on UK laboratories immediately after exit.

The definition of what constitutes a “batch” of ammonium nitrate differs depending on whether the import comes from the EU or elsewhere. We have taken a view on that regarding when the quantity of material manufactured without alteration of composition or characteristics is longer than 92 days. We will therefore retain the EU definition of “batch”.

The instrument was previously presented to the sifting Committee on 1 November 2018 as one that should be subject to the negative procedure. As I explained to my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy), the sifting Committee did not agree. It considered that the effect of one regulation was to allow Ministers to charge fees. In addition, it considered that the instrument conferred powers to legislate. It therefore recommended that this instrument be debated in Parliament. The instrument has been amended since it was presented to the sifting Committee to reflect certain recommendations in the Committee’s report. For example, the provisions that the Committee considered to confer powers to legislate have been redrafted to make it clear that they do not contain new legislative functions.

In general, fertiliser policy, as with other agriculture policy, is devolved. The devolved Administrations were closely engaged in developing these regulations, which apply to the same geographical area as the original legislation that they amend. All Administrations have agreed to maintain a single common framework for fertilisers labelled as UK fertilisers, while continuing their own domestic framework. That will make the marketing of fertilisers much clearer for industry, and is a good example of how well the four Administrations work together towards a common goal.

The instrument relates to the maintenance of existing regulatory standards, with no significant impacts or new administrative or economic burdens on business or other stakeholders. Although there was no statutory requirement to consult on the instrument, officials have held discussions with key stakeholders, including the fertiliser manufacturers’ representative body, which is the Agricultural Industries Confederation, and the farmers’ representative body—obviously, the National Farmers Union. Their main concerns have been addressed by allowing for a transitional period for existing rules and compliance with the amended rules.

In conclusion, the changes to the rules on ammonium nitrate have been developed in conjunction with the HSE and the Home Office, to ensure that safety and security elements are maintained. This package of measures is essential to ensure that retained EU law continues to operate effectively in the UK once we leave the EU. I commend the regulations to the House.

3.35 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to take part in this statutory instrument debate and welcome the Minister to his place. A couple of weeks
[Dr David Drew]

ago I thought, when we got Committee Room 14, that we could not get a bigger audience to listen to these statutory instrument debates. How little did I know that we would end up in the main Chamber? I will sound the usual caveat that the Opposition do not think this is the way to scrutinise secondary legislation. Some of it is very important, and it is being rushed through at the speed of light. With the best will in the world, it is very difficult to scrutinise, and we are obliged to rely on the capability of the civil service to ensure that the exercise they are doing, which is largely a cut-and-paste job, is right; otherwise, mistakes will be made, which we will only learn about in due course.

The Minister was right to say that the process became an affirmative procedure at the request of the House of Commons sifting Committee, and the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) was right to point out that one reason for that was that there is a cost implication, because DEFRA has the ability to charge fees for the costs of tests. The other two reasons were that the instrument confers powers to legislate, changing the functions of the UK as a member state to functions of UK public authorities—presumably a reference to the Health and Safety Executive—and that these amendments had an impact on the safety regulations governing the import of ammonium nitrate materials from outside the EU.

The instrument before us is not a contentious piece of legislation, but it is important because ammonium nitrate, for those who know, is explosive. My own port of Sharpness, which imports fertilisers, including ammonium nitrate, was regularly policed in the days of the IRA because of what could happen to that ammonium nitrate. So we cannot but do our best to ensure that the instrument is as foolproof as possible.

I have a number of questions for the Minister. We do not intend to oppose the instrument, but it is important that we get it right. Clearly, fertilisers are crucial to agriculture, but they are also controversial. If the Agriculture Bill does return to the Floor of the House, amendments will be tabled on Report on the relationship to the Government’s environmental strategy, which is about using fewer fertilisers, and on looking at agri-ecology as an alternative way of producing our food supply. So this is quite a controversial area to the extent that there are those who would say that we should reduce, if not remove, fertilisers and find other ways to grow our food.

This instrument provides for the definition, composition, labelling and packaging of fertilisers, and given that the UK imports the vast majority of its fertiliser, we are dependent on those who wish to export it to us. That will be a substantial change, if and when we leave the EU, because we may choose to import from different parts of the world, and we must ensure that we are completely clear on the safeguards and that the regulatory regime is fit for purpose.

At the moment—I am not sure whether the Minister said this—businesses can choose whether to use the current UK regulatory regime for fertilisers or one that is available from the EU. It will be interesting to know what the Minister thinks about potential changes, and the implied costs. Again, we make our usual criticism that there is no regulatory impact assessment. It is only fair and reasonable to ask what the cost implications are.

Yesterday, I managed to take part in a debate with the Department of Health and Social Care on pharmaceuticals, and it provided a regulatory impact assessment. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs does not seem to be very good at producing such assessments. Its argument is always that there are no explicit cost implications. That is easy to say, but it would be much easier for us to make a judgment if we could look at that and investigate it.

The explanatory memorandum—this may be my inability to access IT—refers to a technical note on page five, but I cannot download that note. It would be useful to know what it contains, but I may be able to obtain it in a different format. It is important that that is made available to those who need to know, whether they are in the business or whether they wish to scrutinise what we are up to.

As I have said, I have a series of questions for the Minister, as always, to keep him on his toes and make sure that we know what we are doing. The Nature Friendly Farming Network raises the case of those who have stored fertilisers that have been labelled under the EU system. What is the status of those fertilisers after the two years are up? Should they be destroyed? Can people continue to use them? Do the fertilisers have to be re-regulated? What is likely to be the situation? As we know, many farm products are stored for years, if not decades, so it is important to know the timeframe for existing products. Will the Minister say something about that, as people want certainty about it, and they need to know exactly what the implications are.

The Nature Friendly Farming Network says that the rules for imports from the EU are different from those for imports outside the EU. Presumably, we need a standard trade agreement, otherwise we will have a differentiated trade in fertilisers. What will the Minister do to ensure that that is the case, so that there is consistency?

The Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board does not have any particular bones of contention, but it is important that we listen to what it says, especially on the environmental effects of non-organic fertilisers. It would be a retrograde step to move away from the progressive approaches to which we have signed up as part of our membership of the EU. What are the Government doing to make sure that there is not a race to the bottom if we look for cheaper, non-organic substitutes, which would lead to all sorts of problems if they got into the water supply. At the very least, they would be likely to damage soil quality, which we discussed at great length when we considered the Agriculture Bill and which features heavily in the Government’s draft Environment (Principles and Governance) Bill.

The principal concern of the Agricultural Industries Confederation is about certainty, which is not there because of the current Brexit situation. It would be interesting to know what discussions the Minister has had with the AIC. If we crash out and have to adopt WTO tariffs, that will have a major impact on the industry because of its reliance on imports. What analysis have the Government made of the impact on the industry and on farmers in general?

Likewise, the National Farmers Union is clear that it needs continuity and an uninterrupted supply of fertilisers. It is worried about the cost implications if we cannot...
continue to source our fertilisers. I believe that most come from Spain and some come from elsewhere in the EU. That is important.

The Landworkers Alliance states that the agrochemicals, antibiotics and nitrate fertilisers used in intensive farming have a negative effect. What is being done to ensure, as I said earlier, that there is no race to the bottom and that we pay more than just lip service in our commitment to the environment? That is also important.

Although the Soil Association has no specific reason to doubt the Government’s intention for the faithful transposition of measures into UK law, it is concerned about the environmental objectives of the regulations, which are not necessarily spelled out as clearly as they could be. When the Minister sums up, it is important that he says something positive about that.

In conclusion, farmers need fertilisers. They need certainty about access and supply. On agroeconomy, we need to understand that, as the world moves forward, we will need fewer of them, but we will also need to ensure that they are good quality and, I hope, organic and that people are able to eat good, wholesome food. The one drawback from lack of access to fertilisers is that we could end up with an overabundance of phosphates and nitrates, which will have an impact on the food that we eat and the human food chain. It is important, therefore, that the Government commit to no diminution of standards. We have regularly heard them say that, but we have yet to see it in legislation, and there is no better place to put it than the Agriculture Bill. I hope that the Minister is listening and that the Government will ensure that they do not just talk about the issue but carry it through in the Bill so that our soils are replete and our farming can guarantee wholesome food, which is what we all want.

Mr Speaker: The natural modesty of the hon. Gentleman has prevented him from announcing to the House and for the edification of those observing our proceedings that in speaking from his party’s Front Bench he does so not as David Drew but as Dr David Drew, blessed with a doctorate in rural economy. That is something that should be known to the world. I call Minister George Eustice.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: I do beg the hon. Lady’s pardon. There was a change of personnel on the Scottish National party Front Bench. Although we very much look forward to what the Minister has to say, it will not be before we have heard from Deidre Brock.

3.48 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Here we are once again creating legislation to replicate legislation that the dastardly EU has imposed upon us. EU legislation is so oppressive that we have to pass the same legislation to free ourselves of the tyranny of EU red tape—taking back control to change nothing.

We should take a moment, however, to consider the imports of products used by the agricultural industries and how logjam at entry points may well affect that process, no matter how many lorries park on old airfields.

The UK imports about 70% of fertilisers, very little potash but half the ammonium nitrate and all of the phosphorus used. They cannot be stockpiled because there is no significant additional capacity, and ammonium nitrate in particular needs storage that minimises the risk of explosion. The lorries need to keep running, the ports need to keep functioning and the imports need to be frictionless, or there will be little in the way of harvest bounties, and that is before we get on to imported seed, plant protection products and animal feed. If the ports get choked with border checks and UK red tape, it will not matter what these regulations say, because food production on these islands will suffer.

I welcome the two-year transitional period, but I can see no reason why the acceptance that the EU regulations work cannot be extended indefinitely. Let the fertilisers be sold as they are now, and indeed the plant protection products, seed and the animal feed. We trust the EU, don’t we? I also welcome the requirement for Ministers to get the approval of the devolved Administrations before making regulations about fertilisers. That seems a very sensible way forward and a path that other Departments could consider following. The various Administrations offer wisdom that should be welcomed, and we trust the Scottish Government, don’t we?

I do have concerns about the regime to control the quality of the products available, particularly when I consider that Ministers will face the temptation of reducing the tariffs on Russian products, particularly ammonium nitrate. The anti-dumping duties that the EU imposes on Russian ammonium nitrate will disappear unless they are replicated by the regulations, and the implications that will have for the quality of imports is certainly worth considering carefully. It will be an issue that gets snarled up in any future trade negotiations both with the EU and with Russia.

I would like to believe the Government will ensure quality and resist the temptation to cut tariffs and duties, but I would have liked to believe there was actually a plan for the Brexit negotiations, or at least some impact assessments that looked at what is actually happening. I have certainly been sorely let down on that. I would be grateful for the Minister’s view when he responds. Further to the fact that the Minister mentioned that more stringent regulations will now be applied to ammonium nitrate from the EU, in line with those currently applied to countries outwith the EU, what added costs might result from those extra regulations?

This is one of hundreds of statutory instruments that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—despite the best efforts, I am sure, of its civil servants—is lagging behind on. The National Audit Office report on DEFRA’s readiness for Brexit was scathing in its assessment, to the point that I think we have to regard it as an impossible task for DEFRA to get ready.

I wish there was a way of ensuring that the products farmers need to produce food will get to them, but the sudden shutting off of the supplies that they need looks set to become a reality, whatever secondary legislation is passed here. A better decision by far would be to extend article 50 and see whether things could be reconsidered. I am tempted by the thought—the hopeful possibility—that we could probably bring it back and appear before the Committee, but I know that is not realistic. I have many concerns about the import regime to follow and the corraling of powers in Ministers’ hands.
It is disappointing to say the least that this is the best on offer. It is disappointing that a Government who claimed so much was possible is content with this. I really hope that that failure does not come back to haunt us all.

3.53 pm

George Eustice: I now have even more points to try to address, and I will do so as comprehensively as I can.

First, I turn to the points made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew). He raised a general point about the use of fertilisers, which is that we should be trying to encourage more sustainability, perhaps through the use of organic fertilisers. He will be aware from the discussions we have had in the Agriculture Public Bill Committee that we are looking, in clause 1, to be able to incentivise more environmentally sustainable farming, which could include, for instance, supporting the use of organic farmyard manures more than manufactured fertilisers. He should also recognise that increases in fuel costs have anyway had a major knock-on impact on the cost of fertilisers in recent decades, such that in the past 30 years or so fertiliser use in the UK has fallen by about 40% already. He pointed out that at the moment we import most of our ammonium nitrate, predominantly from the European Union; there is one manufacturer of ammonium nitrate here in the UK.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the impact on security—in particular, whether there is a risk that the material will get into the hands of terrorists. As I pointed out, we have gone for the more stringent detonating test regime, meaning that any consignment imported to the UK, whether from the European Union or a third country, would have to have had that detonation test within the previous 60 days. We are applying the more stringent set of rules that we have for third countries to all countries.

On the general issue of security, I also point out that in 2006 a fertiliser industry assurance scheme was set up between the Government and the Agricultural Industries Confederation, and it has since successfully created and monitored voluntary standards in the industry supply chain to ensure that ammonium nitrate fertiliser can be traced and does not end up in the wrong hands.

Although we have made changes to the GB regime for detonation testing and the ammonium nitrate regime, as I said in my opening comments Northern Ireland has its own specific rules in this area. The ammonium nitrate safety regulations apply to Great Britain. Owing to the past misuse of ammonium nitrate in making improvised explosive devices, Northern Ireland has its own controls under the Control of Explosives Precursors etc. Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014 and, under existing rules, the Explosives (Northern Ireland) Order 1972. Those prevent any import, storage or use of ammonium nitrate fertilisers without a tier 1 explosives precursor licence from the Police Service of Northern Ireland. The situation in Northern Ireland is more thorough still, given the tragic history of which we are all aware.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned that we have not conducted an impact assessment. As the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) pointed out, that is because we are not seeking to make any substantive change to policy—indeed, the stated aim of all these EU exit SIs is, as far as we are able, to maintain the status quo from day one after we leave the European Union, to ensure that we have an operable law book. He also made a specific point about the technical note on page 5, which he claimed he could not download. I am reliably informed that, since he mentioned that, my officials have been online to double-check and successfully downloaded it. Perhaps the issue had more to do with the hon. Gentleman’s IT than with our system; nevertheless, I thank him for raising that so that we could at least double-check.

The hon. Gentleman also raised an important point about storage: what happens if material is stored beyond the two-year transition? We arrived at the two-year transition period for sale having consulted the industry. The industry generally thought it an appropriate period both to be able to market its existing stocks and to give it plenty of time to use up any residual fertiliser packaging and order new packaging.

Julian Sturdy: I draw Members’ attention to my declaration of interest. Would what the Minister has said apply to on-farm stock as well?

George Eustice: No. I was about to come to precisely that point, which was also made by the shadow Minister. If during the two-year transition period a farmer has bought products labelled under the previous EU regulations, he can then store them on farm. As I pointed out at the beginning, these are marketing regulations—pertaining to the sale of product, not storage or use after sale.

Finally, the hon. Members for Stroud and for Edinburgh North and Leith asked about the specific issue of tariffs on fertilisers. This is an issue that the Government are currently considering. As hon. Members may be aware, while farming representative groups such as the NFU would like to retain tariffs on some agricultural commodities, they are equally keen to have tariff rate suspensions on some fertiliser products. We are giving that consideration. It is important to note, however, that if we were to set a unilateral autonomous tariff rate quota or suspend tariffs on a unilateral basis, we would have to offer the same terms to all countries in the world, probably including Russia, notwithstanding the approach the European Union is currently taking.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Can the Minister confirm that SNP Members were deliberately scare-mongering when they said that farmers would not be able to import any more after 29 March? Will he confirm that foreign suppliers are not cancelling contracts for after Brexit?

George Eustice: I can confirm that we do not envisage any problems at all with the importing of fertiliser, even in a no-deal scenario. That is predominantly because these products—

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP) rose—

George Eustice: Let me conclude my point first and then the hon. Gentleman can decide whether I have answered the point adequately.
Fertilisers tend to come in bulk, predominantly through Harwich on container vessels where we envisage no issues with capacity. They tend not to come in on roll-on, roll-off ferries on the backs of lorries through Calais. It is right that there are some concerns about the potential impacts on the all-important Dover-Calais crossing, but they do not specifically affect fertilisers. We see no particular problems in ensuring that we can import the fertilisers we need for this year.

The hon. Lady asked why we cannot simply have an indefinite extension of the recognition of the EC fertiliser logo. The reason is that we have to treat all countries equally under WTO rules. Once we have left the European Union and become an independent country again, we will not be able to discriminate and give unfair privileges to the European Union in the way that she advocates.

The hon. Lady asked a specific question about what had changed in relation to detonation testing. The principal change on strengthening detonation testing is that it will apply to each consignment that comes into the European Union. Put simply, all that importers will need to demonstrate is that each consignment has been subject to a detonation test of a suitable standard within the previous 60 days. At the moment under EU derogations it is possible for that to run longer because they simply apply it to individual batches rather than consignments, so there will be a small change. In the longer term, once the transition has ended, those seeking to export their goods to the United Kingdom would need to have that detonation test done, probably by the Health and Safety Executive in Buxton. We have world-beating expertise in this area and that testing would be done effectively.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): In terms of scaremongering, was the Minister’s boss, the Environment Secretary, scaremongering yesterday when he said that in a no-deal situation he could not guarantee exports and imports would continue at our borders and that livestock exports from the UK would be subject to high tariffs? Was that scaremongering as well?

George Eustice: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was referring to the export of sheep. We all acknowledge—I acknowledge it, too—that border inspection posts would frustrate that trade and that tariffs imposed on sheepmeat exports would affect that trade. He was explicitly not talking about fertiliser imports. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) was making a very specific point about whether there would be any threats to the import of fertilisers. As most of that trade comes through Harwich, we do not anticipate any problems at all on those grounds.

In conclusion, we have highlighted a number of important areas in this statutory instrument. We have had a thorough debate, but, as I have been at pains to point out, it does not seek to introduce any new policy. In keeping with the spirit and requirements of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, it is simply about ensuring that retained EU law is operable on the day after exit. I therefore commend this statutory instrument to the House.

Question put and agreed to.
reported incidents had an online association—a development that echoes the experiences of other organisations such as Tell MAMA that work to combat Islamophobia.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for celebrating the work of CST, which has done extraordinary work to keep many of us safe. The Government currently provide a significant proportion of funding for security guards, on a commercial basis, to support CST’s work and to keep schools safe. Has he considered making that a multi-year grant, rather than a one-year grant, to ensure that political affiliation does not matter and that the Jewish community has assurances that they will be kept safe?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for highlighting the incredible work of the CST not simply at these memorials and annual events but week in, week out, in schools, synagogues and other places, and the safety and security it conveys in so doing. She will understand that funding decisions are quite germane, particularly given the upcoming spending review, but I understand her call for a multi-year settlement, and particularly given the upcoming spending review, but I understand her call for a multi-year settlement, and I will take that away and reflect on it further. This is about providing assurance and confidence, and I know the difference the CST makes in that regard.

Some of the increase in the number of antisemitic incidents will be down to increased reporting, which we encourage through our hate crime action plan. Similarly, however, a survey carried out by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights in December found that 89% of respondents felt that antisemitism had increased in their countries over the past five years. When asked how big a problem antisemitism was, three quarters of respondents from the UK answered that it was either a “very big” or a “fairly big” problem. I say that with a very heavy heart. It troubles me deeply that some Jewish communities are concerned about their future. It should trouble us all.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The House will know that through my mother I am of Jewish descent, and in 1938 my uncle found a safe haven in this country. Does the Secretary of State agree it is regrettable that this country might lose its good reputation as a safe haven if we continue with this tendency?

James Brokenshire: I believe that this country is a safe haven. It needs to be that safe haven. It is important that across the House we underline the significance and importance that we as a country attach to that intrinsic value.

On that point, I want to give the following assurance to our Jewish communities: you are an intrinsic part of what makes Britain great, and the Government will always stand by you to challenge bigotry and intolerance. We will not walk by on the other side when that is present. That means learning the lessons of the past and facing up to modern manifestations of antisemitism, which continues to evolve. To quote the former Chief Rabbi, Lord Sacks:

“Antisemitism is not a belief but a virus. The human body has an immensely sophisticated immune system which develops defences against viruses. It is penetrated, however, because viruses mutate. Antisemitism mutates.”

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State think it possible that the term “antisemitism” itself is not sufficiently understood in this country and that there are plenty of people who, once they are clear that we are talking about race hatred directed against people who are Jewish, will want to have absolutely nothing to do with it and will want to make no effort to excuse, justify or defend it?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. At its heart, this is racism. That is why it is so intolerable and unacceptable. As the powerful analogy I just used suggests, repelling this insidious threat takes a strong immune system, in the form of leadership at all levels, in all parties and in all areas of public life, and nowhere is this more important than here at the heart of our democracy. It is why we have chosen next door to Parliament as the site for our new national holocaust memorial and learning centre, which commands cross-party support. I believe there can be no more fitting place, no more powerful symbol of our commitment to remembering the men, women and children murdered in the holocaust and all other victims of Nazi persecution, including Roma, gay and disabled people, than placing the memorial in Victoria Tower gardens, literally in the shadow of our Parliament.

In that context, I welcome the cross-party support, which was evidenced today by a joint letter signed by more than 170 Members of Parliament and Members of the House of Lords endorsing the memorial and the positive and enduring impact it will have. It will draw on the history of the holocaust and subsequent genocides with an education and learning centre at its core as a national resource. It will stand as a national memorial at the heart of our democracy, but equally it will stand as a warning of where hatred can lead; the role that government can play, both good and bad; and what happens if people are bystanders as it develops—what happens if they walk by on the other side. It is not just for future generations, but for us all in Parliament.

It pains me hugely to hear the powerful testimony of colleagues in the House of the abuse they have suffered either for being Jewish or for standing up to antisemitism. Some have even asserted that part of our politics is poisoned by antisemitism in an institutional way. That does not reflect the country we are or the politics for which we stand. Our debate today gives us the chance to say that we reject and oppose antisemitism and to stand together against anyone seeking to advance a narrative of bigotry, hatred and division.

For our part, the Government are taking comprehensive action to fight antisemitism and all forms of hatred. We are proud to have been the first Government to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance working definition of antisemitism in 2016. Although not legally binding, it is an important tool for criminal justice agencies and other public bodies to understand what antisemitism looks like in the 21st century. It covers examples of the kind of behaviours that, depending on the circumstances, could constitute antisemitism. Those examples include making mendacious, dehumanising, demonising or stereotypical allegations about Jews as such or the power of Jews as a collective through the myth of a world Jewish conspiracy or of Jews controlling the media, economy, government or other societal institutions, or accusing Jewish citizens...
of being more loyal to Israel, or to the alleged priorities of Jews worldwide, than to the interests of their own nations.

Those narratives have increasingly poisoned public discourse and we should speak out against them wherever they arise, but aside from pinning down what we mean by antisemitism, the Government’s first priority must be to keep people safe, as underlined by the horrendous events last October in Pittsburgh. That people should be attacked in that way while gathering in prayer is profoundly shocking. To strengthen our determination to ensure that the Jewish community here are safe and feel safe, we continue to support the Community Safety Trust to provide security for Jewish places of worship and institutions. In recognition of the vulnerability felt by all faith communities, the places of worship security grant scheme allows places of worship facing threats to apply for funding to improve their security. To that end, the Government have provided more than £2.4 million to increase security provision for churches, gurdwaras, mosques and temples across the country. We committed further resource for that in the hate crime action plan refresh.

I am hugely conscious of the problems online, which we need to confront further and which I am sure will be a focus of a number of contributions to the debate. We will continue to work to strengthen our approach and confront all types of hate crime to ensure that it is appropriately dealt with. We will soon publish a White Paper on online harms that will consider legislative and non-legislative approaches to combat online hate crime and hate incidents alongside other forms of harmful behaviour.

Our engagement with communities on the ground and education are vital, particularly when it comes to tackling stereotypes and prejudices at an early stage before they harden and become more harmful. That is why we are supporting programmes that work with young people to challenge over-simplified narratives and encourage open conversation.

I want to pay tribute to the outstanding work of our partners. I have already mentioned the CST, whose work to facilitate reporting, to support victims of antisemitism and to provide security for Jewish institutions is vital and greatly appreciated. I want to thank the all-party group against antisemitism, so passionately chaired by the hon. Member for Bassettlaw (John Mann) and supported by the Antisemitism Policy Trust. The work of the group ensures there is continued momentum to tackle antisemitism as part of the working group and helps to hold the Government to account. I also want to pay tribute to the Board of Deputies of British Jews and the Jewish Leadership Council, whose input to the cross-Government working group is invaluable in ensuring the community is properly represented, and to our Haredi stakeholders, including representatives of Shomrim and others, who make sure the specific needs of orthodox communities are not forgotten.

Together, we can and will overcome the challenges we face. Antisemitism has no place in our society—however it evolves, it is still hatred and bigotry—and we should not be afraid to call it out and to champion our Jewish community, which continues to make a towering contribution to our society without reservation. Indeed, Britain would not be what it is without our Jewish friends, neighbours and cousins. That is why in standing up for them we are standing up for all communities who are facing hatred and for the values of tolerance, freedom and fairness that define us and define our country.

This is a mission bigger than politics—bigger than any party—and it is in that spirit that I urge all hon. Members to be standard-bearers for these values: values that are our best hope of ensuring that when we say, “Never again,” we mean it.

4.22 pm

**Barry Gardiner** (Brent North) (Lab): May I just say that I agree with every single word the Secretary of State said? I thought he spoke incredibly powerfully, with great seriousness and with great measurement.

It has always been a mystery to me how anyone can feel themselves honoured by the humiliation of their fellow human beings, yet here we are again in 2019 debating history’s oldest hatred. I am glad to have the opportunity to express my opposition to this unique evil and I thank you, Mr Speaker, for presiding over the debate today on antisemitism in modern society.

Antisemitism has led to some of the worst crimes in human history: pogroms, massacres, oppression, dispossession and of course the holocaust—the systematic and bureaucratic attempt to erase European Jewry from existence. Thirty years ago, in the summer of 1989, I travelled through the Berlin wall into what was then East Germany and on into Poland, where I visited Auschwitz-Birkenau. It is one day in my life I will never forget as the full scale—the industrial scale—of the atrocities and mass murders that were committed there etched themselves into my consciousness. Never before and never since has the world seen such a cold, calculated and industrialised plan for the murder of an entire people.

That Jew hatred—for that is what antisemitism is—still exists should shock us; that it is on the rise should appall us. Antisemitism is a cancer that finds new ways, as the Secretary of State said, to mutate and to infect our society. Antisemitism has no place in our society—however it evolves, it is still hatred and bigotry—and we should not be afraid to call it out and to champion our Jewish community, which continues to make a towering contribution to our society without reservation. Indeed, Britain would not be what it is without our Jewish friends, neighbours and cousins. That is why in standing up for them we are standing up for all communities who are facing hatred and for the values of tolerance, freedom and fairness that define us and define our country.

**Barry Gardiner**: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I am sure that we all have similar stories to tell about the CST’s work in our constituencies. In my own constituency of Brent North, we have a Jewish community of just under 2,000 people, and we are the home of the Jewish Free School, which is one of the oldest Jewish institutions in the UK and the largest and most academically successful Jewish school in all Europe. I worked with Arnold Wagner and David Lerner to help the school to move...
from its old home in Camden to the purpose-built facilities in my community. I particularly want to thank the CST for all that it does to keep the pupils and staff there, and in all the other primary schools, safe. I just wish, as we all do, that its work was not necessary.

The CST does more than work on safety. Its work to record and analyse antisemitic hate crime is integral to our understanding of the scale of the problem that faces us. Last year, it recorded 23 antisemitic incidents in my borough of Brent alone, and 1,652 across the country. That makes for sober reading. Antisemitism is at a record high, with a 16% rise in incidents nationwide year on year and 100 incidents every month. This is the lived reality of our Jewish fellow citizens living under the strain of antisemitism. It is appalling—the arson attacks on synagogues, the desecration of Jewish cemeteries, the neo-Nazi graffiti on posters for Holocaust Memorial Day, the vandalising of centres of Jewish life, the physical attacks on Jewish children at their schools or on public transport, swastikas daubed on Jewish homes and antisemitic hate mail sent to Jewish workplaces and schools. These hideous crimes are a warning to us all. We must do better, and we must be better.

That brings me to the issues facing my own party, the Labour party. It was the Labour party that introduced the Race Relations Acts and the Equality Act 2010, and it has put fighting inequality, racism and prejudice at the core of who we are and what we believe in. How can it be that we are struggling so badly to eradicate antisemitism from our own membership? I joined the Labour party because I believed it was quite simply the best vehicle for progressive social change in this country. I still do, but no party has a monopoly on virtue, and in the Labour party we are learning a bitter lesson. For all the strength and passion that we have derived from the mass influx of new members that has seen our party grow to more than 500,000 strong, we have not had adequate procedures in place to react swiftly and decisively to that small minority of members who have expressed sometimes ignorant but often vicious, dangerous and vile antisemitic views.

On behalf of my party, I want to publicly apologise to the Jewish community that we have let them down. We know it and we are trying to do better. We are trying to become the party that we have always aspired to be. We will not stop working until we once again become a safe and welcoming political home for people from the Jewish community, as from every other. The Secretary of State said that we stand here today to say of antisemitism that we reject it. We do. We must.

Barry Gardiner: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I do not understand how the people who say the things that he quotes can, with any integrity, think that they belong to our party.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): What message does my hon. Friend think is sent to the Jewish community when the Labour party readmits Derek Hatton, who tweeted something that seemed to imply that every Jew, wherever they live in the world, is responsible for the actions of the Israeli Government? Does he share my view that Derek Hatton has no part to play in our Labour party?

Barry Gardiner: This morning, I saw the reports that I am sure my hon. Friend saw about not just the readmission of Derek Hatton, but the tweets that he mentions, and I wrote to the general secretary of our party and lodged a formal complaint. I understand that action has since been taken in respect of the complaint, and I will be looking out to see precisely what appropriate action is taken in due course. I totally agree that it was a travesty. I think many of us knew for some while that Derek Hatton had applied to rejoin the party, but it was appalling for the news of his readmission to come to public attention on the very day when some members of our party were forced out.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Barry Gardiner: I will in a minute, but I want to make a little progress.

We recognise that social media can be a tremendous tool, enabling a more democratic and open media, but too often it has become the fertile breeding ground for antisemitic trolling and bullying. We have seen that in the horrifying antisemitic and misogynistic abuse targeted at several of our MPs, and I want to speak specifically about the disgraceful treatment of my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger). I deeply regret that she has left our party, but I regret most of all the antisemitic abuse that made her feel that it was necessary to do so. I have not always shared her political judgments, but she is a strong and principled woman and a kind and loving person, who has been bullied by antisemites to a point at which most of us would not have had the strength to bear it. I wish that she had stayed to help us defeat the evil in our party, but whichever party we stand for in this Parliament, she should have our unqualified solidarity as she stands against her aggressors.

Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. Indeed, it is those who have bullied my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree who will have to answer for it. I hope the processes within our party will be able to deal with that.
Stella Creasy: I thank my hon. Friend for recognising that we have let down the Jewish community. We have lost a very good colleague because we failed to stop what was essentially constructive dismissal. Does he agree that this is not about asking our Jewish members to stay and sort it out? In a movement built on solidarity, it is for us all to act. In this instance, the concern that many of us have is that there are so many cases outstanding, yet time was found to deal with Mr Hatton’s application for readmission. We want to show that we are serious about this, and we must change our priorities and deal with these cases now.

Barry Gardiner: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we are responsible for dealing with this. She will know there are procedures and committees within the national executive committee that deal with complaints and others that deal with other processes.

Let me be clear that anyone who denies the reality of antisemitism on the left, anyone who thinks that antisemitism is a legitimate part of criticising the political actions of the Israeli Government and anyone who says that complaints about antisemitism are smears on our party is wrong. They do not have the endorsement of the Labour party; they do not have the endorsement of its leader; and they need to take a long, hard look at themselves. They have adopted what Bebel labelled the “socialism of fools.”

Our party must call out this poisonous ideology, which encourages people to place the blame for society’s ills at the feet of the vulnerable and persecuted, whether they be immigrants, the unemployed, refugees or those from a different ethnic or religious background. The Labour party has long fought the dissemination of such false narratives, which we know serve only to divide us and distract us from our common cause of a fairer society.

Antisemitism, with its conspiracy theories, seeks to divide ordinary working people. The lies that it propagates about wealth, power and designs on world domination are as dangerous as they are stupid. Those on the far left who are foolish enough to believe that their antisemitism is a form of anti-elitism or anti-imperialism have no place in the Labour party or any modern political party.

Last year, a major study analysing news stories across the English-speaking world found that, according to every metric, fake news is more popular and more widely consumed than factual, accurate stories. We truly live in an era of fake news and imagined enemies, which encourages people to place the blame for society’s ills at the feet of the vulnerable and persecuted, whether they be immigrants, the unemployed, refugees or those from a different ethnic or religious background. The Labour party is wrong. They do not have the endorsement of the Labour party’s NEC, may just say three things? First, we have been far too slow to deal with some appalling cases of antisemitism. Secondly, I do not know whether it has been formally announced yet, but Lord Falconer has offered his services to look at these structures and in leadership. What leadership will the Labour shadow Cabinet specifically give to Jewish members of the Labour party and to the Jewish community?

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Over the last 16 years, I have written repeatedly to every single party here today to raise specific issues, with great success across every single party. In every single instance, I have written to the relevant party leader. Does my hon. Friend accept that people are interested in the structures, in the machinations of those structures and in leadership? What leadership will the Labour shadow Cabinet specifically give to Jewish members of the Labour party and to the Jewish community?
should fool itself that it is immune from this poison, and it would be wrong and dangerous to underestimate the scale of the problem across society at large. A few weeks ago, on Holocaust Memorial Day, a survey revealed that 5% of British adults do not believe the Holocaust took place and one in 12 believe that its scale has been exaggerated. Clearly, something has gone deeply wrong with our education and our collective memory. The Holocaust was the worst crime of the 20th century, in which 6 million Jewish people were murdered. Every single person in Britain should know that. I thank the Holocaust Educational Trust and Holocaust Memorial Day Trust for the work they do to ensure that this atrocity is never forgotten and never repeated.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con) rose—

Barry Gardiner: I am not taking any more interventions, as I said. It is only through education that we will protect future generations from falling into these insidious falsehoods—[ Interruption. ]

Mr Speaker: Mr Ivan Lewis, calm yourself, young man. I am sure what you are saying is absolutely fascinating—riveting stuff—but we would prefer to hear you on your feet in due course, rather than from your seat. Do the Front Bench the courtesy of hearing him.

Mr Speaker: Order. There is no time limit yet, but I wish to make one or two comments.
the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), too. It is not for me to comment on what is going on in the Labour party, but suffice it to say that what is happening to our politics and to some Members of this House as a result of antisemitism stains us all. We should all offer solidarity to those Members who have been affected by vile and disgusting abuse, whether online or in person. I have nothing but admiration for hon. Members in this place who are standing up to those threats and doing so with dignity, which shows why they have been elected to this place. I congratulate them all, whether they are in the Labour party or not, for the stand they are taking. They have the support of those of us on the Government Benches.

This is a cross-party issue. One reason I wanted to speak in the debate was that back in 2013, I joined the all-party parliamentary group against antisemitism. I represent a small constituency in North Wales—I think it is the smallest constituency in population terms represented by a Conservative MP—and I have a very small Jewish community. I felt that the issue was coming to the fore, however, and I decided to join the APPG. The reason I join the APPG was that I most profoundly valued and admired the work that I have done in Parliament, as well as some of the most depressing. I pay tribute to the chair of the APPG, the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), for his leadership of that effort and for the opportunities he has afforded to somebody such as myself.

Back in 2013, one of the few Jewish members of my constituency was elected mayor of Conwy, and I remember having a lot of fun at the fact that Edward I, when he gave Conwy its town charter, stated that no Jews and no Welsh would be allowed to live within the town walls. It gave me a certain degree of pride that Conwy had a Conservative Jewish mayor and a Conservative MP who is as Welsh as Welsh can be.

The APPG gave me the opportunity to see the virus of antisemitism. I went to Amsterdam with the hon. Member for Bassetlaw, and I was absolutely shocked by what I saw. Back in 2014, when we were preparing a report on antisemitism, we went to a Jewish high school in Amsterdam, a city that I would consider to be a liberal city in Europe. We met a group of sixth formers, the same age as my children, and asked them a simple question, “How many of you, in a class of 22, see a Jewish person or a Jewish face in your classroom—one single hand. If that does not shame us as Europeans, I am not sure what does.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): Something bright is happening in Sarajevo. There are 1,000 Jews in Sarajevo—10,000 were killed by the Ustaše, the Croatian fascists, in the war. These 1,000 Jews consider their home, Sarajevo, to be the safest place for a Jew in Europe. Is that not amazing, colleagues, when we think what happened there just 20 years ago?

**Guto Bebb:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. Obviously, it is good to hear that there are good news stories out there.

I undertook my second visit as part of the APPG to Brussels, with my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy). We visited another Jewish school. Imagine my horror, when we drove down that street in Brussels, the capital of the European Union, to be faced with armoured personnel vehicles, protecting that school. It is very difficult to convey the shock that one feels as a parent when one sees that kind of thing happening on the streets of the capital city of the European Union.

As a result of that work, we produced a report in 2015: I think, Mr Speaker, you were there at Lambeth Palace for its launch. One success that I achieved as part of that effort was to ensure that the radio station in Wales—Radio Wales—decided to cover the launch, because in me, as a Welsh MP, they had someone willing to talk on radio about the issue. I was struck by the fact that the reporters who visited Jewish communities in constituencies such as that of the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) were taken aback by what they found. What we had noted in Amsterdam and Brussels was starting to infect the capital city of Wales and other cities across the United Kingdom. What I had seen in Amsterdam and Brussels as something new and strange, shockingly was affecting the very Jewish communities that we represent as MPs—whether in Wales, England, Scotland or Northern Ireland.

That report was an important piece of work because it highlighted the need to change. We should take the APPG’s contribution in that respect very seriously.

Unfortunately, even though that report was produced in 2015, the situation has got worse. I am not sure how we explain the virus that has infected social media and our political discourse. I am not going to stand here and say that it is all the fault of the Corbynista takeover of the Labour party, because there are problems on both sides of the political equation. We must deal with a fundamental issue—the way in which the discourse on social media has been so badly polluted by this age-old hatred. There is a responsibility on us all, especially those in positions of leadership in any political party in the Chamber, to take those issues seriously. It is simply unacceptable, when members of political parties are identified as being responsible for this hate speech on social media and in person, that they are not thrown beyond the pale of our politics.

**Stephen Doughty:** I entirely agree with what the hon. Gentleman is saying. Does he agree that, unfortunately, what we are seeing on social media is a swamp in which everything else breeds, and whether that is going on in my party or in society more generally, it gives rise to some serious and violent behaviour? Does he agree that groups like System Resistance Network—neo-Nazi organisations operating in Wales, targeting Jews, Muslims, gays and the police—need to be proscribed and dealt with, and that Twitter, still hosting an account called Radio Arian that broadcasts neo-Nazi ideology, needs to take action today to remove it?

**Guto Bebb:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. One of the APPG’s current work programmes deals with the behaviour of social media companies, such as Facebook. We all know that they have a responsibility, and it is imperative that we speak with one voice on that issue. How much more important that is, however, that we face those social media companies knowing that we have put our own house in order. So I fully agree with those comments, but we must do more.

I highlighted the fact that this issue does not just face one party in this place. Part of the Jewish conspiracy issue, which appears online, is the detachment from reality of those conspiracy theories. Nothing illustrates
that better than a rather vile piece of work that has appeared online, entitled, “A Very Jewish Coup: The Plot to Stop Brexit.” It is really shocking, Mr Speaker, you are named as an individual who is part of the plot, as are my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve). They are all highlighted as part of a Jewish plot to stop Brexit. That is utterly vile and unacceptable. It is also nonsense, because another individual highlighted as part of that plot is none other than my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole. Now, we are good friends, but on Brexit we do not agree. However, I would be hard-pressed to categorise my hon. Friend as an individual who is devoting his time in this place to stopping Brexit. That is the point—truth has nothing to do with anti-semitism, which is about hatred, inadequacy and attacking others for being different. That is the key point about this vile piece of work. It is an attack on others simply to justify political views that are unacceptable.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that part of the problem is that on social media people can hide behind an anonymous handle and can spread this type of vile abuse—lies and untruths—and bounce off one another? One of the things that social media companies could do to prevent that from happening is identify who these people are so that when these things are reported to the police, they can be prosecuted and banned from social media sites.

Guto Bebb: Once again, I agree with the sentiments that the hon. Lady has expressed. That was taken up with some social media companies on a recent visit by the all-party parliamentary group to Washington, so I subscribe to that comment.

Clearly, we have a problem, but there are good news stories out there. I want to touch on one of them, although it is tinged with a degree of regret. In my constituency, our holocaust memorial event, which takes place every year, has gone from strength to strength. It has been one of the greatest privileges in my time as Member of Parliament for Aberconwy to welcome holocaust survivor after holocaust survivor to speak at these events. It is not just one event on a Sunday evening with 300 or 350 people turning up. The organisers ensure that the speakers visit local schools on the following Monday and Tuesday, and the feedback from those schools has been absolutely phenomenal. The opportunity to speak to someone who survived the holocaust will never be forgotten by the young people of my constituency.

This year, for the first time ever, the holocaust memorial event in Llandudno highlighted not only the historical tragedy of the holocaust but invited a group of Jewish people from Manchester and their rabbi to highlight the threat that they face in 2019, in Manchester, in the United Kingdom. I have to say, listening to the comments of a Hungarian survivor of the holocaust, then listening to fellow citizens from Manchester on the same evening, was a truly shocking experience. If we have not learned anything, it is shame on us all.

Finally—and this is a point for my Front Benchers—the holocaust survivor from Hungary, Susan Pollack, spoke passionately. She was an 86-year-old lady, and she said at the event:

“Our could not escape. We did not have passports. We had lost our passports. They had been taken away from us.”

That really made me think very hard about freedom of movement, because there are Jewish schools in London where a significant proportion of the pupils are French by birth. Their families have opted to escape what is going on in France at this point in time. I would say to Ministers that when we talk about curtailing freedom of movement, we should be very aware of what freedom we are giving up in relation to the history of Europe in the 20th century.

It has been a pleasure to speak in the debate. It is a shame that we need to have this type of debate in the United Kingdom in 2019, but we do need it, and we need to carry on working as parliamentarians to make sure that this virus, which is a plague on our politics and on our communities, is dealt with.

5.3 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb). Although some time has passed since his resignation from the Government, this is the first chance I think I have had to say to him in the Chamber that Defence questions are not the same without him. His contribution was heartfelt and welcome, as indeed was the tone set by the Secretary of State at the beginning of the debate. I should acknowledge, not least because he is a fellow Glaswegian, the tone struck by the shadow Secretary of State.

It is somewhat depressing, as the hon. Member for Aberconwy has said, that we are debating antisemitism for the second time in less than 12 months, and we are doing so against the backdrop of Members of this very Parliament feeling that they have to leave their political party because of antisemitism. Although I have no desire to tread on the broader political grief of the Labour party, I will single out, if I may—I did not tell her beforehand that I would do this—the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger). Having looked at some of the vile poison that she has put up with, I can tell her that she has the solidarity of Scottish National party Members and our admiration for the way in which she has stood up to it.

In the previous debate on antisemitism, I was able to say, in setting out the history of antisemitism in Scotland, that we are one of the few countries, if not the only country, never to have had an antisemitic law on the statute book. Indeed, the declaration of Arbroath, which is understood to be the most ancient medieval text in existence, specifically refers to Jews and gentiles as equal. To bring things a bit more up to date, I am pleased to say that the Scottish Government have accepted in full the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism.

I do not want to deceive Members into thinking that all is well and rosy north of the border, because the sad fact is that it is not. I thank Joel Salmon from the Board of Deputies of British Jews for the briefing he has given me, with some specific key figures on what is going on in Scotland. There have been 21 recorded incidents of antisemitism in the past year. Although that may not seem like a huge number, it does not feel all that small to Scotland’s Jewish population, given how small it is.

I want to read out a few examples of what has happened in the past 12 months. A brick was thrown at a glass door on a synagogue, but thanks to their foresight
in expecting something like that to happen, a non-smash coating had been put on the glass so it did not shatter on that occasion. In another example, a woman who was converting to Judaism was spat at in the face while being called a Jew on a bus in Edinburgh.

In possibly the most vile of the examples sent to me, a Jewish organisation in Scotland received the following email:

“I’m going to kill every single one of you ugly rat-faced kikes. I think I’ll use a knife. Then after I’ve cut you, I’ll shut that dirty, filthy, lying Jew mouth of yours once and for all. Make sure you have a good hiding place ready. I’m gonna stick your children into an oven and then I’m gonna serve roasted kike to my dog. Good luck finding, you worthless piece of shit.”

I will not read out the rest, as though that was not bad enough.

A few weeks ago, the front page of the *Sunday Herald* featured a story about the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities highlighting the deep problem of antisemitism that too often plagues elements of Scottish society. Too many responded to that story with conspiracy theories or by saying that somehow that could not happen in Scotland or that the Jews were complaining about nothing. This was, of course, a misunderstanding. As with any other minority community when the Jewish community complains about being the victim of hatred and highlights it on the front page of a national newspaper, any decent person would respond by extending a hand of friendship.

**Wera Hobhouse:** Is it not the case that we are all responsible for this problem? Sometimes we just say, “Oh, these sorts of things exist,” but we do not stand up enough and we do not say loudly enough, each time, that this is totally unacceptable.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I completely agree with the hon. Lady. As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) mentioned when he intervened on the Secretary of State at the start of the debate, there is perhaps a misunderstanding about how bad it actually is to be called an antisemite. I think the hon. Gentleman is right that the term perhaps feels a little too gentle sometimes. The Secretary of State himself said that people should be confronted with the fact that it is Jew hate. Let us put it to people in those stark terms, and then I think they can understand exactly what they are being accused of.

I want to draw the House’s attention to a school, Calderwood Lodge, which is actually just outside my constituency and in that of the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton). This is a brilliant example of bringing together children of different faiths to better understand people from those faiths. Calderwood Lodge is the first joint Catholic and Jewish school anywhere in the world, and I encourage all hon. Members, if they get the chance, to visit it.

In thinking, as the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) just said, about how we get young people and others to better understand the problems and understand that this is a problem for us all, I reflect on what my own mother chose to do. My own mother, when she was in my early teens, gave me a copy of the book “The Five Chimneys”, written by Olga Lengyel, a survivor of Auschwitz, and that book has stayed with me forever. I have read it a great many times, and I will probably give the book to my own nephew when he is of an age to take in the horrors of the holocaust.

That brings me to something that had never actually crossed my mind before. About this time last year, I was very kindly invited to dinner at my vet’s house. My vet, who looks after my cat very well, is himself Jewish, and he invited me and my partner, Gordon, to come and have dinner with his family, which we duly did. This had not even occurred to me, but when we were there and we got talking around the table about antisemitism, he had to explain to me that he had not yet told his young daughters what the Holocaust was and did not quite know how to approach it or at what time. It was not until I was in the car afterwards that I said to my partner, “How do you even begin to explain to your children that they belong to a faith that has been hunted in the way that Jewish people have over time?”

I want to draw my remarks to a close because I am conscious of time, and many hon. Members want to speak, so I will end with this. I was heartened, and at the same time quite depressed, to see the scenes last night from Paris, where a great number of people took to the Place de la République, rising up against antisemitism in France. The Chief Rabbi of France, Haim Korsia, put it perfectly, in outlining the challenge for us all not just here but around the world, when he asked in Paris last night:

“who must lower their eyes? The anti-Semites or the Jews?”

Let us flip that question around: who is it who gets to raise their eyes? I preferred the days when antisemites and racists felt ashamed and they kept their eyes to the ground. But when the Jew raises her eyes, what will she be confronted with? Will she be confronted with love or hate, friendship or hate, solidarity or hate, understanding or the ignorance that drives the hate we are trying to drive out of our society today? The Jew is looking up at this debate today, and although I suspect we will all speak with one voice, as we should, against antisemitism, what will happen when the Mace is lifted up? Will we all go back to our constituencies with a hand genuinely held out and renewed in our desire for friendship and in our desire to drive out antisemitism from society, or will we have a lot of warm words and not very much by the way of action? I sincerely hope not.

**Several hon. Members rose**—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. We will begin with a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches, but I warn colleagues that I suspect that will not last for long.

5.13 pm

**Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Like everyone in this debate, I want to emphasise that antisemitism is completely unacceptable—whether it comes from the hard right or the radical left—and it is utterly unforgivable if it permeates a mainstream political party. I also want to say that I rise with regret to make this speech, which is not one I ever thought I would have to make. It is deeply regrettable that we are all here to talk about this issue once again, but I feel I have to speak out about the current situation.

I found it truly shocking when, in September last year, the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna)—then of Labour’s own MPs—stated that the party’s problem with antisemitism had become so serious that it had passed the threshold and could be considered institutionally racist.
It is deeply disturbing that concern about problems with antisemitism in Labour are now so distracting to the Jewish community that they felt the need to come to Parliament Square to protest about it. In many conversations I have had on the doorstep in my constituency preparations to leave the country if Labour wins the next general election. That is an appalling and unacceptable state of affairs.

In the debate last April in this Chamber, it was harrowing to hear about the abuse, threats and hatred to which colleagues such as the hon. Members for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) and for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) have been subjected. The fact that much of it appeared to be coming from their own party members and supporters was all the more shocking.

I believe that that powerful debate should have been a turning point—a point at which the Labour leadership gripped the problem and took action to rid the party of this poison. Yet it took another four months of wrangling before they actually managed to adopt the internationally recognised definition of antisemitism overseen by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. What was the cause of that prevarication and foot-dragging? Attempts by the Leader of the Opposition to preserve the right of Labour activists to call Israel “a racist state of affairs.”

The leadership of the Jewish community is clear that much more effective action is needed. The Board of Deputies recently reiterated its disappointment at the lack of leadership on this matter shown by the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). Indeed, there are many who doubt the Labour leader’s commitment on this issue. He is, after all, the person who once accused “Zionists” of having “no sense of English irony, despite having lived here all their lives.”

He is the person who attended a ceremony that appeared to commemorate the Black September terrorists who slaughtered Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics. He defended an artist whose mural featured obviously antisemitic imagery. He has shared platforms with and promoted a number of antisemites, including inviting the blood libel antisemitic conspiracy theorist Shaikh Raed Salah to this Parliament. Mr Salah is a man who has described Jewish people as “monkeys” and “bacteria”, yet the right hon. Member for Islington North chose to describe him as “a very honoured citizen.”

Those may be past episodes, but the present response of the Labour leadership to the antisemitism crisis in their party continues to be inadequate. The right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) set that out in her devastating resignation statement. Pointing out that it is three years since the Labour leadership pledged to tackle the issue, she said:

“At every turn, it has resisted, ignored and snubbed the legitimate demands of the Jewish community.”

She went on to say that the Labour leadership have “offered white-wash reports” and “operated a revolving door disciplinary policy.”

She concluded:

“it has allowed its surrogates to belittle the scale of the problem and attack those who try to bring it to light.”

Even the deputy leader of Labour, the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), has said that he sometimes does not seem to recognise his own party:

“We know in our hearts we have been too slow to respond to the shaming scourge of antisemitism in our ranks.”

This week, eight MPs who have spent decades in Labour left their party, and their criticism was damning. They describe a party “hijacked by the machine politics of the hard left”, where a message of optimism has been replaced by “an all-consuming narrative founded on rage, betrayal and the hunt for heretics.”

The hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes)—someone whom I had always seen as being as Labour as Labour could possibly be—said he was sickened that the Labour party had now become a racist, antisemitic party. I believe he was right to be sickened and gravely concerned by what has happened to the official Opposition—so, too, am I; so, too, are many of my constituents. That is why decisive action is needed now to put this right, so we can see antisemitism driven out of British politics forever. Enough is enough.

5.20 pm

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I rise to speak feeling a mixture of anger and anguish: anger at the shocking increase in antisemitic incidents in our country, and anger at the abject failure of the Labour leadership to root out the cancer of antisemitism within our party; anguish because of the stuff of antisemitism, whether online, verbal or physical, constitutes an unspeakably dreadful stain on our society, and anguish because my colleagues, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) and the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan), both of whom have dedicated themselves to fighting antisemitism, feel that they can no longer stay in the Labour party and work with Labour MPs, both Jews and non-Jews, to eradicate antisemitism from our party.

It just beggars belief that on the very day the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree chose to leave the Labour party Derek Hatton was readmitted. This is a slight deviation, but I knew Derek Hatton in the 1980s. A leading member of the Militant tendency, he held bigoted views and never believed in consistency between what he said and what he did. I remember a meeting of rate-capped councils when he harangued the leader of one council who had told us his council was going to set a rate that night. Hatton accused the man of betraying the working classes by complying with the law. I was fed up with his hypocrisy, because that was precisely what Hatton had done the previous year. When I told him to be quiet, he turned on me and shouted, “If it’s too hot for you Margaret, get back in the kitchen.”

To return to the debate, I never ever thought that my Jewish identity would be central to my political work. I have always been secular. I arrived as an immigrant with my family at the age of four. We were not active in the Jewish community, although all our family friends were also Jewish refugees. But like so many other Jews, I lost family in the holocaust. In recent years, as my sisters trawled through family letters and diaries, that family history became more vivid and poignant for me. I read a letter from my aunt—after fleeing, she found herself in France—that she sent to Marshal Pétain, pleading with him to release her husband who had been taken from their home in the Ardèche:
“He is only a number to you. He is everything to me.”

Her husband, my uncle, was later murdered in Auschwitz.

At Auschwitz, years later, I walked into a room filled with luggage and was confronted with a battered suitcase bearing his initials. I read my grandfather’s diaries and heard the despair he expressed as he visited his parents’ graves in Vienna for the last time before fleeing the Nazis. And most painful of all, I read my grandmother’s last letter, written to her son, my uncle, nine days before she was shot in a trench outside a concentration camp, in which she twice says, “Don’t forget me completely.”

Stamping out antisemitism matters. We must never shirk our shared responsibility to prevent such horrors from happening again. We ignore the present increase in antisemitism incidents at our peril: a 16% rise, as others have said; the third year in a row that figures have reached an all-time high; a 54% increase in just one year in antisemitic abuse on social media. Complacency, denial, the shifting of blame on to others—all that is unacceptable.

This is not about weaponising racism for political advantage, an accusation that makes me profoundly angry. Likewise, for some people to claim that those fighting antisemitism are simply protecting the Netanyahu regime in Israel is deeply insulting and utterly wrong. I often criticise the actions of successive Israeli Governments where I feel that is justified, but legitimate criticism of a foreign Government should never morph into racist abuse against all Jews, as it too often does.

The increase in antisemitism comes from both the left and the right. On the right, CST analysis tells us that one in four of the incidents of recorded abuse involved language used by the far right, but under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), a platform has also been given for antisemitism, which was always present on the hard-left fringes, but has now moved into the mainstream of my party. That is why we have experienced a surge in abuse against us—abusively particularly targeted against female Jewish MPs.

I have seen the internal Labour party documents leaked to LBC that formed the agenda for one single meeting of the group tasked with investigating allegations of antisemitic abuse, and I congratulate LBC on doggedly pursuing this story. There are 47 antisemitic allegations in these documents against Labour party members. The evidence of abuse is shocking. I quote:

“He needs to check out the love fest between the Zionists and the Nazis.

People are finding out how much power Jews have. They seem to have a lot of power over the main opposition party. Might they rebel if... the reason they didn’t get a job or a home was because a Jew got it.

You are paid by Israel to destabilise UK Labour.

A Zionist plot to oust Jeremy Corbyn.

A swastika is appropriate as Israel is a fascist state.”

Some of the abuse is directed at Members of this House. LBC gave the file to Mak Chishiy, who ran the hate crime unit for the Metropolitan police until 2017. He identified 17 cases that he judged were “race hate incidents” and four cases that crossed the threshold for criminal investigation. It took months for the Crown Prosecution Service to give the police the go-ahead just for a criminal investigation. Will the Government urgently inquire into why this delay occurred and will they also provide me with written assurance that the delay will not result in cases being dropped because they run out of time?

The documents leaked to LBC covered less than 50 cases. The Labour party has received hundreds and hundreds of complaints, yet only 12 individuals have been expelled from the party since April. I could have identified more than that from the one set of papers I saw. This tells me that the leader of the Labour party is not demanding zero tolerance of antisemitism in our ranks. Until he does, I and other members of the party will continue to call it out fearlessly, loudly and persistently.

Trust between the leader, his staff, Labour headquarters and Back-Bench Labour MPs has now broken down completely. I have absolutely no confidence in the integrity of the data that the party has provided concerning its progress. I submitted a dossier of abusive communications. The only communication that I have received back is a letter from a party member—about whom I had complained—in which he says of my complaint:

“I can’t tell you how pathetic I think this is of you, going crying to the complaints department when someone says they don’t like you.”

He had accused me of “hysterically abusing Corbyn” to advance my own agenda and had said that Jewish people in this country are not victims of anything and that I was a nasty, dishonest person. The level of care provided to MPs by the party is so pathetic that the only response one gets to complaining about antisemitic abuse is further abuse from the culprit.

This week, two Labour MPs quit the Labour party, mainly because they think the party is institutionally antisemitic. I understand and respect their decision and mourn their departure. I joined the Labour party 56 years ago because it was the natural home for Jews, with its proud tradition of fighting racism, promoting equality and fostering tolerance. I do not yet want to give up the fight for the heart and soul of a party I have worked for and with throughout my adult life. The leader of the Labour party must really listen, must really understand and must really change. If he does not do so, he will be culpable for sabotaging the values that led to the creation of the Labour party and responsible for the withering away of a once great political force.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The limit on Back-Bench speeches is reduced to eight minutes with immediate effect.

5.29 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the powerful speech of the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge). It is also an honour to speak after my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb), who made an excellent speech. We have been great friends since I made a speech here against tuition fees in 2010. He told me I was wrong then and has not stopped telling me I am wrong about Brexit, but we have been great friends even since, and on this issue, as on so many others, we have worked together closely. I join him in paying tribute to my constituency neighbour the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) for the work he has done chairing our all-party group on antisemitism, often in the face of abuse and, sadly recently, of threats and abuse against his nearest and dearest. He deserves great credit for his work.
I want to start on the good news. As this debate is demonstrating, most people in this country are decent, tolerant and open-minded, and that is proven. I think, by surveys in recent years. The annual Eurobarometer has consistently shown that Britain is one of the most tolerant societies in Europe, with some of the most positive views on immigration. We should never forget that that is how most people in this country feel and think.

That is the good news. The bad news, as many Members have said, is the rise of antisemitism in our country. I share the growing concern and alarm. The statistics that the Secretary of State laid out—I will not lay them out again—should shame us all in this House, on whatever side, as should the views of young Jews living in this country. A recent survey showed that 29% of British Jews had considered emigrating because of safety concerns. That is up from 11% in 2012 to now nearly a third of Jews living in this country. About a quarter of them have suffered antisemitic harassment in the last year and about one in three have suffered such harassment in the past five years. This should shame us all. It makes me embarrassed as a Member of Parliament and should shame us all.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy made a great speech about the experience of Jews living in mainland Europe. I cannot reiterate the feeling we had going to that school in Brussels, which is guarded by armed Belgian soldiers, with armoured vehicles outside. I was a schoolteacher. I never had to go through those hoops to get into my school to teach, and to think that pupils have to go through that in mainland Europe just to go to school and do the things they have a right to do is truly shocking. We asked the young people there if they could see a future for themselves in Europe and only a very few hands went up to show they could.

As many Members have said, we have a problem on both sides of politics in this country. There is a growing movement on the far right. According to all surveys, those on the far right hold the most antisemitic views in society, and that is a huge and growing problem. It should concern us all that the far right is getting younger in this country. It is tapping into this feeling of discontent and all the rest of it. As I said in the Holocaust Memorial Day debate, I am disgusted, as somebody who believes in and campaigned for Brexit, that some of these people are now trying to use that issue to further their own hateful, spiteful and poisonous political ideology. It disgusts me, and I say not in my name and not in the name of the nearly 70% of my constituents who voted to leave the EU.

The CST contacted me a couple of weeks ago saying, “We’d like to come and talk to you, because your name is on a far-right list as somebody who is trying to stop Brexit,” as my hon. Friend highlighted. I will sit down with the CST and find out exactly what was said, but that is the nonsense perpetuated on the far right. It is fair to say that UKIP has now become a far-right party. The new leader and some of its members seem to be revelling in embracing a far-right, fascist agenda.

As many colleagues have said, antisemitism is a huge problem on the far left of politics. I will not say a great deal about that—Labour Members can speak to it better than I can—but I was outraged at the report on Sky News that George Galloway, who has reapplied to join the Labour party, described the decision of the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) to leave the Labour party as a black-ops plot against the leader. He also used the phrase “Goebbels-style” throughout.

**Jess Phillips** (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): To reassure the hon. Gentleman and the House, the women in the Labour party have spoken today collectively to push our Front Benchers and the leadership of our party to say that Mr Galloway is not entitled or able to join our party not only because of the rules, but because he is not welcome as he is a misogynist and an antisemite. I would never be in the same party as him.

**Andrew Percy:** I thank the hon. Lady for saying that. Let us call this out for what it was: it was Jew-baiting and a deliberate use of language and of Goebbels to bait. It is exactly the same on the far left as it is on the far right. Let us call George Galloway what he is: a misogynist and a racist. That is exactly what he is. He has no place in this Chamber or in politics in this country.

What do we do about antisemitism? We have identified the problem and we know that it is growing in our country. I want to reflect to the Secretary of State on where we are getting it right in schools and the curriculum—I used be a history teacher—but also on where we need to do a lot more. It is right that holocaust education is written into the national curriculum. When we teach holocaust education, we of course teach the history of antisemitism in Europe as part of it, but I fear that the teaching of the holocaust in isolation could leave pupils with the impression that that was the end of it. We say that antisemitism started and ended with the holocaust and the end of the second world war, but we need to look at how we can broaden the school curriculum so that the liberation of Europe and the camps is not the end of the antisemitism story. It is right that holocaust education is on the curriculum, but we need to look at how we can go further.

I had another good idea, but, as a former teacher, I cannot read my own writing. Not for the first time, I will follow up on that excellent idea with the Secretary of State as soon as I have deciphered my own code. I will end on that, but I associate myself with what other hon. Members have said. I am so proud that, in debates such as today’s, the Chamber is united in its revulsion of this disgusting scourge.

5.38 pm

**Luciana Berger** (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Ind): Why are we joined here for this debate? It was almost a year ago that I shared with the House my family’s history and experience of antisemitism through the centuries. My mother’s family were expelled from Spain in the 15th century. I spoke about the more than 100 members of my family aged from four to 83 who were murdered by the Nazis in the gas chambers of Treblinka, Sobibor, Mauthausen, Bergen-Belsen and Auschwitz.

What has happened since that last debate? It pains me to say this and share with the House that we have gone backwards, as we have heard from hon. Members’ contributions. We have not seen the progress we should have seen over the course of the past 11 months. On a
personal level, I have in the past year alone seen a further two people convicted: one from the far-right, imprisoned after he threatened to kill me, convicted under counter-terrorism legislation, and another just before Christmas, a former member of the Labour party convicted of harassment. That takes my tally to six or seven individuals, depending on how you interpret it, convicted of antisemitic-inspired hate crimes and threats.

And there is a significant amount of antisemitism that might not reach the criminal threshold but that has surfaced. I have been subjected to thousands of messages of antisemitic abuse and hate, and I want to reflect on what I have seen in just the past week and share with the House the range of terms I have seen; they range from the ridiculous to the truly disturbing. There might be a small minority who think I am a “Zionist lizard” or that I am responsible for Eurovision taking place in Israel. It is sadly all too common to be addressed as “an evil little witch” or a “murderous Zionist.”

Abuse is only part of the problem. Arguably more concerning, as we have heard already, is the rise of insidious antisemitic conspiracy theories: that I am an agent of Mossad, that I am a traitor to my country, that I am paid directly by Benjamin Netanyahu, based purely on my Jewish background. The comments underneath my posts on social media are filled with individuals calling me the MP for Tel Aviv or asking whether a Member of Likud can stand for election in our country. And just yesterday an individual who says they are a member of the Labour party and with the hashtag “JCforPM” in their bio—they have been on Twitter for an extended period and have hundreds of followers, so this is not a bot that has been created—said: “shame on Luciana Berger, A Zionist Bitch, I hate her, I hate her baby, her Israel.”

Elsewhere an official Labour-affiliated group, Young Labour, announced that the departure of my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) would mean that “Palestine Lived” and then proceeded to bullying the Jewish chair of Young Labour, while influential Twitter users have wished “good riddance” to “Israel’s fifth columnists.” They have called myself and hon. and right hon. Friends “the Israel stooges party,” “the Israeli apartheid democratic front” and so on. Others have alleged that the Rothschilds and George Soros will declare their backing for the new Independent Group. I share all this because this is what is happening in our country, from people across the country, during the past week and today in particular.

In the Labour party, my political home for nearly 20 years until I resigned from it on Monday, I have seen obfuscation, smears, inaction and denial every step of the way. We had a debate in this House following the unprecedented event of a minority community in our country, the British Jewish community, taking to Parliament Square outside this place to say enough is enough when it comes to antisemitism. It was not a demonstration against National Action or Tommy Robinson; it was against the Labour party, a political movement that is supposed to pride itself on the values of equality for all and anti-racism against all.

Yet what has happened in the wake of that unprecedented event in our country and in the wake of the debate in this House that took place just a few weeks later? Mr Speaker, you could not make up the catalogue of events that has shamed the Labour party since that happened: the countless individual cases, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) has alluded to already, that have been dropped or have not been responded to. In the run-up to Holocaust Memorial Day this year, we learned of members of the Labour party in high-profile positions, a number of them councillors and one a Welsh Assembly Member, who had made antisemitic comments and had as their sanction a “reminder of the rules”. That was somehow a zero-tolerance approach to antisemitism. We have heard the audio recording of a member of the Labour party’s highest governing body, the national executive committee, accuse 70 British rabbis of being Trump fanatics rather than addressing their very serious concerns about antisemitism. We had to fight for months to see the international definition of antisemitism with all its examples accepted and adopted by the Labour party, and even with a last-minute attempt to dilute it.

We had the summer of antisemitism, when not a day went by without another story in the British press about antisemitism in the Labour party and about its leader’s connections to the issue. One in particular, which caused great offence, was the claim that British Jews do not get respect. We were told that the Leader of the Opposition was present, but not involved, at the laying of a wreath for the individuals who orchestrated the Munich attacks and the murder of the Israeli athletes. The commitment to meet a deadline to deal with high-profile cases has been deliberately missed, and the party is withholding details of physical threats to MPs, including myself. Just last week, the leadership of the parliamentary Labour party held members in contempt despite their reasonable request to answer 11 straightforward questions and to respond to serious concerns about antisemitism, which was ignored.

This is a shameful record, let alone from a leadership and a political party that seek the highest office in our land. That is why I have arrived at the sickening conclusion that the Labour party is institutionally antisemitic in its processes, its attitudes and its behaviour. We ignore this at our peril. Colleagues have referred to the figures. We have seen a 16% rise in the number of incidents since 2017, and behind every one of those incidents is a person who has been affected.

Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): The hon. Lady is making some powerful points. I am reminded of the Russian saying that the fish always rots from the head. Does she agree that that is apt in this case?

Luciana Berger: I hear the right hon. Gentleman’s comments, and of course people will contend with this issue in different ways. I have not held back from speaking out and seeking to challenge at every available opportunity what I have seen as antisemitism within the ranks of what was my party. This is an issue not just for us here in this country but for countries across Europe. We heard that there were demonstrations yesterday in 60 towns and cities against the increase in antisemitism there.

I will certainly not be intimidated, bullied or silenced. I have used and will continue to use the full force of British law to ensure that people are held to account for the crimes they commit. There should be no tolerance, and that extends to all issues and crimes when it comes
to racism. However, this cannot be the British Jewish community’s fight alone. History tells us where this can lead. I am clear that, across the Chamber and in every institution in every part of our national life, we must drive out antisemitism and promote the values of respect, equality and tolerance. I am sick and tired of debating this and describing it. We have had enough warm words and read enough tweets of solidarity; now is the time for swift, strong and decisive action, so that when we debate this again in a year’s time, we can celebrate our progress rather than having to reflect once again on our collective failure. I implore all Members from across the House to do everything they can to tackle antisemitism in our country.

5.47 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): It is hard to follow the speech by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger). I pay tribute to her for the actions that she has taken in the past couple of days, as well as for all she has done since first being elected in 2010. It takes a huge amount of courage to do what she has done.

I have a large Jewish community in my constituency, and the work of the Community Security Trust is particularly important there. In fact, I called for this debate after the release of the CST’s figures. I pay tribute to the trust for the work that it does and for its selfless action in looking after the community. I was pleased that my first parliamentary question here asked for money to pay for the trust to look after schoolchildren at their schools. My right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) agreed with me at the time that he did not see why parents should have to pay to keep their children safe just because they were going to school. We continue to fund that work.

Several hon. Members have mentioned the fact that there have been 1,652 antisemitic incidents in the past year, but that is not the whole story. A further 630 potential incidents were reported, but they were not included by the CST because there was no evidence of antisemitic motivation, targeting or content. However, many of the people who suffered those incidents were from the Jewish faith. Previously, we have seen spikes in the number of incidents following military action in Israel or conflict in Gaza or even the west bank, but that has not occurred in the past year. There have been some border skirmishes in which people have been killed, but two particular periods stand out in which there have been spikes in antisemitic incidents.

The first period when the CST recorded an additional number of incidents came during April and May last year, which coincided with the Leader of the Opposition’s past support for a mural in Tower Hamlets coming to light. The so-called graffiti artist Mear One, whom many of us will remember, produced a mural showing many of us will remember, produced a mural showing many of us will remember, produced a mural showing African-Caribbean slaves. Many comments were made at the time, which coincided with an increased number of incidents. The second period came in August and September last year, when there was much discussion in the media about whether the Labour party would adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism, and the number of antisemitic incidents increased to 150 in those months. I certainly did not want this debate to be about criticising the Labour party per se, but I want Labour to know that when people make comments, there is an effect beyond the coverage in the newspapers.

Bob Stewart: I have listened carefully to everything being said today, and I want to assure my colleagues on the Labour Benches that we on the Conservative Benches support them and feel deeply that they are not antisemitic as a whole. We are sad that this is happening.

Dr Offord: I do not believe that that intervention was aimed directly at me, but I will say that I have for some time been asked in hustings and during elections, “Is the Labour party antisemitic?” and I have never really engaged in that debate. The simple reason why I could not do that is because the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) is certainly not antisemitic and was very much part of the Labour party. I have therefore always resisted saying that the Labour party is antisemitic, and I have resisted saying that the Leader of the Opposition is antisemitic. I will let others make their minds up about that.

In a very good book by Anthony Julius called “Trials of the Diaspora: A History of Anti-Semitism in England” that I found in the Library, the author suggests that there have been four periods in history when Jews have been prominent and have received antisemitic abuse, and I think that we are now in a fifth. The antisemitism of recent years has taken the form of criticism of Zionism and of the actions and policies of the Government of Israel, which has often manifested itself in direct action, such as the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement. However, the new line of attack is different from traditional antisemitism, meaning the hatred of Jews, claims that Jews are inferior to others or a belief in a worldwide Jewish conspiracy or the Jewish control of capitalism. The new antisemitism differs in the political voices from which it comes. Previously antisemitism was perceived as coming from the political right, but the new antisemites are primarily on the left and, indeed, the far left.

I have a concern about how such views are communicated to the public through social media. The Antisemitism Policy Trust and the CST found that when Google removed “Are Jews evil?” from its autocomplete function in December 2016, 10% fewer people searched for “Are Jews evil?” than in the previous year. Search companies should stop directing people to antisemitic content on the internet, and we must better equip users and remove content when it is uploaded.

The hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) and I went to Dublin with the all-party parliamentary group against antisemitism to visit Facebook and Twitter. I am sure that he will remember that when we spoke to Facebook, its reaction to any kind of racist, sexist, homophobic, misogynistic comment was, “We must remove it as soon as possible.” However, when we spoke to Twitter, it likened any such posts to comments made in the street to someone as they pass by. We felt that was certainly not an appropriate response. I would like to see the Government and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport consider legislation to prevent such comments from being allowed to remain online.
I am particularly disappointed by two comments that many of us will have seen online yesterday. The first was in response to the right hon. Member for Enfield North when she moved to her current position as an independent Member. Young Labour tweeted:

“Joan Ryan Gone—Palestine Lives”.

As though she had any effect on either Palestine, the west bank, Gaza or Israel.

The second comment, and I do not think it necessary to name the Member, was about the financial backers of the new Independent Group:

“Supporters from the State of Israel, which supports both Conservative and Labour ‘Friends of Israel’, of which Luciana was chair, is possible and I would not condemn those who suggest it”.

Well, I certainly would. I cannot speak for Labour Friends of Israel, but I am sure it is the same as Conservative Friends of Israel, which does not receive any money from the Israeli Government—it receives its finances from within this country, as per the law.

I ask Labour Front Benchers to do more, and not only about the members I have mentioned today and the comments they have made online; they also need to actively seek out those who are causing a terrible and emotional time for so many of my residents.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree has shown us today what antisemitism feels like, but many of my constituents show me on an almost daily basis how it affects them. One comment, on which I will end, came from a gentleman today and, like me, he is very concerned about the removal of a passport from a British person.

“If Mr Corbyn was to be elected, he would know that I have the right of return to Israel, and no doubt I would have my passport taken away.” I do not believe that, and I certainly hope this country never ends up behaving in such a way, but we cannot go on like this. We cannot go on like this.

In reality, Zionism is the Jewish people’s right to self-determination in their own state. It is not expansionism, aggression or the policy of any particular Israeli Government. Many Zionists, including me, oppose settlement expansion and hope that, at some stage in the future, there will be leaders on all sides with the authority and credibility to create the conditions for a two-state solution.

The problem is that those in the current Labour leadership have always believed that the creation of Israel was a catastrophe and, whatever their protestations, favour a one-state solution—Palestine, not Israel. This is in stark contrast to their campaigning for the rights of minorities around the world to self-determination. So in their world view, Jews are the only minority who do not have that right to self-determination. Israel is singled out and demonised when human rights abuses and lack of democracy in many other countries are on a much greater scale, including countries defied by the hard left. Jewish people are held responsible individually and collectively for alleged actions of the Israeli Government.

After a summer when the Labour party was engulfed in a perfect storm as a result of its refusal to accept the internationally agreed definition of antisemitism, what was the reaction of the party leader? It was to go to a meeting of the party’s national executive with his own proposed amendment that people should have the right to say that the creation and existence of the state of Israel is a racist endeavour. In other words, based on this definition, the leader of the Labour party supports people’s right to be antisemitic. This is extraordinary.

Then, we must consider the long-term support for terrorist organisations who kill and incite the murder of Jews—Hamas and Hezbollah. Of course, there is a perfectly respectable argument to be made for talking to terrorist groups to persuade them to end violence and become part of political and peace processes, but with neither Hamas nor Hezbollah, or the IRA, was this the objective of the Leader of the Opposition. His interactions were clearly to show solidarity with their cause and hence legitimise their use of violence in pursuit of their goals. That is the hard truth. Because of this, how can Labour, under his leadership, tackle the “cancer” of antisemitism when many of the accusations refer to people who articulate views he shares and their loyalty to the leader takes precedence over the party’s anti-racist values?

Why should this matter to the vast majority of UK Jews? It is quite simply because Israel is our best, and perhaps only, safe haven against the persecution Jews have suffered in every generation through history, most recently, with the pogroms of Russia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the horrors of the Holocaust only 80 years ago. Jews’ fear of persecution is based on historical and contemporary facts, not irrationality or paranoia. Even in civilised France, we have seen tens of
It is fostered by enabling those who are different to exist as one with ourselves. Neither is true tolerance best fostered by allowing believers like our Jewish brothers and sisters to shoulder with the Jewish community. But it has made me sick to the stomach to observe the silence of some in the party and, in other cases, the denial of the problem or attempts to smear those who have spoken out. The abuse and threats meted out to my courageous hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) have disgusted most decent people. Instead of empathy and support, the response of the hard left was to call a vote of no confidence in her — and they call themselves socialists! Quite simply, if all this has happened in the party, imagine what would happen in our country if the right hon. Gentleman ever became Prime Minister. That is why UK Jews are afraid, and why I urge my friends and former colleagues to examine their consciences and act to put an end to this shameful chapter in the Labour party’s history. Antisemitism is not some second-class form of racism. A party rooted in the values of equality and anti-discrimination cannot collude with racism as a price worth paying for chasing an election victory.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: A six-minute limit now applies.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I am sure that I represent all Members of this House in saying that the Jewish community is and has been a real blessing to our country in the past 20 years because of their direct experiences of antisemitism. I salute my former colleagues who have stood shoulder to shoulder with the Jewish community. But it has made me sick to the stomach to observe the silence of some in the party and, in other cases, the denial of the problem or attempts to smear those who have spoken out. The abuse and threats meted out to my courageous hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) have disgusted most decent people. Instead of empathy and support, the response of the hard left was to call a vote of no confidence in her — and they call themselves socialists! Quite simply, if all this has happened in the party, imagine what would happen in our country if the right hon. Gentleman ever became Prime Minister. That is why UK Jews are afraid, and why I urge my friends and former colleagues to examine their consciences and act to put an end to this shameful chapter in the Labour party’s history. Antisemitism is not some second-class form of racism. A party rooted in the values of equality and anti-discrimination cannot collude with racism as a price worth paying for chasing an election victory.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: A six-minute limit now applies.

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Gentleman hits the mark absolutely.

Good religious education will help to promote community cohesion, which is critical as the shape of our communities changes. I am pleased that the Secretary of State for Education appreciates that, too. He noted recently:

“It is mandatory for all state funded schools to teach RE and it is important that they do this well. Good quality religious education not only helps schools meet their legal duty to promote children and young people’s spiritual and moral development. It also gives them knowledge of the values and traditions of Britain and other countries, and so fosters mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs.”

Lord Alton said in the other place:

“Religious literacy and understanding of faith and no faith, the honouring of difference, the determination to understand one another and to reconsider bigotry, prejudice and caricatures, must surely be at the heart of how we form tomorrow’s citizens.” — [Official Report, House of Lords, 17 December 2018; Vol. 794, c. GC158.]

We can promote true tolerance by reasserting the rights and respect owed to each person simply by virtue of their humanity. These rights, as intended in the universal declaration of human rights, assume that we all have equality by virtue of our humanity.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Before my hon. Friend moves on further from religious education, I should say that on the basis of what she has described, perhaps it is time for new
Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady has three more minutes, but I gently suggest that she is not obliged to use them.

Fiona Bruce: I will endeavour not to, Mr Speaker.

I was speaking about the importance of our individual humanity, which we should respect before any differences in intelligence, strength, religion, ability or political views. We should understand that each of us is individually and uniquely created, and that no insignificant person has ever or will ever be born. It is this vision of dignity in our shared humanity that was lost during the Holocaust.

My favourite teacher at school—I know we all had one—was a German who had, with her father, helped Jewish children escape from the Nazis. They then had to escape themselves. She taught me German, but she also taught me something far more important than that. She taught me that no ideology should take precedence over respect for an individual as a human being and as a person.

I note that we subtly enable persecution every time we promote the use of language that often accompanies identity politics. Our political opponents are not necessarily wicked. They are certainly not scum. They are due a respectable ear and proper dialogue. Those who differ from us, whether in their political or religious views, or in their ethnicity, are first and foremost our brothers and sisters in humanity. I know that our Jewish brothers and sisters teach and promote these principles. As a society, let us stand alongside them and do all we can to enable them to flourish in their unique identity and beliefs.

6.11 pm

Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op):

This is a traumatic time. In the past three days, eight highly respected hon. Members have left the Labour party, citing the Labour party’s antisemitism as the key reason. The antisemitic abuse that I receive includes claims that I do not have human blood, that I am a racist supporter of child abuse, that I am a Zionist shill and the Jewish Labour Movement’s bitch, that I accept the Israeli shilling, that I am prepared to sacrifice the Labour party in support of a foreign power, and that I am a Zio, a racist supporter of child abuse, that I am an anti-Semite, that I am an alien parasite, that I am a parasite responsible for financial heists of entire nations, and that I am headed “Bloodsucking Alien Parasites Killing America”, the alien parasites being the Jews?

This is an abject failure of leadership for a party that aspires to government. No amount of reassurances from spokespeople can make matters right. In fact, they are insulating. Who do they think they are kidding? It is only action in drumming out the antisemites in the Labour party that counts, and there is little sign of that happening—unless, of course, the party becomes embarrassed by the public exposure of its failings. This is not just a problem for the Jewish community. It is about the nature of our society and the soul of the Labour party. Labour prides itself on being an anti-racist party, but a party that struggles to combat anti-Jewish hatred is complicit in racism. That is the reality.

Why am I still in the Labour party? I am not used to giving up. I still believe in the values that brought me into the Labour party 56 years ago—anti-racism, the struggle for equality, seeking the means to create a better society. I am still fighting, and I will not be hounded out. Indeed, I suspect that the leadership would be delighted to see all its opponents go.

I am encouraged by the support of the overwhelming majority of Labour MPs—Jewish and non-Jewish—and many members, including those in Liverpool. I am still battling for the soul of the Labour party as, with my Jewish and non-Jewish colleagues, I oppose antisemitism wherever it raises its ugly head.

6.15 pm

Maria Caufield (Lewes) (Con):

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman).

One of the most poignant sayings is that history has a habit of repeating itself. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) put it in excellent terms this afternoon—that history tells us where all this will lead. Whether it was in the Holocaust, or whether it was other genocides that followed, in which people of different faiths and from different communities have been tortured and murdered, whether it was in Rwanda, whether it was the Rohingyas, the Yazidis, or in Srebrenica—all followed a similar pattern before genocide and Holocaust took place. The warning signs are there long before the action happens.

Antisemitism was clearly evident long before the Holocaust in which 6 million Jews were executed. Looking at the parallels between then and now, there are some disturbing similarities. Only a few weeks ago, as the Secretary of State said, many of us were signing the book of remembrance for Holocaust Memorial Day, promising that we would speak out if we saw those patterns of behaviour emerging in our society. That is part of the purpose of today’s debate. It is important not to sit silently by, not calling such behaviour out.

At the time in 1933 when Hitler took over as Chancellor, few saw that the creeping antisemitism would lead to the murder of 6 million Jews. Look at the building blocks that were put in place to get to that stage. A man got into power—a man that, in 1919 when he joined the German Workers’ party, many thought a political lightweight that would never lead the party. But he got into power, promising the masses, in the time of austerity following the first world war, that he would end austerity.
Hitler denounced international capitalism; he said he would install a new order to dismantle the broken politics of that generation. He promised increased public spending to build more hospitals, schools, roads. He would curb big business and end capitalism. He had sidelined traditional trade unions and established his own new group, the Labour Front. He set up a youth wing to indoctrinate the next generation so it would follow his values and beliefs. They were often found chanting at popular events such as the Olympics.

Hitler changed the rules in his own party, so that people could not challenge him and get rid of him. He got rid of the moderates in his own party, using the Enabling Act, so that no one could speak out, and if they were afraid, they were gone in an instant. He ended the freedom of the press, and it was after he got into power that the antisemitism was really ramped up. Anyone looking at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum website should listen to the testimony of someone like Hedi Pope, whose parents lived through that. She said they were Jewish, but they dismissed some of the changes; they thought they would never last—he would be gone in a few years, and things would return to normal. But they never did.

After 1933, the Jews were dismissed from the civil service. People were told to boycott Jewish goods. They could not attend schools. They could not go to public synagogues, Jewish homes, places of business. In 1938, Jews started to leave, but for many of them it was too late.

At Prime Minister’s Question Time this afternoon, I spoke about Anne Meadows, a councillor—a Labour councillor—since 1994. I know Anne because I was a Conservative councillor with her in the ward of Moulsecoomb and Bevendean—I was the first Conservative councillor there for 20 years. Anne is a fierce, patriotic Labour woman. You did not mess with Anne. I found that to my cost when I was a fellow councillor. To see a woman like that having to leave the Labour party because of antisemitism against her husband is absolutely shocking. What did her local Labour MP tweet today?

That this was nothing more than a bare-faced career move by Anne. There was no sympathy for the plight of Anne and her husband. That tells us where we are today. If we think that antisemitism is something that happened in the past and could never escalate to the same levels, we are fooling ourselves and denying what has happened. There is antisemitism today, and as we remember the lives that were lost in the holocaust and previous genocides, we are confronted with a question—what would we have done? Would we have prevented what happened then? Will we have a chance now, because history tells us that if we do not take it we know where this will end?

6.20 pm

**Ruth Smeeth** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I beg the indulgence of the House. I have never stood before to make a speech in the House without notes and without something explicit to say. I never thought that I would do so on an issue so important to me, because I would be so emotional about it. I beg the indulgence of the House for the next six minutes.

A year ago, I stood in this House and read out some of my greatest hits. I got huge solidarity, and lots of people, both within the Labour party and here, stood with me and the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman) as we continued our fight—a fight I never thought I would have to have inside my own party, and I promise one that I never wanted. As much as I would love to—not love; happily—share the ongoing abuse that has happened over the past 12 months, I say with respect to everybody in the Chamber that it simply is not about us. It is about the chilling effect that this is having on people outside. It is about the young women who should be joining the Labour party who no longer have a political home. It is about those young women and young men who have decided that their identity stops them getting politically involved. It is for them that we continue this fight. It is for them that I stay on my Benches, inside my party. It is for them that I will fight every single day to ensure that antisemitism is removed from my party.

I say to the leadership of my party that one antisemite is too many. It should not be the case that I or my colleagues have to mention the names of antisemites either in this Room—in this wonderful Chamber—or to the parliamentary Labour party for someone to be thrown out. I would like to report to the House that Derek Hatton has been suspended from the Labour party. It took a complaint by my friend the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), and for that to be mentioned in the House.

I am sick and tired, and my heart is breaking a little more every day, because of what I have to experience and what I have to read. I am devastated that my closest political sister in this House has been hounded out of my party, but I have a message for everybody. I will not be silenced. I am going nowhere, and they will have to take my membership card away from me, because this is too important—not for me, not for you, but for the people we represent outside.

I want to say thank you to everybody who has supported us. I want to say thank you to the CST, which has kept me safe. I want to say thank you to the police, who have kept me safe, and I want to say thank you to the Government, who have been there when my own party has not, which is shameful. But this fight continues, and it continues on behalf of all. Everybody should grant the CST more money, and they should support and join the APPG. Now is the time not only for words, not only for things in the Chamber, but for action, because we so desperately need it.

Several hon. Members rose—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. There are six people wanting to speak—four minutes each. I call Stephen Kerr.

6.24 pm

**Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): That was an extraordinary speech and I compliment the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) for delivering it in the way she did.

I almost feel that little more needs to be said, but when I was first elected as Member of Parliament for Stirling, I made a commitment to myself that I would stand up in this place, and in all other places, to defend...
any persecuted minority and to speak up against hatred in all its grizzly, ugly forms. That is why I want to take a few minutes of the House’s time to make it clear that I stand with my Jewish friends and neighbours against the racist vilence that is antisemitism.

Where are we going as a society when a person’s ethnicity or religion is used to demean them and their right to freedom of speech? I have never felt the need to apologise for or hide my religious convictions or affiliations, and no one in this country should ever have to do so. No one should ever have to suffer being the subject of public pillory because of their origins or their religious affiliation. Freedom of religion or belief is a foundational human right.

Based on my limited experience as a Member of this House, I cannot imagine the bullying, abuse and mockery that the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) and others have had to endure and are enduring. The grotesque treatment to which she and other hon. Members have been subject is deplorable and must be condemned, not least by the leadership of the Labour party.

I am deeply concerned about the rise of this hate, here and around the world. Jew hate seems to me to be a significant element in the overall increase of intolerance and hatred of all kinds. There is a coarsening of public discourse in the way in which intolerance and bigotry are being normalised, not least because of the prevalence of the abuse of social media platforms.

There is so much to be critical of in this world when it comes to injustice, whether it is the treatment of religious minorities in Saudi Arabia, the persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar, or the official Chinese persecution and imprisonment of more than 1 million Muslims. There is no small amount of injustice in this world, but it is telling that far more energy and importance is attached to divestment and boycott campaigns against Israel than against any other country. That was demonstrated last month, when Malaysia banned Israelis from participating in the world Para swimming championships. We have also heard calls for the boycott of Eurovision when it takes place in Israel, but protests against awarding the World cup to Qatar or against holding the Olympic games in China are muted at best.

In the minute I have left, let me say that this instinct of hatred, which some on the left and the right wish to bring to the surface of our natures, can only be truly defeated by love. Tolerance is not enough. Tolerance implies that we may dislike something but we will politely keep our mouths shut and grudgingly allow people to behave in a way that is destructive to our way of life. It is only when we truly see the common humanity that we share, free of the strictures of difference, that we will become free of intolerance and hatred. It is for that reason that I have made freedom of religion or belief one of the issues that I will continue to speak about in this Chamber. These hatreds—race, religious persecution and intolerance—make us all slightly less human and diminish us all wherever they are. I cannot think of a more important subject to speak out on.

6.28 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I shall comment on one issue only—not the racists and the antisemites who have been exposed, but the enablers, because the enablers are an equally big problem and there are a lot of them, not least in the Labour party.

I will give one example from the previous debate in which I spoke. One enabler went online and put out to a lot of people the suggestion that I had exaggerated and lied about an incident relating to a dead bird that was sent to my wife by a misogynist antisemite in 2012, for which someone was prosecuted. This enabler found a press cutting from the Worksop Guardian that showed that someone was prosecuted for the misogynist crime. That is accurate, but this enabler, a journalist, did not bother to contact me before he put this out to very many people. He did not ask me whether what I had said was wrong. He therefore did not know that, when in advance of that, I had given the specific antisemitic literature from a man called Roger Dyas-Elliott to Nottinghamshire police, the police requested that the antisemitism was not included in the prosecution—as a dead bird had been sent through the post, the prosecution would be immediate and successful, and this would therefore delay things—and, on that basis, I had agreed.

Dyas-Elliott is an antisemite whom I have challenged repeatedly in my local Labour party. I banned him from my office, and through his union, the National Union of Domestic Appliances and General Operatives, had his pass taken away at the Labour party conference in 2010. This is what he said in 2010, which led to my first action against him. In a letter to the Worksop Guardian, during the general election, he called for an investigation into the motives and machinations of the Zionist fraternity and the conduct and behaviour of the Bilderberg Group. He is an antisemite who repeatedly, in letters to the press and letters to me, put out this vile stuff, and therefore I challenged him. I took him on in meetings, and I banned him, kicked him out of campaigns and stopped him being a candidate.

That is the truth of what happened with Roger Dyas-Elliott, a misogynist criminal and an antisemite, yet this enabler, Kevin Maguire—a national journalist, associate editor of the Daily Mirror and correspondent for the New Statesman, a press pass holder here and one of the people used by Labour party Front Benchers to put out their message repeatedly—puts this out, and what do I get as a response? Let us quote from Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour party forum the next day:

“I enjoyed the too and froing when Mann was accusing a guy of being anti-semitic and racist”,

and

“I hate this man!... I’d like to punch him in the face!”

I do not have time to go through the rest, but that one was from Joe Kelsall in a private Facebook group. He was a Labour party member in Sefton, Liverpool, and he is still a Labour party member, despite my complaints.

Joe Kelsall is a man who wants to punch me in the face, following the enabling of Maguire.

The enablers of antisemitism are as big a problem as the antisemites, and they are more numerous. It is time the enablers were exposed. I have exposed one: Kevin Maguire—an enabler of racism.

6.32 pm

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): For me, this debate is personal. I am not Jewish, but as a black man I know what it feels like to experience racism of both the individual and the institutional kind. I understand how a racist insinuation is not just offensive, but isolating, making you suddenly feel vulnerable and excluded. I know how the repetition of a well-worn stereotype or
trope, followed by the inevitable denial that it is racist, can be undermining and exhausting. I know, because I have seen it and felt it, as well as read about it, that hostility to Jewish people and age-old antisemitic stereotypes are becoming more common.

Many people speaking in this debate will have experienced antisemitism at first hand, as we have already heard in some of the distressing testimonies today. As has been stated, it is clear that most of the well-documented rise in antisemitic incidents here and in many other parts of Europe is driven by the alt-right, the far right and the fascist right. They are emboldened by the xenophobic rhetoric of our age to form a sickening new far-right internationalism, with sometimes devastating consequences for all racial minorities.

Did I believe that in 2019 I would wake up to the news that “No blacks” signs had been daubed on the front door of the home of a 10-year-old boy who had just started a new school, or that Islam would be seen as a threat to the British way of life by one third of people in the UK, according to a poll commissioned by the anti-fascist group, HOPE not hate?

I know that racism can take different forms and all of us can hold unconscious biases. In a frank self-admission, George Orwell, writing in 1945, suggested that the starting point for any investigation of antisemitism should be not just condemning others but looking inside ourselves. This is good advice, even today, that I know some people in my party seem to find quite difficult to follow. The fact that the left is opposed to racism in principle does not mean that it is immune to being, consciously or unconsciously, racist or antisemitic in practice. It can be all the more difficult for us to face up to this fact given the extent of unacknowledged racism in other parties, which goes deep.

In the 1930s, assertions of hidden power and wealth were routinely hurled at hundreds of thousands of poor Jewish immigrants living in the slums of London and Manchester. Today, similar projections, conscious or otherwise, can be heard in the repeated association of Jewish people with shadowy conspiracies, often associated with Israel—especially when complaints of antisemitism are made, even when the evidence of it is before our eyes. And it is before our eyes.

The same HOPE not hate report affirms the seriousness of modern antisemitism, online and off, including the very real problem of left-wing antisemitism. Sometimes I hear it said that antisemitism should not be focused on at all in modern Britain as that takes space away from other groups—as though there is a finite space for this discussion that cannot expand. That can unwittingly reproduce a stereotype of Jews as somehow powerful and privileged even when they are calling out the racism that they experience.

As a black man who has experienced racism all my life, I see the situation very differently: to my mind, closing our eyes to racism against one group only emboldens racism against us all. The only way to combat racism is to show no tolerance to any of it, ever. In that spirit, a few of us have recently formed the new Black, Asian and Jewish Alliance, which we call BAJA. Through our existence, we aim to highlight diversity within our groups as well as between us. Based on the principle of mutual solidarity, we recognise that what we hold in common is considerable, but we also try to listen and learn from each other about our distinctive experiences.

Above all, we know that racism can be defeated only if we stay united and refuse to be divided by any of the current tensions that swirl around us. As we look around the world today, with the rise of the hard right in the form of Trump, Bolsonaro, Salvini and too many others, we know that tackling the scourge of growing antisemitism, wherever it is found, has rarely been so urgent.

6.36 pm

Joa Ryan (Enfield North) (Ind): It is a great sorrow that we are once again debating the rise of antisemitism. As a Labour party member for 40 years, now a former member, I am sickened and ashamed that we have seen antisemitism rear its ugly head in British society—and at the core of British politics: in Her Majesty’s official Opposition.

Yesterday, I made the terribly painful decision to resign as a member of the Labour party. I could not remain a member of a political party whose leadership allows Jews to be abused with impunity and the victims of such abuse to be ridiculed and have their motives questioned and integrity called into doubt. It is that antisemitism that is found on the left, and the connection between it and anti-Zionism is what I particularly want to address today.

There is nothing antisemitic about criticising the policies and actions of the Israeli Government—millions of Israelis do so every single day—but there is an undeniable link between antisemitism and anti-Zionism: those who deny the Jewish people’s right to self-determination, who attempt to demonise and delegitimise the world’s only Jewish state and who invoke antisemitic conspiracies accuse Jews of dual loyalty and—most offensive of all—compare Israel’s actions to those of the Nazis during the holocaust. To deny the link does a disservice to the victims of antisemitism and prevents us from tackling evil.

Let me be clear: no one can pretend to be an ally to the Jewish people while denying their right, and only their right, to self-determination in their historic homeland. No one can oppose antisemitism if they also oppose the existence of a state that exists to provide the ultimate safe haven for Jews facing antisemitism. No one can declare themselves to be a lifelong anti-racist if they single out for disproportionate criticism, above and beyond that expected for any other democratic nation, the world’s only Jewish state and its citizens and deny the religious significance of Israel to the Jewish people.

Over the past three years, we have seen in the Labour party how quickly hatred of Israel and attacks on Zionists can morph into vile racism against Jews—whether through repellent myths about the Rothschilds or the sewer of holocaust denial. Those in the current Labour leadership opened this door. They have shamed and demeaned a once-great party. They have allowed its bonds with Israel to be severed; its anti-racist credentials to be shredded and Jews to be driven from its ranks. I can no longer fight for the values that brought me into politics—equality, solidarity and against discrimination—from such a party. I respect my former colleagues—and still my friends—in the Labour party who have made it clear that they will carry on that fight from inside the
Labour party. It needs to happen inside and out. I hope that what I and other colleagues have had to do will be a real wake-up call.

6.40 pm

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): It is a privilege to follow the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan).

In my limited time, I would like to concentrate on just a couple of points. I am not Jewish, but I was talking to a constituent of mine a few months ago, a perfectly ordinary, normal middle-aged lady who is a Brit. I did not even know that she was Jewish, but during the conversation, it became clear that she was. She told me something quite shocking. She said that, with the change in antisemitism over the past couple of years, she and her friends no longer feel safe in the United Kingdom. This was so astonishing and extraordinary that I chanced it a bit and said, “How can you really feel that, considering all the challenges around the rest of the world?” but she was absolutely clear on that. In the ensuing months, I spent time talking to a number of other Jewish British people in Eastbourne with a similar background—they are not into politics or campaigning—and again and again I found that genuine fear.

That brings me to two outstanding speeches, one of which was from my friend, the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) who I have known for a long time. He made a very strong point about enablers, which is crucial. The other speech—I am sorry to say that she has left the Chamber—was from the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge). Again, I have known her for over 30 years from before I got into politics. She made a crucial point about how promoting pro-Palestine and pro-Palestinian rights has over the years gone over the line, so that it is no longer a case of “I disagree with the Israeli Government,” but “I disagree with Jews.”

How did that happen? Unfortunately, I am old enough to remember the hard left from 30 years ago. I hate to say it, but many of us in the Chamber will know that that was always there in the hard left 30 or 35 years ago; it was just that the hard left then did not have any control. Bluntly, it was ignored. Should something have been done? Perhaps, I do not know, but it was ignored. What has changed—I am afraid this is true, although I do not mean this about every member of the Labour Front Bench—is that a cabal of people I would define, many would define and I suspect colleagues behind me would define as the hard left now controls the Labour party. That very same nonsense—and it is nonsense—openly that very same nonsense—and it is nonsense—openly.

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That strand now walks the land, and I do not really know what the Labour party is going to do about it—I really don’t. It is different from the hard-right antisemitism that is hundreds of years old. That is thuggish and thick, and has been around forever. We could almost take that on. It was easier in a way. But the antisemitism we now have is mainstream with a lot of the supporters of the current Labour party, sadly, and some of its members.

That is a real problem. What I do know is that that type of antisemitism is the canary in the mine. The canary is choking and we really have to deal with it. We have to deal with it now or we will all live to regret it.

6.44 pm

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): Antisemitism is rising again. Antisemitism is an attack on Jewish people, and when our Jewish communities speak of the fear that they hold, we must listen. When there is anxiety and anger, we must learn and act on these determinations. Whether we are talking about Macpherson, #MeToo or the motion today, this begins with believing the victim and their powerful testimony. It strikes me as well that, as we consider antisemitism, all too often the haters hate harder when it is a woman, so let me condemn both antisemitism and the misogyny we see.

The endless values that we share bring me here today—values of equality, fairness and social justice. Let me also say that it is sometimes more important to single out the calling-out of antisemitism than it is to simply smooth the issue over with a catch-all view of being against racism—just as sometimes I tell each of my children by name that I love them.

Humbly I say that I have no easy answers, but my own perspective guides me. I am the son of a Church of England minister. I am not Jewish, but my wife is. Her Jewish heritage is one of the many things I love about her. We are raising our young family in the traditions of both our faiths, both our cultures. That pursuit is not borne easily. Time spent with mixed-faith couples before my wife and I got married highlighted to us both the anguish that many people face when love and relationships collide across cultures to form family. I am not here just to defend Jewish people from the rising attacks or to call out antisemitism, though I do both; I want to celebrate and affirm Judaism and Jewish people and the contribution that they make to our society, our country and to my life.

My mixed-heritage family is a picture of the messy, beautiful multiculturalism of our country and of modern Jewry. It is also a portrait of hope—I hope—for a better future. For me, this is not about party; it is primal and my principled, personal belief. Modern love, relationships and family across races, religions and cultures can blur the old lines of religious dogma, intolerance or hate-filled political division. Rooted from here, even the most steely glare of these ugly politics can begin to soften.

6.47 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): This has been a difficult debate to listen to, and it is one we have repeated. This is not the first time that we have had this debate but it is important that we have done so, and I hope that if we have such a debate in a year’s time, we are reflecting on a year of progress, particularly in my party. I take no pleasure at all in—in fact, I am very hurt by—the experiences of people in my party and what they have to go through on a regular basis.

I pay tribute to a number of people who have spoken today. My right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) talked about her family history and told us some very human stories. When someone looks at their family tree and goes into the stories of
people from many generations ago, those stories are not distant or abstract. They form part of a person’s identity and who they are. When someone reads stories that are so harrowing, it affects them as a person. I know that from my own family, although it is nowhere near comparable with the type of loss and suffering of members of the Jewish community.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman) spoke about how people’s motives are being questioned. If legitimate views that a member of the Jewish community might have are posted online or are stated in the press, they are questioned on a range of motives. People ask, “Why is that being done? In whose name is it being done? Who are you really working for?” and I just find that sickening. I think that the questioning of motive that has infected our political debate is fundamentally damaging for democracy.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) for his outstanding work on the all-party parliamentary group—he has shown real leadership. He told a very personal story about the impact antisemitism had had on his family. We choose to come into politics—we stand for office and we know what comes with that—but we are all hugely protective of our families, their privacy and their right to be normal, non-political people and to live their lives, and when they become the target of abuse in the way he explained, it hurts all of us who believe in common decency and fairness.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Frith) talked about—celebrated, if you like—his life and how special it was. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) said that about 100 members of her family had been affected by the holocaust. I want to mention her in particular. Until a couple of days ago, she was a fellow co-operator in Parliament—one of our finest—and in case any members of the Labour party are celebrating the loss of someone like her from our movement, allow me to say this: we are much, much poorer for not having her part of it, and I am so sorry for what she has had to go through.

I believe in the Labour party. We do not have a right to exist, but I think we have a purpose to exist. There is a reason the Labour party was born, and that need is still very much here, but, as has been explained today in very human terms, we have a lot of soul searching to do—who are we and what are our values? I take responsibility, as does every fair-minded member of the parliamentary Labour party, for trying to address that. That is why I am at the Dispatch Box today—not to draw attention to specific contributions, but I was struck by the contribution of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth): “It is time to be counted in the battle to remove antisemitism from the Labour Party, as it is a battle for the heart and soul of the labour movement.” I agree with Ruth.

6.53 pm

James Brokenshire: With the leave of the House, I would like to conclude this extraordinary debate. It is a difficult debate to summarise, however, because we have had such wide-ranging, heartfelt and painful contributions that have underlined the chilling aspect of antisemitism and how, while this place is a bastion of free speech, actually that free speech is at risk from bullying and intimidation. That was hard to listen to. It gives us a warning that antisemitism is serious. I quoted the statistics in opening the debate, but it does not give us the colour or sense of reality that we were given by so many of the appalling examples that hon. Members underlined in their contributions.

Given the wide-ranging nature of the debate and the passion and honesty with which hon. Members have spoken, it feels slightly invidious to draw attention to specific contributions, but I was struck by the contribution of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth). Standing here at the Dispatch Box, I can see the Jo Cox coat of arms just above the hon. Lady and I am struck by that sense of there being more in common than divides us, and yet this afternoon we have highlighted a lot of division.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) highlighted the theme of family history, which was mentioned by a number of colleagues. That history matters to us all. She rightly said that she will not be intimidated—I am going back to the issue of freedom of speech. She made the point, as did the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North, that she is not going anywhere, and nor should she. They or any hon. Member should be able to make the points they wish to make in the House as they have done.

The comments of the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) were equally notable. She talked about anger and anguish, which came through in
a number of contributions, probably most notably in the contribution of the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann). I pay tribute to him for his courage and bravery and for the leadership he has shown through his work and the all-party parliamentary group.

That sense of leadership was a theme in the debate. We need to show leadership as the Government, but equally all leaders of political parties need to show it. I deliberately opened by saying that we should not make this a partisan debate, but people outside the Chamber might wish to reflect on the powerful contributions that have been made by so many this afternoon.

Education and learning the lessons of the holocaust was a strong theme. Our holocaust national memorial and learning centre has been widely supported. It matters that it will be here, next to this seat of democracy, because of the warning it provides to us all. We may take comfort in having a democratic society, but we cannot take it for granted. A number of hon. Members gave that warning this afternoon.

The challenges of the online world were mentioned by a number of colleagues. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) also mentioned the education theme. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) spoke of the regret she felt at having to make the speech she made this afternoon. It is a regret that we are here today to debate this again. We have heard the message: we have had so much talking, but it is now about action more than words. We all need to instil that sense of action within us.

I conclude with the words of the Chief Rabbi, Ephraim Mirvis. At a recent sitting of the Home Affairs Committee, he drew a black dot on piece of paper to represent the stain of antisemitism and said:

“The white area represents the situation of Jews in the UK today. It is great to be Jewish in Britain and we are proud to be British. This is a truly wonderful country. But, in that context, we’ve got a problem. It used to be smaller, but it has now got bigger, and it could get bigger and bigger unless we deal with it effectively.”

As long as I am in this role or involved in public life, that is what I will continue to do. It is our responsibility to shrink that black dot. I hope that, by virtue of what we have done today, we will help to turn it into a full-stop.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered antisemitism in modern society.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 7 to 9 together.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ANIMALS)

That the draft Trade in Animals and Related Products (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 16 January, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES)

That the draft Benchmarks (Amendment and Transitional Provision) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 24 January, be approved.—[Rebecca Harris.]

Question agreed to.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS)

That the draft Official Listing of Securities Prospectus and Transparency (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 21 January, be approved.—[Rebecca Harris.]

The Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 27 February (Standing Order No. 41A).

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 11 to 14 together.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (PUBLIC PROCUREMENT)

That the draft Public Procurement (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 13 December 2018, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION)

That the draft Environment and Wildlife (Legislative Functions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 8 January, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (DATA PROTECTION)

That the draft Data Protection, Privacy and Electronic Communications (Amendments etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 11 January, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (TARDS AND CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT)

That the draft Employment Rights (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 14 January, be approved.—[Rebecca Harris.]

The Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 27 February (Standing Order No. 41A).
Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT)

That the draft Employment Rights (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 14 January, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

The Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 27 February (Standing Order No. 41A).

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT)

That the draft Employment Rights (Amendment) (EU Exit) (No. 2) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 31 October 2018, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

The Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 27 February (Standing Order No. 41A).

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS)

That the draft Financial Services Contracts (Transitional and Saving Provision) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

The Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 27 February (Standing Order No. 41A).

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 20 to 24 together.

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

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Local Government (Structural and Boundary Changes) (Supplementary Provisions and Miscellaneous Amendments) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 16 January, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES)

That the draft Equivalence Determinations for Financial Services and Miscellaneous Provisions (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 17 January, be approved.

PUBLIC SERVICE PENSIONS

That the draft Judicial Pensions and Fee-Paid Judges’ Pension Schemes (Amendment) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 7 January, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ANIMALS)

That the draft Equine (Records, Identification and Movement) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 10 January, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (CIVIL AVIATION)

That the draft Air Traffic Management (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 28 January, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Knife Crime in Edmonton

7.3 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents in Edmonton. The petition has over 200 signatures including from local businesses, the local community and our faith leaders.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of London,
Declares that on Tuesday 18th December Edmonton saw a young person lose his life to gun crime; further that in November there were gun and knife crime incidents in our area; further that this is too many lives lost with too many of them in Edmonton; and further that this has inevitably led our local community to feel unsafe, worried and concerned for our young people.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Home Secretary to urgently increase resources for both the Police and Youth Services to ensure that our young people and communities can live in a safe and positive environment.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002426]
Horse Tethering

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

7.5 pm

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): I am delighted to have secured this Adjournment debate on the practice of the long-term tethering of horses. Tethering is the practice of attaching horses to a stake in the ground using a collar, or sometimes just a piece of rope around the horse's neck, that is then fastened to a chain. The horse that once defined our great nation is now being left at risk of neglect, cruelty and abuse because of loopholes in the very legislation that was written to protect it. This debate follows the Break the Chain campaign run by the excellent HorseWorld trust, a leading equestrian rescue charity in the south-west, just next door to my constituency. The Break the Chain campaign aims to amend the Animal Welfare Act 2006 to include restrictions on the tethering of horses.

Traditionally, tethering has been used as a short-term method of keeping horses, but it has transformed into a method of retaining horses without having to purchase land, by using public or private grassland, often by the side of busy roads, for grazing. Because the tethered animal can be moved quickly, it is easy for people to tether a horse on land that does not belong to them and then move the animal before the authorities can identify the landowner or the owner of the animal. This results in it being virtually impossible to monitor the welfare of these animals, leaving around 3,500 horses in a state of potentially compromised welfare with little or no chance of intervention from charities.

There are a number of reasons why there has been such a large public response to the public campaign. In my constituency and the constituencies that surround it my constituency and the constituencies that surround it, there is a big problem with tethering. There have been instances where horses tethered by the roadside have been visible from the council offices in Yate, but despite this being a clear breach of the Animal Welfare Act, it could not be acted upon because the law does not state explicitly that tethering is a welfare concern. Unfortunately, because these horses are not protected by law, most cases of tethered horses that HorseWorld gets called to do not end well. The horses are simply moved before the authorities can identify the landowner or the owner of the animal. This results in it being virtually impossible to monitor the welfare of these animals, leaving around 3,500 horses in a state of potentially compromised welfare with little or no chance of intervention from charities.

As I said, such incidents are a regular occurrence. In 2016, a pony was found tethered among fly-tipped rubbish. It was so badly tangled up in a discarded bicycle that it could not even stand. This pony, which had a life-threatening injury, was lost to the authorities after the owner simply moved it and tethered it in another location before they could arrive. Sadly, just before Christmas last year, a member of the public came across a pony that had been tethered in a wooded area. The tether had become tangled around the surrounding trees and, in a desperate effort to break free, the one-year-old pony had strangled himself and lay dead in the mud at the end of his tether. It is therefore clear that the practice desperately requires stricter regulation.

HorseWorld, the charity that started the campaign, was spurred into action by the alarming case of a mare that gave birth to her foal while she was tethered. Unable to protect her foal from the other horses who roamed free in the same field, the mare became seriously distressed. Of course, protection of the young is one of our most basic instincts. Research into tethered horses in Wales, where tethering is rife, showed that 10% of tethered horses had young foals. Those are just a few examples of the horrors associated with long-term tethering, but because tethering is not restricted by law, people can tether horses unchecked beyond the reach of the law, resulting in tethered horses reaching despicable stages of neglect before they can be rescued.

I want to touch on the current regulations and legislation surrounding equine welfare and explain why they are not protecting tethered horses in practice. The Minister may refer to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs code of practice, which acts as a guide to safely tethering horses, but the code is not being adhered to in reality, as demonstrated by an investigation conducted in south Wales in 2014 by the excellent University of Bristol's veterinary school, which gave five main conclusions.

First, the code of practice states that water should be made available on a regular basis in a spill-proof container, but the research concluded that up to 90% of animals were not given water regularly. Secondly, the code states that animals should, as a minimum, have shelter from the sun and wind and that the area should be well drained in the event of heavy rain, but the research tells us that no shelter was provided in over 80% of cases.
Thirdly, animals should be given the freedom to exercise off the tether for a reasonable period at least once a day. In reality, however, less than 3% of horses spent more than five minutes a day off the tether, and no one would argue that five minutes is a reasonable amount of time. Fourthly, according to the code of practice, the tethering site should not contain anything that might injure the animal, but the reality is that sites contained potential hazards in 50% of cases. Fifthly, the code states that tethered horses require a high level of supervision, with inspections “no less frequently than every 6 hours”. However, it was found that only a third of horses were visited that regularly. While we have a code of practice, it is clearly not being adhered to, and the fact that an animal’s most basic instinct is to flee from danger, who keep horses can attest to, horses are flight animals. A horse that is free to roam will, on average, walk or run 10.6 miles a day, and the reality is that a tethered horse can come nowhere near that. As my many colleagues who keep horses can attest to, horses are flight animals. A horse’s most basic instinct is to flee from danger, which tethering does not allow. Tethering restricts a horse’s most natural behaviour.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. A large number of my constituents who have seen horses tethered locally have contacted me to express their concern about these issues.

Luke Hall: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. We are seeing horses being tethered all across the country, potentially leaving them open to neglect, cruelty and abuse, and potentially posing a danger to the people around them, too.

Tethering is not deemed enough of a breach of the Animal Welfare Act to allow horse charities to intervene. A tethered horse also does not have the freedom to interact with its own species, as the Act says it should. Leaving horses isolated has been shown to increase stress levels and stress-related hormones, which can cause them to display stereotypical behaviours that cause physical and psychological harm.

Stereotypical behaviours are strongly linked to isolated horses; stabled horses tend to perform behaviours that engage with the stable around them, such as crib biting or weaving. Horses that are tethered long term have a total lack of environmental stimuli, so they are much more likely to develop stereotypical behaviours such as pacing or self-mutilation. This clearly raises questions about the clarity of the existing legislation and regulations on the grounds for removing a horse from a tether and on the capacity of law enforcers to act.

Long-term tethering is in direct conflict with legislation, yet in many instances authorities have not felt that the Animal Welfare Act is strong enough grounds to rescue horses, despite the obvious suffering. It is therefore my belief, and the belief of the charity that initiated this campaign, that the Act needs to be amended to state explicitly what constitutes inappropriate tethering.

One of the reasons why this is such an emotive subject is the location of tethered horses. As I said earlier, the main purpose of long-term tethering is free grazing, so horses end up on any strip of grass available, with the roadside, grass verges and even the middle of roundabouts, as we have seen in south Gloucestershire, being popular choices. It goes without saying that this is not remotely appropriate. Horses are easily spooked by traffic, and if the tether were to fail, there would be a loose horse on the road.

Advances in equine and animal science mean that we are much more able to understand what constitutes poor welfare, but our laws have not caught up with that deeper understanding. When I met HorseWorld staff, who are so passionate about what they do, I was told about a pregnant mare that escaped her tether and got on to a busy A road, where she narrowly avoided being hit by a lorry. Police had to attend the scene to monitor the horse until HorseWorld could assemble a team at 3 am. If the tethering laws were stricter, the lives of the mare and her unborn foal would not have been risked, a lorry driver would not have had to make an emergency stop on a main road and numerous hours of police time would not have been wasted.

That leads me on to my second point, which has been raised by other equine welfare charities in a number of reports: only appointed animal welfare officers or police constables have the authority to seize an animal. However, councils are in no way mandated to employ an animal welfare officer. In these areas, the police are the only organisation that has the power to rescue an animal from a situation where its welfare is compromised. I therefore ask the Minister to update us on what steps he is taking to gain a deeper understanding of the depth of the problem. The result of this situation is that police time is being spent attending horse rescues, which often just involve hours spent holding a horse at the side of the road when it had got on to the road. Only a police constable, once contacted, can authorise a
charity to remove a horse. It is clear from written parliamentary questions I have tabled that the Government have no idea about the amount of police time that is spent dealing with these incidents. Clearly, police time can be better spent in the community. Having clarity over who should be dealing with equine welfare complaints will reduce the time that it takes to deal with them and will save the lives of animals. The councils that do employ animal welfare officers need to ensure that they are trained to handle horses. That could easily be achieved by collaborating with voluntary organisations.

Let me now address what needs to change. In the past, DEFRA Ministers have said that the current legislation appropriately meets the needs of tethered horses. The 19,000 people who signed a petition to get the tethered horses rescued from Rovers Way in Cardiff would disagree. The 12,000 people who have emailed their MPs about getting tethering laws tightened would disagree. I also think that all the experts who have been in touch with me and the voluntary organisations calling for stricter laws on tethering would also disagree.

There are therefore four changes that I would like to see incorporated into the 2006 Act to improve the lives of horses. The first is that there should be a 24-hour legal limit on how long horses can be tethered for. That is important, because DEFRA’s code of practice states that long-term tethering is inappropriate. That needs to be clarified, backed up and given status in law. The second is that there needs to be a complete ban on tethering horses on the roadside or in dangerous locations. The third is that if a tether is someone’s only method of keeping an animal, they should not be allowed to keep that animal. The fourth is to make it a mandatory duty for local councils to employ an animal welfare officer or to ensure that arrangements are in place with neighbouring authorities to ensure that those officers are in place.

There is currently too much room for interpretation within the legislation. It needs to be clear-cut that long-term tethering infringes on equine welfare, leaving horses at risk of harm and suffering. We need to give the relevant authorities the means and confidence to rescue horses that desperately need protection. We need to step up and take action to protect these most majestic and iconic animals. Making these changes will protect thousands of horses across our country. Minister, please help us and break the chain.

7.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall) on securing this debate, and I pay tribute to his campaigning activity in this House, on this issue and on many others, and to the hard work he does in the House.

I am grateful for the opportunity to debate the issues relating to horse tethering. I know it is an issue of concern to many, not only because of the important welfare issues involved, but because of the visibility of tethered horses in our countryside and by our roads and the many challenges that can arise if tethering is not undertaken properly and in line with established guidance and good practice.

As the Minister with responsibility for animal welfare, I am clear that we have to uphold, and continue to drive up, our already high standards of welfare in this country, including in relation to the tethering of animals, and I applaud my hon. Friend for securing this debate and highlighting the issues that can arise. As he has so clearly set out, some people are not tethering their horses appropriately and are causing these poor animals distress and suffering. I was horrified to hear of the cases he set out of the suffering that poor tethering practice can cause our much loved horses and other equines. The practices in the examples he gave must be stamped out so that these noble animals can live without the threat of cruelty or a life of misery. I applaud the work that HorseWorld is doing to look after these horses, and I welcome the aims of its effective Break the Chain campaign which focuses on ending all inappropriate and long-term tethering of horses, and in particular on seeing a ban on the tethering of equines for longer than 24 hours.

As my hon. Friend clearly pointed out, it is an offence under section 9 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 to fail to provide for an animal’s welfare. As he mentioned, that means that a person who cares for an animal—whether it is a pet, a working animal or a farm animal—must provide for its five welfare needs, as set out in the Act. Those needs are a suitable environment to live in; a healthy diet, including fresh, clean water; the ability to exhibit normal behaviours; appropriate company—for example, some animals need to live in social groups; and protection from pain, suffering, injury and disease. Section 4 of the Act goes even further and makes it an offence to cause a protected animal any unnecessary suffering—commonly known as animal cruelty.

Bob Stewart: The Minister mentioned the requirement for horses to live among their own kind. We can vividly understand how difficult it must be for a lone horse. Were a man or woman put in a herd of horses on our own for 24 hours, we would understand how lonely that can be. It is lonely for a horse, too.

David Rutley: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The aim of the Government’s work in this policy area is to highlight that tethering should be for the short term. We want these animals to be as socialised as possible.

The 2006 Act is backed up by a number of statutory codes of practice, including the code for the welfare of horses, ponies, donkeys and their hybrids. The code provides owners and keepers with information on how to meet their animals’ welfare needs and includes a specific section on how to tether horses and other animals covered by the code. Although it is not a specific offence to breach a provision of the code, if proceedings are brought against someone, the court will look at whether they complied with the statutory code in deciding whether they have committed an offence. That makes the code a key document in relation to prosecutions for animal welfare offences. We are very grateful for the input and assistance from the British Horse Council and the Horse Trust in particular and for their advice last year on the changes we made to the code, which was updated in April 2018.

I should clarify that tethering is not a banned activity, as there are circumstances in which tethering may avoid a greater risk of harm arising—for example, if a horse strayed into a place of danger. That point was made by World Horse Welfare in the statement issued this week, which said:
“We are concerned that banning tethering could lead to more horses being led into areas where their welfare cannot be monitored, or left to wander freely, endangering both themselves and the general public.”

Tethering is defined under the code as “securing an animal by an appropriately attached chain, to a centre point or anchorage, causing it to be confined to a desired area.”

Furthermore, the code states that tethering “is not a suitable method of long-term management of an animal,” but “may be useful as an exceptional short-term method of animal management”.

I think that goes a long way towards addressing the first and third changes that my hon. Friend proposed.

Although tethering is not prevented or illegal under the code, the code does include detailed specific advice on tethering and how it should be done properly. It details which animals are not suitable for tethering and provides advice on a suitable and appropriate site—for example, a site should not allow the horse access to a public highway or public footpaths. That helps to address the second change proposed by my hon. Friend. To tether a horse in such a way that it can physically be on a pavement or road is clearly contrary to the code and therefore open to enforcement action.

In addition to the statutory welfare code, other organisations provide advice on tethering. For example, World Horse Welfare has drawn attention to the code of practice produced by the National Equine Welfare Council specifically on tethering. In addition, the British Horse Society has produced a helpful leaflet that is available online and provides advice to anyone with concerns. The Redwings equine welfare charity also has useful advice on tethering, as does the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, which has also produced guidance on tethering. Our concern today, though, is not with necessary tethering that is undertaken in the short term, in the right way and in exceptional circumstances, to avoid a greater risk of harm arising; it is with avoidable and unacceptable tethering.

Under the 2006 Act, local authorities have powers to investigate concerns about the welfare of animals and if necessary to seize them—if they are suffering, for example. They can also prosecute if someone is neglecting an animal in their care. In addition, the way the Act is drafted means that anyone can bring forward a prosecution under the Act, and it is on this basis that the RSPCA prosecutes many hundreds of people each year for animal cruelty or neglect. It is important that we all recognise the important work the RSPCA does in this area.

Those convicted of such crimes under the Act can be subject to an unlimited fine or imprisonment for up to six months. I am pleased to say that the Government have announced that they are increasing the maximum custodial penalty for animal cruelty from six months to five years of imprisonment. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) will be very aware that the five-year penalty is already in place in Northern Ireland and we look forward to having it in England, too.

If anyone is concerned about how a horse or other animal has been tethered, they should report the matter either to the relevant local authority or to the RSPCA, which can investigate and if necessary take the matter further. If a horse or other animal is found not to be tethered appropriately, that could lead to a prosecution under the 2006 Act.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate mentioned the important role of local authorities in this area and the need for them to appoint animal welfare officers. Local authorities have strong powers to enforce welfare controls and often work in partnership with the RSPCA or other welfare charities, or indeed with other local authorities that have expertise in horse management.

Enforcement can be targeted according to local priorities and needs. In some areas, for example, horse abandonment or poor tethering practice might be an issue. In others, it may be non-existent. We encourage all interested parties to work together at local level to use the available powers to address the problem of abandoned or incorrectly tethered horses. Local authorities have powers under the 2006 Act to appoint welfare inspectors, as my hon. Friend pointed out, and I encourage them to do so to meet the needs of residents and equines in their area.

Bob Stewart: The Minister refers to reporting to local authorities. A weekend is a long time, and local authorities close down. I should have thought that reporting it to the police might result in more action.

David Rutley: Local authorities often have emergency contact numbers, and the RSPCA can give a 24/7—or at least seven day a week—response. I think my hon. Friend’s concerns are addressed.

I am conscious that, in the short time I have left to speak, it is also important to highlight that the Control of Horses Act 2015 is also relevant. It was introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) with support from the Government and introduced more flexible options for the management of unlawfully placed or abandoned horses—often known as fly-grazing horses—some of which might be tethered. It has been welcomed by landowners, local authorities, countryside bodies and animal welfare charities.

In summary, the appropriate tethering of horses is an important issue that the Government are taking action to address. We have put a number of protections in the 2006 Act, the code for the welfare of horses and the 2015 Act. The strong arguments made today and the concerns that have been raised mean that I shall call for a meeting with key stakeholders in the months ahead to see what more can be done in sharing and documenting best practice on horse tethering and ensuring that messages on best practice are more actively disseminated to horse owners. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate on these matters in the months ahead and I am sure that that will help us to deliver animal welfare at a continued high standard now and in the years ahead.

Question put and agreed to.

7.34 pm

House adjourned.
The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): The Government recently launched their resources and waste strategy, which outlines a new approach to addressing food waste. Actions include consulting on introducing regulations to make transparent reporting mandatory for businesses of an appropriate size, and the appointment of Mr Ben Elliot as the food surplus and waste champion to support our strategy.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is right to point out that there can be confusion as a result of labelling. There has been leadership from the very top of the Government in pointing out that, when it comes to salt or jam, it is perfectly possible to consume healthy and nutritious food uninhibited by some of the nannying authorities, for instance, about how they can help with this strategy.

Michael Gove: We have had extensive discussions with the Local Government Association and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. We want to move towards mandatory food waste collection across all local authorities, and we intend to ensure that resources are available to help them to do just that.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Anaerobic digestion of food waste used to be prohibitively expensive for local authorities, but now there has been a massive drop in the cost so savings are available for local authorities and businesses if they opt for this kind of food waste disposal. What measures can the Government take to promote this as a really good green method of reducing food waste?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Anaerobic digestion can play an important part in dealing with food waste and making sure that we have a truly circular economy. We want to work both with local authorities and with farmers and land managers to make sure that, where appropriate, anaerobic digestion can be expanded.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Secretary of State will accept that food produced here that cannot go to market in the EU and cannot be sold here profitably will increase food waste. Will he reverse the change in the guidance on protected geographical indications that he issued last week and provide Scotland’s high-quality food and drink exporting industry with all the support that it needs to maintain protections across the EU rather than leaving producers to do it themselves all over again?

Michael Gove: All the geographical indications that Scotland’s outstanding food producers and other producers enjoy will be protected in the future. The real danger to Scotland’s food producers is a Scottish Government who are not prepared, I am afraid, to use the Agriculture Bill that is currently before the House to provide our outstanding food producers with the legislative framework that they need. In that respect, I am afraid that the Scottish Government are being negligent, and not for the first time.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): The Labour Administration in Wales have instituted household food waste collections across the nation. The anaerobic digestion industry in Wales is flourishing because it guarantees regular feedstock, and the amount of food wasted in the first place in Welsh households has reduced because people are thinking about what they do with their food. Meanwhile, in England, we get yet another consultation to add to the impressive mountain of strategies and consultations produced by the Department. Will the consultation lead to comprehensive doorstep food waste collections in England, will the Secretary of State’s Department seek the funding needed to enable local authorities to do the collections, and why will it take England four more years to do something that is already being done in Wales?

Michael Gove: Yes, yes, and I yield to no one in my admiration for Wales.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): A lot of food is destroyed before it even lands on the supermarket shelves. Carrots are not straight enough, tomatoes are not round enough. What is my right hon. Friend doing to promote wonky veg, which is just as beautiful and nutritious on the inside, even if it is not visually appealing?

Michael Gove: Since my hon. Friend and I were at college together, both of us have been champions of wonky veg, and indeed other unconventional foodstuffs,
and he is absolutely right: when it comes to food, the search for symmetry and for perfection is vain and, if the House will excuse the pun, fruitless. The true joy of food comes in appreciating the diversity of British food producers and the way in which wonky veg—or even, sometimes, unconventional cuts of meat—can be a source of great nutrition. In that respect, Mr Speaker, may I say that even though it is awful, sometimes it is a good thing to indulge in tripe?

Mr Speaker: Well, I must say I rather enjoyed that. I must say to the House that I did exhort the right hon. Gentleman to inject into his answers some philosophy, and I think he has already done that.

**Puppies: Welfare Standards**

2. **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve welfare standards for puppies.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs** (David Rutley): The ban on third-party sales of puppies and kittens is an important step forward in improving welfare standards for puppies in England. When introduced, the ban will address welfare concerns associated with the sale of puppies by dealers and pet shops. It will also crack down on unscrupulous breeders who operate with little regard for animal welfare.

**Nigel Huddleston:** Will the Minister join me in thanking the Dogs Trust for all the work it is doing on the issue of puppy smuggling, and will the Government do all they can to stamp out this despicable trade, including reviewing border enforcement and the pet travel scheme?

**David Rutley:** I welcome the work of the Dogs Trust to highlight the abhorrent issue of puppy smuggling, and I thank it for its support for a ban on third-party sales. The Department is working in close collaboration with the Dogs Trust to tackle puppy smuggling. Our comprehensive approach to this issue encompasses international engagement, enforcement, public communications and tighter regulation. Looking to the future, leaving the EU will open up new approaches to managing our pet travel arrangements.

**David Simpson** (Upper Bann) (DUP): We all know the welfare of puppies is vital, but will the Minister enlighten us on what his Department is planning to do when it comes to stricter penalties for those who abuse puppies?

**David Rutley:** There are strict penalties available already, but we will be strengthening sentences for real attempts at animal cruelty from six months to five years. We are just waiting for the right time and legislative vehicle to do that. I know that in Northern Ireland there are already strong standards in place.

**Serious and Organised Waste Crime**

3. **Andrew Griffiths** (Burton) (Con): What steps he is taking to tackle serious and organised waste crime.

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs** (Michael Gove): Last year, we commissioned a review of serious and organised crime in the waste sector. Recommendations from the review have informed our strategic approach to tackling waste crime. We have plans to prevent, detect and deter all forms of waste crime, including the creation of a joint unit for waste crime and a dedicated disruption team to deal with the threat of serious and organised criminal gangs.

**Andrew Griffiths:** Landowners, and particularly farmers, across Burton and Uttoxeter have been having to deal with the scourge of industrial fly-tipping. One farmer who I met in Uttoxeter was confronted overnight with a tsunami-like deposit of waste that was chest-height and went on for hundreds of metres. It was he who had then to deal with the consequences—not just cleaning it up, but paying for that. What are we going to do to support farmers, make sure that the perpetrators get caught and help to keep our countryside clean?

**Michael Gove:** My hon. Friend raises an important point and is an indefatigable campaigner for everyone in his constituency. He is quite right not only that fly-tipping is a horrific crime that leads to environmental damage, but that it is doubly unfair for farmers and landowners who have to bear the costs of clearing the waste. That is why we have talked to magistrates and others to ensure that they appreciate that they have unlimited powers to fine those responsible for these crimes.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the Secretary of State for that response, but will he further outline whether he intends to liaise with the Ministry of Justice to increase the judicial ability in these cases to make examples of those who repeatedly flout the rules, on the basis that the fine for being caught just once is less than the cost of disposing of ten times as much waste? In other words, will he make the fine fit the crime?

**Michael Gove:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: the “polluter pays” principle is central to good environmental management, and we must ensure that every arm of the justice system has the tools required to make sure that those who pollute pay a heavy price for their crime.

**Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): The cost of skip hire in Cornwall is disproportionately higher than in many other places around the country. The reason for that is that we do not have an aggregates recycling plant. Will the Department look at that and see whether there is anything we can do in Cornwall to reduce the burden on builders?

**Michael Gove:** My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I will liaise with him, and of course Cornwall Council, to see what we can do to improve the situation.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Did the Secretary of State see the wonderful young people campaigning for the environment and against climate change last Friday? Some of them are in the Gallery today. Can we not harness the enthusiasm of those
young people in tackling waste, waste crime and litter? They are out there plogging—clearing the planet up—so will he put his energy, action and leadership behind those young people?

Mr Speaker: I should say to the Secretary of State that I think I am right in saying that a couple of little Sheermanites are observing our proceedings today.

Michael Gove: I was going to say that we have recently seen a number of new groups emerging in this Chamber. May I say that I welcome the growing number of Sheermanites in the Chamber? I am tempted to join them myself.

The serious point that the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) made is absolutely correct. The idealism shown by our young people towards the environment is inspirational. In particular, we hope that through the Year of Green Action we can support youth and community groups across the country in taking practical steps to improve the environment around us and to raise awareness of the threat of climate change.

Cats: Welfare Standards

4. Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve welfare standards for cats.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): Cats are cherished members of our families, and it is important that we do all we can to protect their health and welfare. That is why the Government recently updated the welfare code for cats, which highlights the benefits of microchipping, neutering and other aspects of responsible cat ownership. It is also why we are banning third-party sales of kittens in England, which will prevent dealers and pet shops from selling young cats.

Maria Caulfield: In the interests of equality between cats and dogs, will the Minister look at introducing mandatory microchipping for cats, as is currently the case for dogs? Cats Protection says that 62% of cats in shelters are not microchipped, and it would make returning wandering cats to their owners much easier.

David Rutley: I know my hon. Friend is a strong campaigner on this issue. The Government strongly recommend that cat owners get their cat microchipped and keep their records up to date. I am pleased that the proportion of cats that are microchipped has grown in recent years. Lost and stray cats do not pose the same public safety risks as dogs. As a result, our focus should be on publicising the benefits of microchipping rather than making it compulsory at this particular time.

Leaving the EU: Fisheries

5. Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): What plans he has for fisheries policy after the UK leaves the EU.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): The Government’s vision for the future fisheries policy as we leave the European Union and once again become an independent coastal state was set out in our July 2018 fisheries White Paper, “Sustainable fisheries for future generations”.

Peter Aldous: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that reply. Brexit provides a great opportunity to revitalise the Lowestoft fishing industry, but to do so local fishermen must be able to catch enough fish to earn a fair living for themselves and to supply local merchants and processors. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the Fisheries Bill will deliver the root-and-branch reform that is required to ensure the fair distribution of fishing opportunities?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. One of the benefits of leaving the common fisheries policy is that we can reallocate quota in such a way as to ensure that the inshore fleet and ports such as Lowestoft get a fairer share of the natural resources in our waters. As my hon. Friend the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has pointed out, as well as supporting the inshore fleet, we can also end practices such as pulse fishing, which are environmentally damaging and lead to those who operate out of ports such as Lowestoft being distressed about the way in which other countries have been fishing in our waters.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Over the past 40 years, shellfish producers in my constituency have perfected the art of getting fish out of the sea and on to tables in Europe within a matter of hours, so they are dismayed that the Eyemouth fishing and supplies company D. R. Collin & Son has been refused every single ECMT haulage permit it has applied for. Will the Secretary of State explain why fewer than 1,000 of the 11,000 permits that have been applied for have so far been given out?

Michael Gove: I will look at the issue. It is important that we make sure that high-quality fresh produce of the kind that the hon. Gentleman’s constituents are responsible for landing on our shores reaches appropriate markets. The one thing I would say is that the significant opportunities available to fishers in Scotland would be undermined by the Scottish Government’s policy of staying in the European Union and not leaving the common fisheries policy.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Secretary of State has repeatedly given an assurance that there will be no further concessions in the EU negotiations on fishing, but he will be aware that the industry still has some reservations. May I invite him yet again to reassure it that there will be no further concessions and that the Government will hold firm to their present position?

Michael Gove: Absolutely. We are going to become an independent coastal state, and as such we will decide who fishes in our waters. The threat to that position comes from Opposition Members who want to thwart our departure from the European Union, and who want us to stay in the common fisheries policy.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Seafood processors in Banff and Buchan have raised concerns about the possibility of them requiring ECMT permits if we leave the EU without a deal. What discussions has my right hon. Friend had with the Department for Transport to ensure that hauliers in the seafood sector can continue to transport to the EU27, regardless of the outcome of negotiations?
Michael Gove: We have been talking to the Department for Transport and the European Commission to ensure that in the event of no deal we maintain access to European markets that is as frictionless as possible. As I know my hon. Friend and others are aware, it would be infinitely preferable to secure a deal, and I hope that Members across the House—including Opposition Members—will put the interests of their constituents ahead of ideology, and back the deal in the Prime Minister’s name.

**Air Pollution: Deprived Areas**

7. Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): What steps his Department is taking to tackle air pollution in deprived areas. [909369]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Last month we published the clean air strategy, which sets out concerted monitoring, but not necessarily to the same level as is required for standards that have been set and agreed across the European Union. We will continue to increase the money we are spending on monitoring, but the European Union has said that we must do so.

Geraint Davies: I am aware of the correlation put forward by scientists between air quality and depression, and that is something we need to tackle. The House will be aware that we have set in statute air quality standards until 2030, and we will continue to drive down emissions and pollution in our air. I am sure the Welsh Government will want to do the same.

Dr Coffey: It is incorrect to say that the EU has taken the Government to court four times. We are in the middle of infractions proceedings, and we will be going on with that. Nevertheless, I am aware of the correlation put forward by scientists between air quality and depression, and that is something we need to tackle. The House will be aware that we have set in statute air quality standards until 2030, and we will continue to drive down emissions and pollution in our air. I am sure the Welsh Government will want to do the same.

Dr Coffey: Local authorities undertake air quality monitoring, but not necessarily to the same level as is required for standards that have been set and agreed across the European Union. We will continue to increase the monitoring network across the country. Local authorities already have powers to tackle such issues, and we are encouraging them to do so.

**Species Decline**

8. Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to tackle species decline. [909371]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): We have undertaken activities to improve biodiversity through nature conservation sites, where we are looking to restore and create wildlife-rich habitats and support species recovery. Internationally, we have various programmes to tackle species decline in our overseas territories, particularly supported by the Darwin Initiative, and last year we introduced what is effectively one of the toughest bans in the world on the sale of ivory, which we believe will do a lot to preserve species such as elephants and rhinoceroses.

Liz McInnes: I thank the Minister for that answer, and I am sure she is as concerned as I am about the recent report on the decline in insect species. What action is being taken to address the increasing fragmentation of our landscape, which means that pollinator species are left isolated and unable to move between areas?

Dr Coffey: I think it fair to say that the wildlife corridors we are seeking to extend—some projects, future environmental management pilots, are already under way—give us hope. We have taken effective action—for example, with the restrictions on the neonicotinoids. We need to follow the science and the evidence, and do what it takes to keep pollinators alive and buzzing.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Insect decline will be cataclysmic. Do we have a comprehensive plan?

Dr Coffey: I have tried to outline the different activities we are already taking and what is being planned. The year 2020 will be key. We have the convention for biodiversity, and we are already in consultation with other countries around the world on how we can tackle this global challenge.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): Hon. Members are absolutely right to raise the issue of insect decline, but it is not just about insects. We know there have been huge declines in many birds and mammals, too. I am sure that like myself, Mr Speaker, as a child you enjoyed grubbing around for grass snakes and slowworms.

Mr Speaker: Indeed.

Sue Hayman: It is now much harder for new generations to do that. How will the draft environment Bill, which has been roundly condemned as toothless, ensure that this appalling ecological meltdown will be properly tackled?

Dr Coffey: Alongside the draft clauses we presented on governance in the Bill, we also published a policy paper. I am sure the hon. Lady will recognise that several of the items outlined in it will help us towards tackling the issue. This will be about a shift away from the common agricultural policy, where farmers are in effect just being rewarded for land ownership, and...
moving towards paying for ecosystem services. I believe that that will benefit all the different species to which she refers.

Sue Hayman: That is all very well, but another huge concern is the cuts to Natural England. Grants to Natural England have been cut by nearly half, and we now hear that there may well be further cuts of between £3.5 million and £8 million over the next year. How can that be justified?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Lady will recognise that the Government took a view in 2010 that we had to balance the books after the record deficit from the last Labour Government. There was a realignment of what needed to be done on Government funding. I believe that Natural England has the resources it needs to undertake its role. Natural England will continue to focus on what is best for preserving the environment in England.

Leaving the EU: Farming

9. Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What plans he has for farming policy after the UK leaves the EU.

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Our plans for future farming policy are set out in the Agriculture Bill. At the heart of our new policy in England will be a system that pays public money for public goods, rewarding farmers for enhancing animal welfare, improving soil health and creating habitats for wildlife. We are also introducing measures to support investment in farm productivity and to improve fairness in the supply chain.

Luke Hall: I thank the Minister for that answer. Will he update me on what steps the Government are taking, following a very serious case in my constituency, to give the courts the power to grant injunctions to prevent people who are on trial for animal cruelty from acquiring new animals as they go through that legal process?

George Eustice: I recall meeting my hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs last month alongside the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. That has been welcomed by the World Health organisation as an example for the rest of the world to follow. As I referred to earlier, we continue to deliver our £3.5 billion plan to reduce roadside nitrogen dioxide concentrations.

Helen Hayes: In my constituency, parents, schools and our local councils are working hard together to introduce school streets; timed road closures and a drop-off and pick-up time close to schools to reduce pollution, encourage cycling and walking and increase awareness of the urgent need for action on air pollution and climate change. Will the Secretary of State commit to a fully funded nationwide programme of school streets?
Dr Coffey: The Government are investing £3.5 billion and it is for local authorities to potentially apply to the clean air fund to undertake different activities. A lot of this is about cycling and walking and the strategy on changing transport. I am not aware of what the hon. Lady’s local authority has been directly involved in, but we have also been funding—say, through the London Borough of Islington or Spelthorne Borough Council—awareness campaigns run through schools.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), I have many schools in my constituency that are very worried about air pollution in the surrounding area. The problem is not the powers—they have the powers to monitor it—but the finances. They do not have the resources either to monitor the air pollution or then to fix the problem. Is there any possibility of more resources being made available?

Dr Coffey: I am conscious that, certainly through Transport for London, London has had a substantial amount of money to improve air quality. I know that it is keen to do more, but local authorities have statutory duties to tackle this issue. They have had funding in the past and they are able to apply for funding in the future, and I would welcome the hon. Gentleman’s authority doing so.

Dog and Cat Meat

11. Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): If he will bring forward legislative proposals to ban the human consumption of dog and cat meat.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): It is abhorrent to think that our beloved cats and dogs could be eaten. As the Prime Minister said, it is illegal to sell dog and cat meat and there are no abattoirs with a licence to slaughter these animals in the UK. We recognise both the substantive and symbolic nature of the issues raised, and we are exploring what more can be done to address this matter and to send a clearer signal that the consumption of dogs and cats should never be tolerated.

Giles Watling: There are extensive restrictions in place on the commercial sale of dog meat for human consumption, and I understand that there are similar restrictions on cat meat. Despite those advances, amazingly, the private slaughtering of dogs and cats for private consumption is still legal in this country, and I want that to change. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to extend the current restrictions to cover the private consumption of dog and cat meat, as my amendment to the Agriculture Bill sets out?

David Rutley: There is no evidence that dogs and cats are being consumed in the UK, although I understand and agree with the sentiment behind my hon. Friend’s amendment to the Agriculture Bill. A ban on consumption raises issues of enforcement and prosecution, but I have asked DEFRA officials to explore what more can be done to address these issues. I look forward to having the opportunity to debate these matters further in Westminster Hall this afternoon.

Food Labelling Laws

13. Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): What plans he has to introduce more stringent food labelling laws.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): The UK has world-leading standards of food information, backed by a rigorous legislative framework, but the Secretary of State has been clear that an overhaul of allergen labelling is needed and DEFRA is working with other Departments to deliver that. We are also committed to reviewing food labelling laws after EU exit, so that consumers’ confidence in the food they buy continues to grow.

Kirstene Hair: My 15-year-old constituent Ethan McCollan has a severe nut allergy. He is one of 2 million people in the UK who have food allergies. Can the Minister reassure Ethan that this matter is an absolute priority for the Government, enabling him to identify and avoid foods that include nuts, and that manufacturers will be forced to comply?

David Rutley: The provision of allergen information to the public is very important. It is essential that all UK consumers have complete trust in the food they eat. I understand the concerns of my hon. Friend’s constituent and his family. On 25 January, the Government launched a consultation on how to strengthen the framework on allergens. I encourage her constituent and others in a similar situation to feed their views into that consultation as a matter of urgency.

Topical Questions

T1. [909379] Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): It was a pleasure to be able to speak to the National Farmers Union conference in Birmingham earlier this week. Of course, farmers expressed concern about failures to ensure that environmental and countryside stewardship payments kept pace with reforms in other areas. I was able to assure them that we would guarantee bridging payments to ensure that those who have worked hard to improve our environment receive the support from the state that they deserve.

Colin Clark: I congratulate the Department on the future farming plans it has announced today, but does the Secretary of State agree that the Scottish Government’s disengagement with the Agriculture Bill puts at risk payments to Scottish farmers post 2020 and that it undermines the UK internal market if the Scottish Government do not adopt UK frameworks?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point. There is a stark contrast with the progressive approach being taken by the Labour Administration in Wales, who have engaged with the Bill and ensured that we legislate to give Welsh farmers confidence and certainty for the future. The Scottish Government, not for the first time, have decided to put separatist ideology ahead of the interests of Scotland’s farmers and food producers. Having visited Scotland twice in the past week, I have to
say that Scotland’s farmers and food producers are scunnered with the Scottish Government’s attitude to their future.

**Michael Gove:** There is a clear legislative framework following on from the ban introduced by the Labour Government, and this Government have no intention of changing that ban.

**Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab):**
Foxhunting was banned in 2004, yet the practice remains widespread. Is it not time that the Government beefed up the Hunting Act 2004 and introduced prison sentences to deter people from taking part in and organising these barbaric sports?

**T3. [909383]**  
**Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab):**
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**Michael Gove:** There is a clear legislative framework following on from the ban introduced by the Labour Government, and this Government have no intention of changing that ban.

**Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con):**
Leaving the EU gives us the opportunity to enhance animal welfare standards, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has consistently said that, once we have left, we will control the export of live animals. Will the Minister confirm that all options are still on the table and that a ban remains a possibility?

**T2. [909380]**  
**Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con):**
Leaving the EU gives us the opportunity to enhance animal welfare standards, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has consistently said that, once we have left, we will control the export of live animals. Will the Minister confirm that all options are still on the table and that a ban remains a possibility?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley):** It has been made clear, and it was a manifesto commitment, that once we leave the European Union, we will take early steps to control the export of live farm animals. We are considering all options in the context of our exit from the EU and as part of our broader commitment to further strengthen animal welfare standards.

**T5. [909385]**  
**Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab):**
What steps have the Government taken to ensure that once we leave the EU pet travel scheme, the UK becomes a listed country so that people such as guide dog owners are not disadvantaged?

**David Rutley:** I assure the hon. Lady that we are working very closely with the EU and making the necessary applications. We want to ensure that the arrangements—particularly on health—fit everyone, but with guide dog owners in particular, we are working to see what more we can do to help.

**T4. [909384]**  
**Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con):** What is the Department doing to ensure future prosperity and high quality of life for Cumbrian upland and lowland farmers?

**Michael Gove:** My hon. Friend makes a very important point. It is not only the vital food produced by farmers in lowland and upland parts of Cumbria but their work to ensure that one of the most beautiful parts of our country remains beautiful that deserves support. The provisions in our Agriculture Bill will ensure not only that food production is given the prominence it deserves but that environmental and other services that farmers are responsible for providing are properly rewarded.

**T6. [909386]**  
**Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab):** Scores of large, polluting cruise liners moor at Greenwich pier each year. What are Ministers prepared to do to support better efforts to regulate shipping emissions on the River Thames?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):** This is an historic issue. As the hon. Gentleman will know, it was his own local council that granted permission for the installation. Through the clean air strategy, we have specifically identified the challenges relating to shipping, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will want to continue to work with the Government to bring about improvements that would be suitable for his constituents.

**Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con):** The late Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin said that his countrymen were a sentimental people, “easily moved by stories of cruelty”.

In that spirit, will the Secretary of State clamp down on puppy smuggling, by which means sinister foreign traders bring small dogs into this country, causing disease, distress and death?

**Michael Gove:** My right hon. Friend makes an important point. He is absolutely right. From the time of Earl Baldwin to this day, people have looked to the Conservative party to safeguard the welfare of the nation and to stamp out cruelty. Puppy smuggling is one of the vilest types of crime against animals, which is why we have introduced provisions to ensure that it is only from appropriately licensed breeders that individuals can find the companion animals that give us all such joy in our lives.

**Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab):** Last week, as we have heard, thousands of young people, including hundreds in Cambridge, showed that they recognise that we are facing a real climate emergency. Would the Secretary of State like to meet some of them so that they can impress that sense of urgency on him? He might even meet some Sheermandites.

**Michael Gove:** I should be more than happy to do so. This issue is very close to home for me as well. I appreciate that last Friday was an important day for many young people and an opportunity for them to say to my generation that more must be done.

**Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con):** Mr Les Stretton from Stapenhill in my constituency is a regular correspondent, but he is one of many constituents who have written to me expressing concern about the possible implications of a new trade deal with other countries as we leave the European Union, including a possible impact on the quality and standards of food imported into the country. We will debate trade deals later today, but will the Secretary of State confirm that on his watch there will be no diminution—no reduction—of standards in relation to food quality and animal welfare?

**Michael Gove:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is a wish expressed across the House—and, indeed, given effect in one or two of the proposed amendments to the Agriculture Bill—that we do everything we can to ensure that the high-quality environmental and animal welfare standards that characterise British food production will be protected in the future, and that is absolutely the Government’s determined intention.

**Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP):** The Secretary of State told me a few weeks ago that he believed that other European countries would be looking enviousy
Michael Gove: We absolutely do have the powers to do that and we will not hesitate to intervene if necessary. The hon. Lady, who represents the farmers in her constituency very effectively, knows that all of us recognise that a no-deal outcome is not in the best interests of British farming, so I hope she will join me in supporting the Prime Minister as she negotiates hard in Brussels and brings a deal back to this House, which I know the hon. Lady in her heart will believe is the right thing to do.

**CHURCH COMMISSIONERS**

*The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners was asked—*

**Clergy Recruitment: Rural Parishes**

1. **Anne-Marie Trevelyan** (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): What recent assessment the Church of England has made of the effectiveness of its recruitment of clergy to rural parishes.

2. **Andrea Leadsom** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Leader of the House accept that the religious community on Holy Island was founded by an Irish monk called St Aidan in 635 AD. I certainly welcome the Reverend Canon Dr Sarah Hills, our new vicar of St Mary, Lindisfarne.

3. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Leader of the House recognise that it is not just in rural parishes, but most magnificent. It has a permanent population of only 200 people but, living in the cradle of British Christianity, it has hundreds of thousands of visitors every year. So will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming to her post, and with an outreach vocation, the Reverend Canon Dr Sarah Hills, our new vicar of St Mary, Lindisfarne?

4. **Andrea Leadsom**: I understand that the religious community on Holy Island was founded by an Irish monk called St Aidan in 635 AD. I certainly welcome the Reverend Canon Dr Sarah Hills to her post and wish her well with her ministry. She brings with her considerable experience from Coventry cathedral, where she led the international reconciliation team.

5. **Mr Barry Sheerman**: I have been asked to reply on behalf of the Second Church Estates Commissioner. We absolutely do have the powers to do that and we will not hesitate to intervene if necessary. The hon. Lady, who represents the farmers in her constituency very effectively, knows that all of us recognise that a no-deal outcome is not in the best interests of British farming, so I hope she will join me in supporting the Prime Minister as she negotiates hard in Brussels and brings a deal back to this House, which I know the hon. Lady in her heart will believe is the right thing to do.

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Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): I am sure the Leader of the House will agree that it is not just church buildings that are of importance; it is the people within them and the work they do. Just two weeks ago I was able to do a tour of all the churches in Uttoxeter in my constituency. I talked to the people in those churches and witnessed first-hand the great work they do in our community by supporting people, particularly the sick and the vulnerable. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Christians across the country on the work they do in our communities?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is a busy bee doing this extensive tour; it sounds absolutely enticing.

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly join my hon. Friend in thanking all those who do so much right across our country. I pay particular tribute to the work of the Church of England, which operates the single largest group of schools in the UK. Very often those schools are in small rural communities, and the schools and their teachers face big challenges, as do other rural services—distance, access to facilities, cost of living, the reduction in family sizes and so on. The Church has done a great deal to try to improve the sense of community right across our country.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the right hon. Lady to her place. Does she accept that one of the problems now is that we have so few ministers and so many churches to look after? In my own area, the Stroudwater team has three ministers to look after 15 churches, although we have had a vacancy recently. We ought to recognise that that puts enormous pressure on those ministers, and I hope that the Church is looking after their welfare.

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly join the hon. Gentleman in praising all those clergy who do so much, often working under quite some pressure and with large parishes to deal with. In 2017, the number of clergy who retired was 330, and I am pleased to say that the number that the Church is training is more than the number who are retiring.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the right hon. Lady outline whether she has considered the idea of more joint parishes—joining with other denominations—thereby involving the community and making more regular use of our beautiful historic buildings? Coming together, perhaps?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point out the excellent work that some churches are doing to help and support their communities across the denominations. I would certainly encourage him to write to the Second Church Estates Commissioner, my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman); she can perhaps tell him a bit more about some of the work that the churches are doing.

Metal Theft from Churches

2. Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What recent estimate the Church of England has made of the extent of metal theft from its churches.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The Church of England has unfortunately seen a steady increase in metal theft recently. Between 2017 and 2018, reports of thefts were up 25%. The rise is attributed to an increase in international metal prices. Additionally, significant thefts are being co-ordinated by organised criminals working in teams. The Scrap Metal Dealers Act 2013 had great success initially, but I understand that the all-party parliamentary group on combating metal theft is working closely with the Second Church Estates Commissioner to see what further work might be necessary to reflect the organised nature of this crime.

Luke Hall: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Thieves recently took the lead from the magnificent 900-year-old Old Sodbury church in south Gloucestershire, but sadly, only part of the cost of replacing the roof was covered by the insurance. What discussions has the Church of England had with the Government and the insurance industry on the theft of metal and decorative objects from churches, so that we can be sure that these magnificent buildings can be protected for generations to come?

Andrea Leadsom: I am so sorry to hear about that theft. It is an unusual theft, in that it does not fit the recent pattern. The church of St John’s, Old Sodbury, estimates that about 150 square metres will need to be replaced at a cost of around £50,000, only some of which will be covered by its insurance. I can tell my hon. Friend that the Church is working with law enforcement, the metal recycling trade, Historic England and the all-party parliamentary group on combating metal theft to find ways to address these crimes.

Bell Ringing

3. Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to support bell ringing in its churches.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The Church works closely with the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers, which supports local associations with a network of teachers, including one in my hon. Friend’s constituency. Following the recent successful recruitment of new bell ringers for the world war one anniversary, the Church was pleased to hear that many of the new members have decided to continue to ring with their local towers.

Alex Burghart: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer. Will she tell us what the Church of England is doing to encourage young people into bell ringing, so that we can foster the next generation of campanologists?

Andrea Leadsom: I hope that my hon. Friend will be encouraged to learn that more than 250 young people will gather in Liverpool this weekend to take part in the national youth ringing contest. The Church of England is delighted to see young people rediscovering the love of these traditional community activities. Church schools and parishes provide a range of support to children and
young people, and initiatives such as these show how beneficial exercise and teamwork can be for young people’s wellbeing.

Mr Speaker: I must say to the House that I have observed bell ringing being undertaken in Winslow and in Lillingstone Lovell in my constituency, and very skilfully undertaken it was too. For my own part, I am bound to say that I think I was very maladroit when trying to bell ring. I found it a most strenuous activity. But there you go—perhaps with practice I might get a little bit better.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend make representations to the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport about the loss of income to belfries from letting them to telecommunications companies for their antennae? As a consequence of the cack-handed introduction of the telecommunications code, the loss of income is as disconcerting to bell ringers as it is to the vicar.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises a worrying issue that I am sure the Second Church Estates Commissioner will be pleased to hear about and tackle on his behalf.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South, representing the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Northern Ireland Parties: Donations

4. Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): If the Electoral Commission will publish its correspondence with the Cabinet Office on the publication of donations received by political parties in Northern Ireland from 2014 to 2017.


6. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): The exact time spent on Divisions is not recorded, but there were 198 Divisions in the Chamber in 2018, 28 of which were deferred Divisions. If we estimate that each of the 170 real-time Divisions took 15 minutes, then 42 hours and 30 minutes were spent collectively by Members of Parliament participating in Divisions in the Chamber in 2018.

Brendan O’Hara: The Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport’s interim report into “Disinformation and ‘fake news’” rightly criticised the shadowy and secretive Constitutional Research Council for having “deliberately and knowingly, exploited a loophole in the electoral law to funnel” £435,000 to the Democratic Unionist party during the EU referendum. The source of that money remains a secret and is beyond the scrutiny of both this Parliament and the public. Will the hon. Lady add her voice to those on the Select Committee and the Electoral Commission in calling for the publication of the source of that money?

BridgetPhillipson: I fully understand the hon. Gentleman’s frustration. However, the law requires the Electoral Commission to keep confidential all information about political donations and loans in Northern Ireland before 1 July 2017. The commission therefore regrets that it is unable to disclose information and its own work in fulfilling its statutory duties to give confidence to the public, parliamentarians and others.

Angela Crawley: The Electoral Commission has stated: “We continue to urge the UK Government to bring forward additional legislation to allow the publication of donations from 2014 onwards.” It is astounding that this Government refuse to allow those donations to be published, so will the hon. Lady call on the Government to remove the shield from those responsible for dark money?

BridgetPhillipson: The hon. Lady is right to add her voice to that of the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) in expressing frustration. I can only reiterate the Electoral Commission’s position, which is that it is unable fully to disclose information in this regard. However, it is for the UK Government to bring forward further legislation, should they so wish, to make such information available.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Divisions of the House


Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): The exact time spent on Divisions is not recorded, but there were 198 Divisions in the Chamber in 2018, 28 of which were deferred Divisions. If we estimate that each of the 170 real-time Divisions took 15 minutes, then 42 hours and 30 minutes were spent collectively by Members of Parliament participating in Divisions in the Chamber in 2018.

David Linden: Indeed, the Institute for Government estimates that we have spent nearly 49 hours troop ing through the packed Lobbies, which must be in breach of health and safety. In a week when Westminster is in absolute chaos, does the fact that we wander through the Lobbies like elephants in some sort of circus not just highlight the fact that Westminster is broken and does not work for Scotland?

Tom Brake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question, although I did anticipate that it would be about electronic voting, so he has rather wrong-footed me. However, he makes a point that I would personally support, which is that we waste an awful lot of time troop ing through the Lobbies, and I would also support the rolling out of electronic voting as a solution.
Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman will be delighted to know that I took his advice from the previous House of Commons Commission questions and wrote to the Chair of the Procedure Committee suggesting that it finally get to grips with the issue. I look forward to joining the right hon. Gentleman in giving evidence to the Committee and making the case for reform of the outdated Lobby voting system in the House of Commons.

Tom Brake: I am not sure that I detect a question there. However, I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has finally acted on the advice I have given him and his colleagues on a number of occasions by raising the matter with the Procedure Committee, which I am sure will look at this with due consideration and, I hope, will come to the right conclusion.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): May I suggest to SNP Members that, if they occasionally voted with the Government, they could use the time usefully in the Division Lobby by lobbying Ministers?

Tom Brake: Again, I completely fail to detect a question there for me. However, I am sure SNP Members will have noted the suggestion that they should work closely with the Conservative Government in the Division Lobby.

Escalators: Underground Car Park

6. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What the annual cost is of running the escalators from the underground car park.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): The maximum annual energy cost of running the escalator has been calculated as £2,820, including VAT.

Mr Hollobone: This escalator is running all the time yet, compared with the escalator between the main estate and Portcullis House, it is used relatively infrequently. Would it be possible to install a button so that it operates only when required?

Tom Brake: It may be that the hon. Gentleman does not burn the midnight oil and therefore may not be aware that, in fact, the escalator is switched off manually by engineers control between midnight and 6 am on sitting days and between 6 pm and 6 am during recess. He will be pleased to hear that the escalator is also switched off at the weekend. It is also fitted with sensors that slow down the motor when it has not been used in the previous few minutes.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Maintenance of Graves

8. Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): What recent assessment the Church of England has made of the adequacy of its policies on the maintenance of graves.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): With permission, Mr Speaker, as an ex officio member of the Church Commissioners I have been asked to reply on behalf of the Second Church Estates Commissioner.

It is not clear from the hon. Lady’s question whether it relates to an open churchyard or a closed churchyard. For a closed churchyard, the responsibility for maintenance and management is often held by the local authority. The regulation of an open churchyard, however, is managed under the faculty process, which is the Church’s planning process. Each diocese publishes guidelines on its website, and the regulations are there to make sure that churchyards remain places that we can all enjoy for years to come.

Melanie Onn: My question relates to a constituency case that I have raised with the Second Church Estates Commissioner in advance of this Question Time. Shelley Fleming, my constituent, lost her husband Keith in October 2017—he was aged just 49. When she was arranging his place in the church’s graveyard, she was not notified that there would be any restrictions on her choice of grave at the Great Coates St Nicolas church. I would like the Second Church Estates Commissioner to work with me to encourage the church to review its regulations to permit the laying of flush kerb stones to carefully and respectfully mark parishioners’ final resting places.

Andrea Leadsom: I am so sorry to hear of Keith’s passing, and I am sure everyone in the Chamber would pass on their great sympathies. It is such an incredibly young age to die. The regulations that govern churchyards differ from those that govern municipal cemeteries, where the land is not consecrated. A churchyard almost always surrounds a church building, and memorial stones that may be entirely suitable for an urban municipal cemetery may be out of place when they are close to an ancient church, especially one in a rural setting. If a constituent wants kerb stones installed around a grave, this would generally require the special permission of the diocesan chancellor. I will ask the Second Church Estates Commissioner to write to the hon. Lady with more information about the regulations and processes.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Parliamentary Employees

9. Christian Matheson (City of Chester): What recent discussions the Commission has had with trade unions on pay, terms and conditions for parliamentary employees.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): The House of Commons Commission delegates the negotiation of pay and terms and conditions for House employees to the Commons Executive Board. Formal and informal meetings between House of Commons management and its recognised trade unions take place on a regular basis. Formal discussions relating to changes of pay,
allowances and conditions of service for 2019-20 were last held on 3 December. Pay negotiations for 2019-20 will begin shortly, following agreement of the pay remit by the House of Commons Commission.

Christian Matheson: I draw the House’s attention to early-day motion 2025, which I have signed, concerning rates of pay for security officers. How on earth have we got into a situation where our security staff feel it necessary to ballot for industrial action? Will the House of Commons Commission get a grip on the management of the security department and tell it to start treating these loyal and essential men and women with decency and respect, and to pay them and treat them properly?

Tom Brake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and for drawing our attention to this matter. He may be pleased to hear that the Clerk of the House has written to the Public and Commercial Services Union confirming that changes to rest breaks, which were a particular issue of concern, will be reversed as soon as is operationally possible. Initial talks have been held and the House awaits a further proposal from PCS for it to consider.
Speaker’s Statement

10.35 am

Mr Speaker: I have a short statement to make about PC Keith Palmer, who tragically died on 22 March 2017. PC Palmer was nothing short of a hero, in the way in which he ran towards danger to ensure the safety of us all on that day. He paid the ultimate price for doing the job that he loved, and we owe him a profound debt of gratitude for his bravery. Yesterday afternoon, the Police Memorial Trust placed a permanent memorial to PC Palmer at Carriage Gates. Not only will it serve as a lasting tribute to his dedication and courage, but it will ensure that visitors to Parliament never forget his sacrifice and heroism.

Business of the House

10.36 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for next week will be:

Monday 25 February—A motion to approve the draft Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, followed by a motion to approve the draft REACH etc. (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, followed by a debate on a motion relating to the 20th anniversary of the Macpherson report. The subject of this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Tuesday 26 February—Estimates Day (5th allotted day). There will be debates on estimates relating to the Department for Education and on estimates relating to the Department for Work and Pensions. At 7 pm the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates. This will be followed by motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to terrorism.

Wednesday 27 February—Proceedings on the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) (No.2) Bill, followed by a motion relating to the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union.

Thursday 28 February—A general debate on St David’s day, followed by a general debate on the UK’s progress toward net-zero carbon emissions. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 1 March—The House will not be sitting.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said to this House on 12 February:

‘When we achieve the progress we need, we will bring forward another meaningful vote, but if the Government have not secured a majority in this House in favour of a withdrawal agreement and a political declaration, the Government will make a statement on Tuesday 26 February and table an amendable motion relating to the statement, and a Minister will move that motion on Wednesday 27 February, thereby enabling the House to vote on it, and on any amendments to it, on that day.’—[Official Report, 12 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 733.]

I will make a further business statement if necessary.

I was honoured to be at the unveiling of the memorial stone to PC Palmer yesterday at Downing Street, and I would like to pay my own tribute to his selfless bravery—we will always remember him.

This week, the House has heard a number of touching tributes to our colleague the Member for Newport West. It is always sad to lose one of our colleagues, and we will remember and continue to be inspired by his energy for campaigning and the difference he made in the policy areas he cared so much about.

This Government are making great progress. I am of course talking about the five Government Bills that have just received Royal Assent—legislation that will make a real difference to our country. They are: the Voyeurism (Offences) Act 2019, which criminalises the abhorrent practice of upskirting; the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019, which gives our law enforcement and intelligence agencies the powers to keep us safer from terrorism; the Tenant Fees Act 2019,
where we are helping renters by banning unfair fees; the Finance Act 2019, which cuts taxes for 32 million people and cracks down on tax avoidance; and the Crime (Overseas Production Orders) Act 2019, which makes it easier for law enforcement agencies to convict terrorists, sex offenders and those involved in serious crime. I am proud of the legislation this Government have brought forward to address some of the critical issues of our time.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement for next week. I note that she has provided the Backbench Business Committee with two days of debates, and both subjects are very important. I know that the Chair of the Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), is a cheeky chappie, but the Leader of the House should not have favourites, so as she is being so generous with Government time, may we have an Opposition day? The shadow Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Christina Rees), whose birthday it is today—I wish her a very happy birthday—will be pleased about the St David’s day debate.

Will the Leader of the House confirm whether the House will rise on 4 April and return on 23 April? I understand that some civil servants are being told that their leave is cancelled during that time. Are there any plans to cancel the recess? Will the Leader of the House place in the Library a letter about the costs that were incurred as a result of the cancelling of the February recess? I particularly thank the staff for being here. It is easy for Members to rearrange their time, but it is not so easy for the staff of the House and our own staff to do that. Will the Leader of the House confirm that all the fire and safety works that were due to take place this week will be done at a convenient time?

I thank the Leader of the House for scheduling the statutory instruments—she will know that it is very important that Parliament has the opportunity to scrutinise them—but from next week an average of 24 Commons debates on affirmative Brexit SI’s need to be held each week through to exit day, so will she confirm that all the affirmative Brexit SI’s will have proper scrutiny in the House?

It is absolutely unacceptable that the Government have failed to effectively plan their Brexit strategy over the past two and a half years. The Prime Minister gave a speech in Lancaster House on 17 January 2017, and speeches in Davos on 19 January and Florence on 22 September that year, and she gave speeches at the Mansion House on 2 March 2018 and at Chequers on 6 July 2018, yet with just five weeks to go until the UK exits the EU on 29 March, the Government are still attempting to secure a negotiated agreement with legal assurances. I am not clear how this works, because I understand that the Attorney General—[Interruption.]

No, I was here listening to him, and the Attorney General warned in December 2018 that the backstop provision in the Brexit deal could continue indefinitely “unless and until it was superseded”—[Official Report, 3 December 2018, Vol. 650, c. 547.]

by a new agreement. That is according to the Government’s legal advice, but he is now seeking to secure changes and a new legal interpretation. Does that mean he has misled Parliament? Will the Attorney General come to the House and explain his advice, because it is clearly going to change?

On Tuesday, the Prime Minister was forced to admit to Conservative MPs that the Irish backstop could not be replaced by the Malthouse compromise. The Leader of the House will know that that is not actually a clause in the agreement, and Brussels does not recognise it—it was done only to win the vote. The Leader of the House said that the Prime Minister is going to make a statement on Tuesday and that there is a vote on Wednesday; will she confirm that it is the meaningful vote on Wednesday?

Will the Leader of the House confirm that the spring statement will take place on 13 March? New analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows that more than half of day-to-day public spending on the NHS, defence and overseas aid has already been allocated. That means that if the Chancellor was right when he said that austerity has ended, the Government will have to spend £5 billion more than is currently planned by 2023-24 to maintain real spending per person on unprotected services.

May we have a debate on the wholly inappropriate use of public money by the Mayor of the West Midlands combined authority? He wants to introduce articulated buses—or bendy buses—on one of the routes in Walsall where the X51 already provides a perfectly reliable service. Articulated buses were taken out of use because they caused accidents with cyclists and pedestrians. May we have a debate on that misuse of public money?

I, too, attended the unveiling of the plaque for PC Keith Palmer. No one can forget that day. There were some heartfelt tributes by both the Prime Minister and the Metropolitan Police Commissioner. I can only repeat what the commissioner said to Keith Palmer: thank you and God bless you. We have our own memorial on the estate where PC Palmer fell. People have already been laying flowers.

I want to take up what my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) said to me and pay full praise to our colleague, Paul Flynn. Newport has lost a famous son. He was a Member of Parliament for more than 30 years. He recalled hearing Aneurin Bevan, the then Minister for Health, speak in the city in 1948, when he established the new NHS. He served on many Select Committees, and, at the age of 81, was very gracious and kind to me both when I first came in and when he handed over to me as shadow Leader of the House. In 1996, he won Back Bencher of the Year award from The Spectator. Hon. Members will be aware of his book “Commons Knowledge: How to be a Backbencher”. I hold it up to the Chamber because he said that one of the 10 commandments for a Backbencher was:

“Honour your party and extend its horizons.”

And I think he did that. He also showed us how to live through Private Bills and—Mr. Speaker, you will like this—how to survive the Speaker. On making bogus points of order, he said, “Flatter the speaker subtly.”

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Nice tie, Mr Speaker.

Valerie Vaz: I think it’s a nice tie—it is one of the better ones anyway. Paul also said to be cheeky to the Speaker.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement for next week. I note that she has provided the Backbench Business Committee with two days of debates, and both subjects are very important. I know that the Chair of the Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), is a cheeky chappie, but the Leader of the House should not have favourites, so as she is being so generous with Government time, may we have an Opposition day? The shadow Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Christina Rees), whose birthday it is today—I wish her a very happy birthday—will be pleased about the St David’s day debate.

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Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Nice tie, Mr Speaker.

Valerie Vaz: I think it’s a nice tie—it is one of the better ones anyway. Paul also said to be cheeky to the Speaker.
In the foreword, the late Tony Banks said that Paul Flynn was “one of Westminster’s sharpest of brain and tongue”—with a—“well-merited reputation for forthright and controversial views.” Paul was ahead of his time in many ways. He was one of the first MPs to use the internet to communicate with constituents and, in 2000, he won the New Media Award for his website from the New Statesman. We all send condolences to his family and we will miss him and his gorgeous voice.

Finally, Mr Speaker, you will pleased to know—I am sure that Paul would like this, too—that there will be a blue plaque to Bob Marley, which shows great diversity on the blue plaque front. I know that some hon. Members will be singing “Exodus”, but those of us on the Labour Benches will be singing, “One Love/People Get Ready.”

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her very interesting insight into our hon. Friend, the Member for Newport West. That was genuinely very interesting and I thank her for that. I also join her in wishing the shadow Secretary of State for Wales a very happy birthday.

The hon. Lady asked about Opposition days. I hope that she will recognise that I have tried to accommodate a number of requests made by colleagues across the House, including those made by the Opposition and the Backbench Business Committee. I am sure that she will welcome the fact that the House will have the opportunity to debate a motion to approve the draft REACH etc. (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 on Monday following her request in business questions on 24 January. She will also appreciate that I have announced some important business for next week, and that we have had a range of key issues to debate this week, including a debate on serious violence, which was requested by Members from both sides of the House, and a number of statutory instruments recommended for debate by the European Statutory Instruments Committee—all very important business.

The hon. Lady asks about Easter recess. We always announce recesses subject to the progress of business, and that remains the case for the time being. She asks for a report on the costs of cancelling the recess. I will certainly look into it. I imagine that that is a matter for the House of Commons Commission, on which she also sits. Perhaps it is something that she and I could raise at the next House of Commons Commission meeting. I would certainly like to join her in thanking all those members of staff who have worked this week to support us as we continue with important parliamentary business.

The hon. Lady asks for confirmation on the position of Brexit statutory instruments. More than 450 EU exit SIs have now been laid, which is over 75% of the total that we anticipate being required by exit day. The sifting Committee, which looks at all the statutory instruments under the key powers of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, has now considered more than 190 SIs, recommending 52 of them for an upgrade to the affirmative procedure. I can confirm to the House that there remain a relatively small number of SIs for the sifting Committee to continue to review. I can also confirm to the House that the total number of statutory instruments will be fewer than 600. I will continue to update the House, but I am confident that we have enough time to put in place all the necessary secondary legislation by the date of leaving the EU.

The hon. Lady asks about our Brexit negotiations. She will be aware that the Prime Minister is determined to—and continues to—negotiate legally binding changes to the backstop to ensure that the requirements of this House in approving the withdrawal agreement and political declaration can be met. If necessary, I will make a further business statement, but my statement today is clear that we will meet our commitment to deliver a debate on an amendable motion next week relating to the UK’s withdrawal from the EU, and the Prime Minister will update the House next week.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the future of travelling shows and fairs? As chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on fairs and showgrounds, I know that this family-based sector has made representations about falling customer numbers and is concerned about the effects on the workforce of changes to freedom of movement once we have left the European Union.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. Travelling fairs and shows are a brilliant source of fun for families, and they contribute a lot to a thriving cultural scene and local economies. The Government have made clear our commitment to EU citizens who have come to the UK to make their living, and they are welcome here beyond our departure from the EU. A Westminster Hall debate might be a good way in which to raise this matter further.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing next week’s business. May I join in the many tributes to Paul Flynn? He was a brave but kind politician, and we will never forget his sojourn at the Dispatch Box as shadow Leader of the House, which he described as a job creation opportunity for octogenarians.

It is starting to feel distinctly different in here as the Government’s chaotic Brexit starts to play havoc on the UK’s political parties as well as the UK itself. We are all wondering who is next and looking for some willing volunteers on the Conservative Benches.—[Interruption.] Oh, there we go; it might be the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning). The smart money certainly is not on the Leader of the House; she is more ERG than TIG. Can we have a debate on political defections, particularly on the question of the point at which defections become a realignment of British politics?

Next Wednesday, we are going to have another one of these “I can’t believe it’s not the meaningful vote” debates as the clock is run down further, and attempts to blackmail the House into accepting this rotten deal or a disastrous no deal continue apace. Once again, there will be another one of these Christmas tree motions. The Government will be told that this House will not accept no deal, and presumably the Government will just ignore the wishes of the House all over again. But at some point this nonsense has to come to an end. The House simply is not going to accept no deal, and the quicker the Leader of the House accepts that, the better
we will all be. With 36 days left until we leave the EU, the Government are going to have to come back to the House with their real meaningful vote, so when will that be?

The Leader of the House has actually invented a new date—29 February next week. As the Leader of the House knows, there is no 29 February. Perhaps this is not so much running down the clock, but extending February forever so we actually never get to a meaningful vote.

I do not know what the Leader of the House has got against the private Member’s Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil)—the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill—but it has been almost a year since it passed its Second Reading in this House. Other Bills have been given precedence and his still has no money resolution. Again, the Government are defying the wishes of the House. When will the Leader of the House set out a motion to let this important Bill progress?

Please let us not do this week all over again. The Leader of the House’s hon. Friends gave up their skiing holidays and trips to their villas for barely-debated statutory instruments and general debates. I have been listening carefully to the Leader of the House, and it seems as if the Easter recess is under threat and is not particularly safe now. We know that this costs the House God knows how much money and has put staff at a great disadvantage, so let us make sure that we have our Easter recess. The only notable thing that happened this week was the desertion of MPs from the two big parties. In the week of the TIGers, this Government have seemed little more than a bunch of Eeyores in a bad mood.

Mr Speaker: I do not want to make the hon. Gentleman envious, but I am pleased to tell the House that I have a fully up-to-date and, dare I say, sanitised version of the business of the House, and mine very clearly says “Friday 1 March”. [Interruption.] Well, I feel very sorry for colleagues. I am obviously in a privileged position and should be thankful for it.

Andrea Leadsom: If the hon. Gentleman had only realised, I put that deliberately on his paper in the hope that he might think that, as it would be 29 February, I might propose to him. Just continuing the love, Mr Speaker.

The hon. Gentleman says that I am more ERG than TIG, but he is the one who is desperate for independence, so perhaps he should be the one to go and join the Independent Group. He asks about the debate next week. I have certainly tried to make it clear that the Prime Minister will bring back the meaningful vote just as soon as she feels that she has accommodated the wishes of the House for the legally binding changes to the backstop that will mean that the Prime Minister’s withdrawal agreement and political declaration can be approved by the House. All Members need to take that incredibly seriously. It is not the Government’s policy to have no deal; it is the Government’s policy to have a good deal that works for the UK and our EU friends and neighbours. Should we agree to and pass the meaningful vote, we will swiftly be able to move to the withdrawal agreement Bill and give certainty to citizens and businesses right across the United Kingdom. It is in all our interests to do so.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): When my right hon. Friend fills in her questionnaire on restoration, which is available in the Library, she will quickly discern from the questions that, far from preserving Barry and Pugin’s masterpiece, what is envisaged is the creation of Kubla Khan’s stately pleasure dome. When can we debate this matter and get it back on track?

Andrea Leadsom: I confess that my right hon. Friend has totally thrown me there. That is absolutely not my understanding at all. The idea of the restoration and renewal of the Palace is predominantly to sort out the mechanical and engineering requirements of the House, to restore and preserve this UNESCO world heritage site for many generations to come. As my right hon. Friend will be aware, I will hope to introduce a Bill that will put in place the new sponsor body and delivery authority that will carry out the work, which is in the interests of the entire United Kingdom.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I am glad that I have been elevated to the status of official parliamentary cheeky chappie by the shadow Leader of the House. I add my commiserations to the family of the hon. Member for Newport West, Paul Flynn. He will be greatly missed in this place.

If there is to be a Government statement on Tuesday, could the estimates day debates be given some form of protected time? The applications were very heavily subscribed. More than 50 Members have backed the applications for debates on education and on work and pensions. If the Government statement on EU withdrawal is put into that, it too much, it would demean the whole situation on estimates day applications.

I thank the Leader of the House for confirmation that the debate on the 20th anniversary of the Maerophon report’s publication will go ahead on Monday, and that time has been put aside for Welsh affairs and St David’s day, and on climate change next Thursday. Thank you very much.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point about protected time. I will see what can be done. I obviously cannot make any commitments because statements from the Prime Minister, as he will be aware, command significant interest in the House, but I will certainly take that away and consider it.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): With a diligence that chimes with all of your stewardship, Mr Speaker, and characterises the best of my own endeavours, we listened yesterday to the Home Secretary deal with an urgent question—I use the word “question” generously—on passports and their removal. The Leader of the House surely acknowledges that all those who, regardless of passports, who once fled to our shores and enjoyed our welfare and St David’s day, and on climate change next Thursday. Thank you very much.

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Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is right that our priority is to ensure the safety and security of the United Kingdom, and we will not allow anything to jeopardise this. We have tough measures to deal with people who pose a serious threat, including depriving them of their British citizenship or excluding them from the UK. Any British citizen who does return from taking part in the conflict must be in no doubt that they will be questioned, investigated and potentially prosecuted.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House might recall, not that she was alive at the time, that on 6 September 1620 a little ship, the Mayflower, sailed from Plymouth to America. We still have time to celebrate that great event, so could we have an early debate to discuss how we best do that? We have a strong alliance with the United States and we share that history. Also, she knows my belief that we should use it to celebrate not just that famous journey—there were 102 passengers, 30 crew and some children, waifs from the London streets, went on that boat—but migration, which is not a dirty word. Immigrants bring creativity, energy, great strengths and a great store of knowledge.

Andrea Leadsom: Personally, I think that is a fantastic idea. I think the hon. Gentleman means, “Can we celebrate in 2020?” I am not sure we have a time turner, but he is right that we should celebrate the contribution of migrants, whether outward or inward, who give so much to our culture and to our communities. This fantastic idea will also celebrate in 2020? I am not sure we have a time turner, but he is right that we should celebrate the contribution of migrants, whether outward or inward, who give so much to our culture and to our communities. This fantastic idea will also celebrate the fact that the UK has left the European Union and will be re-establishing our close connections with our transatlantic cousins and friends.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): The Leader of the House will be aware that I have raised with her before the lack of accountability in our NHS management. In south-west Hertfordshire, the frontline staff do a fantastic job, but they are being let down time and again by the management around the clinical commissioning group and West Hertfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust, which seem to be completely unaccountable to parliamentarians or to the public. Can we have a debate to see how we can have more accountability and find out exactly what goes on with these management systems, which seem to be doing their own thing and ignoring the public’s will?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend has had some sympathy from others across the House on some of the challenges in dealing with CCGs; he is right to raise that. He might like to seek a Westminster Hall debate, so that all hon. Members can share their concerns, and also possibly propose remedies.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): The Scottish Government are in the process of renegotiating pay rises for public sector workers. When that is concluded, they will be backdated to April 2018. While that is welcome, those who are currently claiming universal credit will go beyond their earnings threshold and therefore might be taken off the benefit altogether. May we have a debate in Government time on protecting public sector workers from this penalty?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that universal credit is a support that is designed to help people get into work and to increase their earnings, and to keep more of their earnings as they increase their hours and increase their pay, so that nobody needs to face the problem that we had under the old legacy system under which, if someone worked a few extra hours, their benefits would be cut immediately. Universal credit does deliberately seek to ensure a smooth transition that motivates and incentivises people to have extra hours of work and, as they earn extra money, to be more self-sufficient for themselves and their families.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The people of Chelmsford care deeply about the environment and will have been pleased to see the Chancellor taking action on the plastic packaging tax this week. This time last year, 41 Conservative MPs gave up plastic for Lent, and took time to reflect on our own environmental footprint and to think about what more we could do for the planet. It was great that the Leader of the House was one of those 41. Will she again take a pledge for the environment this Lent and encourage colleagues from across the House to do so? Will she perhaps also support the great work of the charity Tearfund, which is partnering with the Department for International Development to address plastic pollution in some of the poorest parts of our planet?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a great champion for our environment. I am delighted to take up her challenge and again have a plastic-free Lent, as I did—and enjoyed—last year. I can say to her that our 25-year environment plan aims to ensure that this generation in the UK will be the first to leave our environment in a better place than we found it. We have done a huge amount already, including introducing a world-leading ban on microbeads and taking 13 billion plastic bags out of circulation in the past two years. We have consulted on banning the sale and supply of plastic straws and stirrers and of plastic-stemmed cotton buds. We will be consulting on introducing a deposit return scheme for single-use drink containers and reforms of packaging producer responsibilities. We are doing a huge amount in this Government, and it is right that we do so. As individuals, it is right that we all seek to do as much as we can to protect and preserve our planet for future generations.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Definitely the most important thing I have ever done in my 21 years in this House was to call for the public inquiry into the investigation of the murder of Stephen Lawrence. I welcome the debate on Monday, but it was one of the watershed moments for race relations in this country and this is therefore an important moment. I believe that we are losing the focus on the lessons that Macpherson taught us, so will the Leader of the House ensure that the Home Secretary is in his place for that debate to give it the status it really deserves?

Andrea Leadsom: I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is vital that we continue to learn the lessons from that appalling incident, which is now 20 years old. Stephen Lawrence will never be forgotten for what his death demonstrated about the problems and challenges we have in our society today, and the debate on Monday will offer a good opportunity for all hon. Members to
give their own thoughts on this. While he will appreciate that it is not for me to decide precisely which Minister comes to this House, I know that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary takes a huge personal interest in this issue.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): A report in today’s Grimsby Telegraph highlights the cost of missed GP appointments. It points out that the cost to the NHS was £120,000 in north-east Lincolnshire alone. This is a major issue and a big problem that the NHS must tackle. May we have a debate to see how we can focus attention on it?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right to raise this issue, which is a huge concern right across the country. People failing to turn up for GP appointments are wasting valuable resources and time from which others might be able to benefit. I strongly suggest that he perhaps seeks a Westminster Hall debate so that he can address this directly with Ministers and enable other hon. Members to put forward the concerns they have in their own constituencies.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): May I just say—I learned this from the late Paul Flynn—nice tie, Mr Speaker? It is indeed one of the best. Paul once told me that he was named after the German soldier who spared his father’s life in World War one, and many were the stories Paul shared with us.

First, I would like to say that it is good the business is out and we know what is happening on Wednesday. Again, we will be tabling an amendment to revoke article 50, which is open to all Members.

To turn to the serious matter I want to raise today, this Government keep playing games with the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill. I raised this last week, and the racket still goes on. I want the Leader of the House to put a rocket under the Government Whips to get this moving. Last week, she just read from some blank sheet that was handed to her from behind her. The Government Whips have done nothing in the intervening time: they have not responded to emails, and when they suggested a meeting I was ready to go, but I find out today that the Whip in question is absent today. It is ridiculous, so will she pursue this, or must we find out today that the Whip in question is absent today. I totally reject the hon. Lady’s suggestion that this week has been a PR stunt. We have had two statements and five urgent questions, which enabled colleagues to question Ministers on UK nationals returning from Syria and the situations with Flybmi and Honda. Eight pieces of important legislation have been agreed on the Floor of the House, including the annual update of support for our armed forces on Monday. The Home Secretary opened a debate on serious violence for which the House has been calling for several weeks. We had a valuable and well-attended short debate on the NHS 10-year plan, which the shadow Leader of the House had called for, and this afternoon we will debate potential future trade agreements. In addition, the Public Galleries have been full this week, with members of the public—including children on their half-term holidays—getting the chance to see their elected representatives holding the Government to account and defending their interests. I simply do not accept that this has been anything other than a valuable parliamentary week.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman was doing so well until he started accusing the Government of not caring, which is simply untrue. This Government have an excellent record of supporting private Member’s Bills, and more than 50 have received Royal Assent since 2010. We are not blocking progress. The Government are closely following the passage of the hon. Gentleman’s Bill, and they continue to look at providing money resolutions for Bills that require them in the usual way, which is on a case-by-case basis. As I have said before, the Government have helped to reunite 24,700 family members over the past five years. Our policy allows a partner and children under 18 to join refugees in the United Kingdom if they were part of the family unit before their sponsor fled their country. It is vital to do everything we can to help asylum seekers and refugees, but we must also discourage people from making treacherous journeys that end up doing so much damage to lives and people’s futures.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): If the media are to be believed, this week is commonly known as “ski week.” I would not know about that, but many of us have had to cancel constituency engagements to be here. May I echo the words of the shadow Leader of the House and ask that, if such a move is planned again, the needs of House staff are taken into consideration? I have spoken to many staff this week who have had to cancel family events or simply a much-needed break. If a PR stunt such as cancelling recess is planned again, the needs and wellbeing of House staff must be taken into consideration.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an important point about the need to balance the needs of House staff with those of our Parliament. I received reassurances from senior House staff that all existing commitments would be honoured, and in speaking to many House staff I found them incredibly supportive, and they did not complain that they have had to cancel significant prior engagements. Nevertheless, the hon. Lady raises an important point about the need to take their wishes into account. I totally reject the hon. Lady’s suggestion that this week has been a PR stunt. We have had two statements and five urgent questions, which enabled colleagues to question Ministers on UK nationals returning from Syria and the situations with Flybmi and Honda. Eight pieces of important legislation have been agreed on the Floor of the House, including the annual update of support for our armed forces on Monday. The Home Secretary opened a debate on serious violence for which the House has been calling for several weeks. We had a valuable and well-attended short debate on the NHS 10-year plan, which the shadow Leader of the House had called for, and this afternoon we will debate potential future trade agreements. In addition, the Public Galleries have been full this week, with members of the public—including children on their half-term holidays—getting the chance to see their elected representatives holding the Government to account and defending their interests. I simply do not accept that this has been anything other than a valuable parliamentary week.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): May I add my name to those paying tribute to Paul Flynn, who was a friend of mine and of many Members across the House? Paul’s hobby was annoying Ministers, regardless of which party they happened to come from, and on Monday evening we will pay tribute to his memory at a meeting of the parliamentary Labour party.

The Leader of the House may be aware of a scheme that was introduced by the Government to enable local authorities to take in Syrian refugees. One such council is Waltham Forest, which covers most of my constituency, and the problem is that next year the funding will evaporate unless something is done now or in the very near future. May we have a statement from a Home Office Minister to set out the Government’s plans for continuing that funding beyond 2020?
so-called Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack, different religions, here in the United Kingdom. The descended on the town and injured 20 policemen and host an Ahmadiyya convention in the town of Ahmednagar, 800 men wielding sticks and batons, angry at plans to northern Bangladesh, leaving 25 injured. Some 700 to members of the Ahmadiyya religious community in 12 February, hundreds of religious hard-liners attacked Christians, Sufis and Shi'a. Will the Leader of the House and local authorities, it is right to take time to assess the evidence thoroughly. We are currently reviewing funding arrangements, and more than 50 local authorities have taken part in a consultation. We hope to reach a conclusion soon, but it is right to take time to assess the evidence thoroughly. We are committed to putting in place arrangements that work as well as possible for both unaccompanied children and local authorities.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on antisocial behaviour, so that we can discuss the need for more support and help for police and local authorities to deal with and prevent such behaviour? That problem has recently caused difficulties in my constituency, including some serious incidents.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. Antisocial behaviour is a real scourge for many communities right across the UK. He will be aware that we have recently had a debate on antisocial behaviour, and I hope he had the opportunity to raise his specific local concerns then. I keep under review the possibility of further debates on subjects that are of grave concern to this House, and will continue to do so with regard to antisocial behaviour.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On Tuesday 12 February, hundreds of religious hard-liners attacked members of the Ahmadiyya religious community in northern Bangladesh, leaving 25 injured. Some 700 to 800 men wielding sticks and batons, angry at plans to host an Ahmadiyya convention in the town of Ahmednagar, descended on the town and injured 20 policemen and five Ahmadiyyas. I attended an Ahmadiyya convention, along with lots of other people from across many different religions, here in the United Kingdom. The so-called Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack, but the authorities blamed the Jama’at-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh, which is accused of killing scores of Hindus, Christians, Sufis and Shi’a. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate or a statement on the matter?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman, as he often does, raises a very significant and concerning report of religious hatred and violence. He is right to do so. We have Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions on Tuesday 26 February, and I encourage him to raise it directly with Foreign Office Ministers then, so that he can hear what more the UK can do to help to support religious tolerance around the world.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House for their remarks about our friend Paul Flynn. He would have had something to say about the business of the House sheet in which the Leader of the House appears to have abolished St David’s day. As a proud Welshman, he would not have been very keen on that. However, does that not open up an opportunity? When the amendable motion is discussed, could we put down an amendment that brings forward Brexit day from 29 March 2019 to 29 February 2019, since it is here on the business of the House sheet, and thus avoid the whole thing all together?

Andrea Leadsom: All I can say is, nice try.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I have a constituent who wishes to remain anonymous, but who recently applied for a job with a UK Government Department. She has, among other qualifications, an A in higher maths and a B in advanced higher maths. This is a higher standard than an English A-level, yet she was told by Capita, which did the initial sifting, that she did not have the requisite qualifications. May we have a written statement from the Leader of the House, directing the attention of Ministers, HR managers and Capita to an explanation of the value of all qualifications sat by school pupils in the UK, including in Scotland? While she is answering, will she take the opportunity to congratulate the Scottish pupils who have just done their prelims—mock exams in England—and are now studying for their highers and advanced highers before the summer?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to congratulate all students, in Scotland and elsewhere in the United Kingdom, who have just taken mocks and preliminaries. I wish them every success with their exams in the summer. I will definitely congratulate in particular the hon. Gentleman’s constituent, who sounds as if she has done extraordinarily well in her maths highers. I sincerely hope that she will be rewarded with a good role. He makes a very important point. It is not clear to me whether he is suggesting that perhaps Capita has not understood the way that the grading system works.

Stewart Hosie indicated assent.

Andrea Leadsom: If the hon. Gentleman would like to write to me about this specific case I can take it up on his behalf, or he could raise it directly with the Secretary of State for Education, who I am sure would be very keen to take it up on his behalf.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): This year, 2019, marks the launch of the three-year “I am and I will” campaign, which highlights the power of individual action in reducing the impact of cancer. I am sure the right hon. Lady already knows about it. Leading the way are the 1.4 million people who have joined the UK stem cell donor register, part of a community of more than 33 million people worldwide. Despite that, not every blood cancer patient is able to find the match that could save their life. Will the Leader of the House join me in encouraging more people to join the stem cell donor register, particularly young men, who are under-represented but in the highest demand? Will she look for an opportunity to have a debate in Government time on this really important issue?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for raising this very important issue in the Chamber, and I certainly join her in encouraging all people to consider joining the stem cell donation register. It is absolutely vital that we all do what we can to help our fellow man and our communities in the United Kingdom. She will no doubt be aware that we have made progress in treating all forms of cancer. Rates of survival have increased year on year since 2010 and people are more likely to survive cancer than ever before. The NHS is rolling out a new standard, so someone with a referral
for suspected cancer can expect to be diagnosed or given the all-clear within 28 days. So often, early detection is absolutely vital to the outcomes for cancer sufferers, and I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for raising this very important issue.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP) rose—

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: I call Drew Hendry.

Drew Hendry: I am on a good run, Mr Speaker. May we have a statement on the responsibility of Government Ministers to respond to Members of this House in a timeous fashion? There has been an increasing pattern of unacceptable delays in responding to constituents’ queries raised by Members of this House. For example, I have been waiting four months for a response from the Department for Work and Pensions, despite having written four letters to two separate Ministers. Does the Leader of the House believe that that is acceptable behaviour from her fellow members of the Government?

Andrea Leadsom: I am genuinely sorry to hear that. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that Departments sometimes overlook correspondence. They have very clear service standards and seek to turn around letters within a short period of time. If he wants to write to me following business questions, I can certainly take it up on his behalf.

David Linden: Hon. Members may be aware of TotsBots, a fantastic company in my constituency that manufactures eco-friendly nappies. One of the issues that this company, based in the Queenslie area of my constituency, has raised is nappy companies that falsely tell their customers that they are eco-friendly. The Leader of the House will be aware of the Nappies (Environmental Standards) Bill that I presented to the House. May I therefore ask her to find time for us to take forward this hugely important issue and make sure that we are supporting great companies such as TotsBots?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating the company on its efforts to introduce more eco-friendly nappies. The whole issue of nappies is a big challenge in our attempts to improve our environment and reduce waste. I encourage him perhaps to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can discuss directly with Environment Ministers what more can be done to prevent the misrepresentation of how environmentally friendly some resources actually are.

Points of Order

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Item 4 on the list of written ministerial statements for today is about the continuity of trade deals. It would have been extremely helpful to have had that written ministerial statement before the debate that is about to take place, and I deeply regret that it has not been made available by the Department for International Trade. This is the second time that such an omission has been made, and I wonder whether there is anything that we can do to ensure that in future, such a lackadaisical approach does not happen.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has made his point in his own way. I must say, on a personal basis, that I have always found the Secretary of State the very embodiment of courtesy. It does seem to me that if it was a deliberate decision that the written ministerial statement would appear later, that is less than considerate to the House as it embarks on this debate. If it was inadvertent, that is unfortunate and perhaps rather inept, but it certainly should not happen again. Whether the statement can be made available fairly quickly, so that Members could at least consult it in the course of the debate, I do not know. It is a regrettable state of affairs, but hopefully there will not be a recurrence.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. This is a momentous debate, called on a Thursday during what would have been half-term, and the statement is not even available. The problem with Brexit is surely that people are talking about the divorce, not what is going to happen to the children. We simply do not know what will happen to trade deals, which are terribly important. I feel that there should be some sort of ruling on whether the debate itself should be deferred, so that we have the information at hand.

Mr Speaker: Well, I do not think the hon. Gentleman would carry the House with him in suggesting that the debate be deferred. I hope he will not take exception if I say that I think that Members on the whole, at this point, although they may well have benefited from sight of the statement, will have a clear sense of what it is they wish to convey to the House, and I do not exclude from that category the hon. Gentleman himself. Although it is an imperfect situation, I think “needs must” is the principle that should apply here and we should proceed with the debate as scheduled. In that context, I look to the Minister to open the debate—and not any Minister, but the Secretary of State for International Trade himself, Secretary Dr Liam Fox.
Future Free Trade Agreements

11.25 am

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): I beg to move,

That this House has considered potential future free trade agreements: Australia, New Zealand, US and a comprehensive and progressive agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.

It is a pleasure to open the debate on Britain’s potential future free trade agreements as an independent trading nation outside the European Union. The Government have consulted widely on the topic and heard a huge range of views, including from the Select Committee on International Trade, businesses, civil society groups, parliamentarians and the wider public. Today is the opportunity for the Government to hear further from Members of this House what their ambitions are for the first agreements we negotiate as an independent trading nation.

Although the Government’s firm intention is secure an ambitious partnership with the European Union, if we are to deliver on the referendum result instruction given to us by the British people, we must remember that there is a world beyond Europe and there will be a time beyond Brexit. Now, for the first time in over 40 years, the United Kingdom will have the opportunity to step out into the world and forge relationships across the globe by negotiating, signing and ratifying new free trade agreements.

Free trade agreements should not be seen in isolation from the wider economic, strategic and security partnerships that we will need to thrive as a truly global Britain; nor should we ignore the enormous potential of multilateral agreements, which can have even greater liberalising effect than bilateral FTAs. Our ability to influence such agreements will be a major benefit of taking up our independent seat at the World Trade Organisation on leaving the European Union.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Numerous constituents have contacted me, very concerned about the future of our national health service. If we are to have all these trade deals around the world, can the Secretary of State guarantee that we will never open up healthcare, but let me say first that the ISDS system has been ratified by this House, although its provisions, including NHS regulation and services, labour law and environmental services, were not supported by the Opposition. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like to explain why.

Dr Fox: While I clearly reject the latter part of what the right hon. Gentleman has said, the rest of it is very important. Trade agreements make it very clear that it is up to the elected Government of the United Kingdom to determine what they do with public services. The matter is therefore decided by the British electorate and not by any forces outside the United Kingdom. I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for making that point.

Several hon. Members rose—

Dr Fox: I will make some progress. I will give way again shortly.

New opportunities are clearly available to the United Kingdom, and seeking them will demand some of the agility that is required to respond to the potentially seismic shifts that are taking place in the world economy. The United Kingdom will have to be ready to compete for emerging sources of growth. While our established partners—such as the European Union—will continue to be vital, the locus of economic power is none the less shifting rapidly. It is estimated that 90% of global economic growth in the next five years will occur outside the EU. A centre of gravity that rested in North America in 1990 will have shifted to China and the far east by 2050, and we are already seeing the effects of some of that in the global economy. Those changes in economic development, global trade patterns and population growth in emerging and developing economies will fundamentally alter the opportunities that developed economies will have in the years to come.

Overall, the global population is projected to rise from 7 billion in 2010 to 9.8 billion by 2050, with the increase stemming mainly from Asia and Africa. The world is becoming increasingly well educated, wealthier and more urbanised. It is expected that by 2030, 60% of the world’s population—5 billion people—will be middle-class. In 2009, the figure was only 1.8 billion. In the intervening time, middle-class spending will more than...
double to $6.38 trillion. The rise of the middle class in Asia means that there is an enormous potential demand for the high-quality products and services in which the UK specialises. By 2050, China alone will have 220 cities with a population of more than 1 million, while the whole of Europe will have only 35.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The Secretary of State is right to refer to the emerging middle class in growing economies—India is one example—but can he give me a cast-iron guarantee that when he is negotiating these trade agreements, human rights and issues such as freedom of religion and belief will be at the forefront of his mind? I am concerned about the possibility that, as we go around negotiating these wonderful free trade agreements, we will start to ignore human rights, particularly in the case of India.

Dr Fox: The importance that the UK ascribes to human rights is extremely well documented in the range of Departments that are involved. The Government do not intend to seek any watering down of concepts of human rights, although it is very reasonable for us to have different provisions in countries such as Canada and the United States, whose legal remedies and legal systems are similar to ours, from those that we would have in some other countries. We will want to be flexible on that, and it is one of the issues that I want to see built into real-time parliamentary scrutiny of our trade agreements so that the House can determine whether the values represented by the United Kingdom are reflected in those agreements.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State expect the beneficial arrangements that the European Union has made with developing countries to be maintained in the deals that his Department will negotiate?

Dr Fox: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, who takes an interest in these issues, for his intervention. Not only would I like to see those maintained, but I would like to see us use our greater freedom to enhance them. For example, I would like to see a greater convergence of our trade and our development policies; I would like to see us use outward direct investment to help some of the poorest countries develop the ability to add value to their primary commodities; and I would like then for us to be able to use our freedoms in tariff policy to be able to reduce those tariffs on those value-added goods. It cannot be right that countries that produce coffee or fish are penalised for roasting their coffee beans or canning their fish when they try to sell them into our markets. By bringing those two elements together, we would be able to bring enormous benefit and enable people to trade their way to prosperity, rather than being as dependent on our aid policies as they are today. I am grateful to colleagues on both sides of the House who have come forward to us with proposals on that, because I think that we could find a strong bipartisan consensus in this country to be able to do some of that work.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): We have already shown that we are very capable of getting contracts, for instance, as the Secretary of State knows and as I saw from direct involvement, with China in terms of the agri-food sector in Northern Ireland. We have a £200 million contract over four years, which is an example of what we can do. Does the Secretary of State feel that the personal, family and business contacts we have with Australia, New Zealand and the USA will inevitably lead to further trade deals that will benefit us all in the UK, and does he share the confidence that I and many others in this House have that the trade deals we will get will benefit all in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Dr Fox: The hon. Gentleman makes several interesting points, and of course not all of the improved openings will come from former bilateral free trade agreements. The case he makes about opening up the dairy sector in China, which as he correctly suggests is worth about a quarter of a billion pounds to the Northern Ireland economy, came from our bilateral engagement with the Chinese Government and looking at their own regulations, so it was produced by an unilateral change by China rather than a bilateral agreement. In many ways, it will be the opening up of sectors rather than bilateral agreements that will see the UK be able to increase access. The hon. Gentleman also makes a very good point about some of those other countries, because we have strong bilateral and personal links that I hope in the case of the United States, for example, will enable us to be involved at a state as well as a federal level in improving British trading access into those markets.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): On scrutiny and transparency, can my right hon. Friend confirm that the legal protections for our NHS that were built into the EU-Canada deal will be replicated in any future UK trade agreement and that, if there was ever a dispute with investors, it would be resolved in a transparent and open manner and not behind closed doors?

Dr Fox: The UK as well as the EU have been at the forefront of improving the investor-state dispute settlement system and its transparency; in particular we supported the UNCITRAL—United Nations Commission on International Trade Law—rules on transparency that became effective in 2014. We have always seen this as being a necessary part of agreements, but we do absolutely agree that transparency is one of the ways to give greater public confidence in the system itself.

It is predicted that the share of global GDP of the seven largest emerging economies—Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Russia and Turkey—could increase from around 35% to nearly 50% by 2050, which would mean that they would overtake the G7, although of course even with more mature economies the International Monetary Fund has predicted that the United States will grow over 50% faster than the euro area this year, at 2.5%. This historic shift in global economic and demographic power will reshape the opportunities of international trade in the years to come, perhaps faster than many expect.

We cannot wish away this change and nor should we. Providing the employment and economic growth the UK needs means navigating this shift successfully. Happily, the United Kingdom is well placed to take advantage of these new opportunities. British businesses are superbly positioned to capitalise on this new environment, as both established and growing economies drive demand in precisely those sectors in which the UK excels. Anyone
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who has travelled widely will have seen how impressed global businesses and consumers are by the high quality of British goods and the professionalism of British services.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): But surely Team EU collectively, with Britain in it, would have much more negotiating leverage against those very large emerging markets. An extreme example would be China. We are dwarfed by China but, as the EU, we can negotiate the best deal. The EU is negotiating deals with Singapore, Japan and others. Surely the Secretary of State must agree that we would get a better deal as part of the EU than isolated as a dwarf outside it.

Dr Fox: I really find it quite insulting that the United Kingdom, the fifth biggest economy in the world, should be described as a dwarf by the hon. Gentleman. We are one of the most successful global economies. It is also worth pointing out that the European Union does not have a trade agreement with China or with the United States because it was too difficult to get an agreement with the 28 nations in those negotiations. He is right to suggest that economies of scale have a role in trade agreements, but so also does the ability to conclude those agreements and to ratify them. That has shown itself to be easier when dealing with single nations, which is why Australia has a trade agreement with China but the European Union does not.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The Secretary of State has given us a good rundown of eastern growth metrics. This is why the EU is making the free trade deals with Japan and Korea that we are worried we are going to fall out of. The percentage that I would like him to give us is the gain to gross domestic product for the UK in any deals. We know that the UK will probably gain about 0.2% of GDP with a United States deal, as opposed to the 6% to 8% that it is going to lose from the European Union. That is only about one thirtieth or one fortieth of the gain. If the right hon. Gentleman is talking percentages, will he give us the percentages in context? He says that there will be a loss from Europe and gains with the United States of America and other places, but sadly those gains will be dwarfed by the losses.

Dr Fox: But that is a false prospectus, because we want a full and comprehensive trading agreement with the European Union that maintains that trade for the United Kingdom plus the extended opportunities that will come with increased access to those markets that are growing faster. It is possible to do both. It is possible to maintain our trade with the European Union and to improve our trade with the rest of the world. In fact, Britain will have to do that if we want to generate the sort of income that we require for the provision of our public services. Work done by the Institute of Economic Affairs suggests that in 2017 the big increase in UK exports of about £60 billion fed back into the Exchequer at a level of something like £15 billion to £20 billion. That is an example of how, when we come to balance our budget, it is not simply a choice between raising taxes and cutting spending; it is also about earning more money as a country.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Is the right hon. Gentleman seriously saying that the Treasury’s suggestion that getting out of the European Union and the single market will hit the UK economy by 6% to 8% is not actually the truth? That is what is going to happen; he knows that we will take a GDP hit from that. He also knows that a deal with the USA, which accounts for a quarter of the world’s GDP, will give us only a 0.2% gain. He will need to make about 30 or 40 USA-style deals to make up for that loss. Given that the USA accounts for a quarter of the planet, he is going to have to trade with seven or eight planets to make up the loss resulting from his Government’s policy on Europe.

Dr Fox: I know that the hon. Gentleman feels very strongly about this. He did not like the result of the referendum and he does not like the decision to leave the European Union, but we are leaving the European Union and we need to ensure that we have sufficient access to the European market, but in a way that does not tie our hands in relation to increased access to other global markets. He makes assumptions on growth in other markets that I do not accept. Nor is this purely about access to goods markets; it is also about the growing access to services markets. In the global trading environment, we have simply not seen the sort of liberalisation in services that we have seen in goods since the establishment of the World Trade Organisation. There is huge potential to unlock the economic benefits to the United Kingdom in seeking global liberalisation in services trading, which is not factored into any of the equations that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): My hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), the Chair of the International Trade Committee, has got to the nub of this. The National Institute of Economic and Social Research said 18 months or so ago that we would lose around 20% of total UK trade even with an FTA with the EU. However, FTAs with the main English-speaking economies and with all the BRICS countries would only see trade rise by 2% or 3% respectively, which goes nowhere close to filling the gap. The point that my hon. Friend is making in GDP terms and the one that I am making in trade terms is at the heart of this. Liberalisation or not, there is no way that we can fill the gap left by what we are about to lose.

Dr Fox: As I said, the Government’s ambition is to have a full and comprehensive agreement with the EU, as set out in the Prime Minister’s model. Of course, if the Opposition parties want to avoid what they regard as the terrible scenario of no deal, they can vote for the Prime Minister’s deal. In arithmetic terms—if the hon. Gentleman looks at where Britain’s exports are going—just over a decade ago some 56% of our exports were going to the EU, whereas today that is down to about 44%. Why? It is not simply because the EU has grown more slowly, which it has, but because the economy of the rest of the world is growing faster. Clearly, that is where the markets are going to be for a United Kingdom that has an outward, global vision.

Several hon. Members rose—

Dr Fox: I will make some progress.

Standards have been widely debated in relation to future trade agreements, and I am sure that they will be raised throughout today’s debate. The Government have been clear that more trade does not and cannot come at
the expense of the deterioration of our world-class regulations and standards, whether they relate to the recognised quality and safety of our products, our labour laws or our environmental protections. Our current approach both protects our own citizens from substandard goods and services and provides the quality assurance that foreign buyers want, which underpins our export success. I remind the House that Britain’s exports are currently at an all-time high.

The United Kingdom has proud and long-standing domestic commitments to protect the environment, to fight against climate change and to uphold high labour standards. We have clear commitments to sustainable development and the protection and advancement of human rights, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), who is no longer in his place. We have a proud and long-standing tradition of promoting those values throughout the world, and the Government remain determined to meet our international commitments in that regard. That will not change as we leave the European Union.

To further that agenda, we will also be exploring how those values should be reflected in the design and provisions of future trade and investment agreements. We are absolutely clear in our policy that any future deals must ensure high food safety, animal welfare standards and environmental protections and maintain our excellent labour standards. The Government are committed to ensuring that this House and people across the country will have the opportunity to scrutinise such commitments in any future free trade agreements—a subject on which I will elaborate later.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Taking the Secretary of State back to Honda’s decision earlier this week, the company said that one of its reasons for disinvesting from the UK was the new EU-Japan free trade agreement. Britain was fully involved in the negotiating of that agreement, so did the Secretary of State’s officials get the EU to take account of the FTA’s impact on inward investment into this country, because it has turned out to be disastrous?

Dr Fox: That was one of many reasons, with the main reason being changes in the international car market and, for example, the move towards electric vehicles and away from diesel engines. However, the hon. Lady’s argument seems strange coming from the Labour party, because Labour wants to remain in a customs union with the EU, which would keep the EU-Japan agreement in place and prevent us from making changes to it in the future. If it is such a bad agreement, why is it Labour policy to lock us into a customs union with that agreement in place?

Helen Goodman: We would like to stay in the customs union because we export a lot to Europe. That is the simple answer to the Secretary of State. However, the question that I am trying to put to him is about what he, his officials and his Ministers did to prevent an agreement that has been damaging to the British economy. Will he undertake to ensure that future free trade agreements will not involve the same model, because that would have a similar negative impact?

Dr Fox: The liberalisation of global trade is to everyone’s advantage. The hon. Lady says it is a terrible agreement, but her party’s Front-Bench policy is to keep Britain in the customs union, which would mean the agreement is there in perpetuity. Not only that, but we would have no ability to alter it in future, nor would we have the ability to resist any changes made to it, whether or not we think they are to Britain’s advantage. The Labour party cannot have it both ways: it either wants the freedom to create trade agreements or it wants them to be dictated by the European Union. It must be one or the other.

Stephen Timms: The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) asked the Secretary of State for an assurance that the wording he read out from the agreement with Canada will be included in these future trade deals, too. Can he give the House that assurance?

Dr Fox: I have done so in previous debates of this nature, in which I said that we regard the public provisions in CETA as being the template we would like to see for future trade agreements. We think it is a good agreement, which is why we find it difficult to fathom why the Labour party did not vote for it in the House of Commons.

The world is crying out for the goods and services in which Britain excels, and it will do so even more in future. We have long been a proud and open trading nation. Trade totals some 61% of our GDP, and it is the foundation of an economy that delivers high-quality, high-paid jobs, that delivers better and more affordable products and that creates the conditions for competitive, world-leading businesses to innovate, prosper and grow across all parts of the UK.

Our openness to free trade, founded on a rules-based multilateral trading system with the World Trade Organisation at its centre, is at the heart of our prosperity. The Government have a clear position that multilateral agreements remain the gold standard of international trade agreements and are the ideal means of pursuing prosperity for the UK and globally across all 164 WTO members. However, this does not mean that bilateral or regional agreements cannot be useful complements to the multilateral system as an adjunct to wider liberalisation. That is why we are also pursuing a range of free trade agreements at both a regional and a bilateral level. Through these free trade agreements, the United Kingdom can work with our partners to establish modern, enduring and impactful trading rules that work for British businesses and for people and communities across our country.

One of the most important trade agreements we are considering is, of course, with the United States, which is our largest single-nation trading partner, with £184 billion-worth in the last year accounting for around a fifth of our exports, and is the single biggest source of inward investment into the United Kingdom. The UK and the US have a deep, long-standing relationship with a strong and enduring bond. We have a shared heritage and shared values, and of course we have deep co-operation across a wide variety of security and defence matters.

We have already taken concrete steps towards this potential trade agreement, including the signing of a mutual recognition agreement. We are currently engaging with both Governments’ commitment to maintaining all relevant aspects of the current EU-US MRA when it ceases to apply to the UK. This will help to facilitate goods trade.
between the two nations and will guarantee that UK and US exporters can continue to ensure goods are compliant with technical regulations before they depart their home country. Total UK trade in the sectors covered by the deal is worth up to £12.8 billion, with the UK exports covered worth an estimated £8.9 billion.

Similar agreements have been signed in recent weeks with Australia and New Zealand. These agreements ensure continuity and safeguard revenues for British businesses and consumers, and they mark a further crucial step in securing and furthering our vital trading relationships. An ambitious free trade agreement between the US and the UK would further cement our existing strong bilateral partnership and further the interests of our highly compatible economies. It will make it easier for UK and US businesses to trade with each other and identify where we can collaborate to promote open markets around the world.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I have been listening carefully to the Secretary of State, and his argument seems to be that, on our own, we will be nimbler and more able to negotiate good trade deals, but he must know that size matters. As a market of 500 million, there is 10 times the opportunity for profit in the European Union than in the United Kingdom. Why should we get a better trade deal with the United States, for example, given the smallness of our market and of the opportunity for profitability compared with the European Union? If we are not going to get a better deal, why are we doing it?

Dr Fox: I hate to point it out, but the EU does not have a trade agreement with the US. Let me give the hon. Lady one example of why it has been unable to have one—data localisation. Although 24 out of the 28 members wanted to move forward with data movement with the US, four countries—France, Germany, Austria and Slovenia—blocked it. That meant that although most of the EU wanted that agreement, it was unable to get it. We would not be restricted in the same way. She is right to say that the bigger the market, the bigger the offer, but that has to be balanced against our ability to be flexible, and how liberal and open we would want to be in that trading environment. We are the fifth biggest economy in the world, and I find it ridiculous that we are being told that we are some sort of economic minnow when, as the fifth biggest market in the world, most countries want to have access to us. Being smaller economies than the EU has not prevented countries such as Canada and Australia from having trade agreements with much bigger economies, because those trade agreements will be completed and signed only if they provide mutual benefits—otherwise, what would be the point in negotiating them? So I counsel this House against the despair of saying, “We cannot do it on our own.” As the fifth biggest economy on the planet, we are more than able to negotiate strong agreements with other political and economic groupings around the world.

Several hon. Members rose——

Dr Fox: I will make a little progress, because I know other Members wish to speak.

When we leave the European Union, an ambitious UK-US free trade agreement will be a key priority for the Department for International Trade, and we have already been laying the groundwork. The US-UK trade and investment working group has now met five times, with conversations focused on what both sides can do towards ensuring certainty and continuity for business on both sides of the Atlantic, and on identifying opportunities to facilitate bilateral trade and investment, consistent with the UK’s obligations as an EU member. Both the Prime Minister and President Trump have made clear their shared commitment to these bilateral discussions, and they restated that in their most recent meeting in July 2018. As US Ambassador Woody Johnson has said:

“Britain is the perfect trading partner for the United States.”

We very much welcome the letter of intent sent to Congress from the United States trade representative stating that the Administration intend to open a negotiation with the UK once we leave the EU. The President’s statement in the Rose Garden last week, pointing to a very substantial potential increase in UK-US trade, makes it clear that we already have a special trade relationship and that there is real ambition on both sides of the Atlantic to embrace this after we leave the EU.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Let me come back to a point about UK-US trade. The Secretary of State will be well aware that so many US corporations have favoured UK membership of the EU because it has given them a bridging point in access to the EU. The US Chamber of Commerce in Europe, for example, has long favoured our staying in Europe. Does he not agree with that?

Dr Fox: A lot of US corporations that I speak to are very relaxed about what our relationship with the EU will be, not least when I explain to them the constitutional implications of Britain being in the EU. I say to my American colleagues, “How would you like to have a court that has authority over the Supreme Court but that sits in Ottawa or Mexico City and over which you have no control?” They then soon understand the constitutional reasons why many of us voted to leave the EU.

Vicky Ford rose——

Dr Fox: I will give way, but then I will make some progress.

Vicky Ford: My constituents are very concerned about animal welfare standards. Will the Secretary of State confirm that a future trade agreement with the US would not expose British farmers, who have our high animal welfare standards, to products from the US that may have been produced to a lower animal welfare standard?

Dr Fox: I have already said that we give high priority to those standards, including animal welfare standards. That has been an essential part of what the Government have set out. I know that it would be advantageous for the Opposition if that were not the Government’s position, and they would like it not to be our position so that they could attack it, but we want to maintain our high standards of consumer products, our high environmental standards, our high standard of labour law protection and our high animal welfare standards as part of our approach to global trade. I am not sure that I could be clearer but, no matter how often the Government restate
their position, there are those who do not want it to be our position and who want to interpret it in a completely different way.

The Asia Pacific region will be a key engine of global growth in the 21st century. That means that the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, or CPTPP, is a key interest for the United Kingdom as we leave the European Union. It is an extraordinarily global free trade agreement, spanning 11 countries on four continents: Japan, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Mexico, Chile and Peru. Those 11 countries are collectively home to around 500 million people, constituting some 13% of global GDP and more than £95 billion-worth of current UK trade. If the UK were to accede to it, we would be the second-largest economic member within the agreement, which would then cover a sixth, or 17%, of global GDP—nearly equal to the EU minus the UK.

There has been a positive response across CPTPP members to the Prime Minister’s announcement of the UK’s interest in potential accession. In particular, it has been welcomed by both the Japanese and Australian Prime Ministers.

**John Spellar**: I thank the Secretary of State for mentioning the welcome developments with regard to the partnership. I hope, though, that accession would not be at the expense of trying to move towards a free trade agreement with our great friends and allies in Australia.

**Dr Fox**: The right hon. Gentleman, as ever, anticipates my very next point. In addition to considering access to that comprehensive international trade agreement, we are at the same time moving forward with ambitious bilateral discussions for future free trade agreements with two of our closest friends and allies: Australia and New Zealand. Both countries are important strategic partners with which the United Kingdom has a deep shared heritage, built on the foundations of democratic values, security, language, our common legal system, culture and, of course, sport—although not all with equal success. It is because of our shared values and our firm belief in free and open trade that we want to strike cutting-edge free trade agreements with Australia and New Zealand, seeking to go further than CPTPP—indeed, further than any FTA ever before—in areas of shared ambition such as services and digital.

Many UK businesses already view Australia and New Zealand as an attractive base for their regional operations, and their proximity to Asia makes them excellent partners for UK firms in a region that stands to deliver nearly two thirds of global growth to 2030. Unlike the EU, Australia and New Zealand have trade agreements with the world’s second largest economy, China.

**Mary Glindon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): The Australian Trade Minister has said that other countries in the Asia Pacific region would be considered before us for membership of the trans-Pacific partnership, because we are not in that region. How does the Secretary of State feel about that? Does it dint his confidence at all about any agreements we could reach?

**Dr Fox**: No. The countries in the CPTPP have been quite clear that they want to finish the ratification process for the 11 countries that are already in the partnership before they consider potential new entrant countries. They have yet to decide whether they want to consider individual countries or to group countries in a timetable for accession. We have simply made it clear that we have an ambition to join the partnership. We have a long way to go in determining what that would look like in respect of both timescale and content.

I am delighted to report that both Australia and New Zealand have shown strong political will to negotiate such agreements. Australia is the 13th largest global economy and has been a flourishing nation in recent times, with an excellent record on GDP growth, and trade already worth some £15 billion per year.

The UK is the second largest investor in Australia while Britain is the second largest destination for Australian overseas investment. Our countries established the UK-Australia trade working group in September 2016 and since that time it has met regularly to lay the foundations for future FTA negotiations in addition to discussing wider trade issues of shared interest. I believe that we can look forward to those discussions with confidence.

Similarly, New Zealand and the United Kingdom enjoy extremely close economic ties. The UK is New Zealand’s largest export market in the European Union. New Zealand exports more goods to the UK than to Germany, France and Italy combined. We are also the largest EU investor in New Zealand. The UK and New Zealand are both ranked in the top 10 countries for ease of doing business and we already boast a strong trade relationship, with UK-New Zealand trade worth around £2.8 billion.

The UK-New Zealand trade policy dialogue has been working since September 2016 to determine how we further strengthen our trade and investment relationship and to prepare the groundwork for the launch of bilateral FTA negotiations. An FTA with New Zealand would be an opportunity to set an ambitious precedent for future agreements and to build our relationship with a key ally in multilateral forums. It will give us the opportunity to pioneer modern and enduring trade rules, to update our global rulebook and to identify where we can collaborate to promote free, fair, rules-based trade in markets around the world.

Free trade agreements also give the United Kingdom the opportunity to design new modern trading rules that play to our unique strengths. To ensure that any future FTA works for the whole of the UK, the Government have sought views from a broad range of stakeholders from all parts of the UK. The Government’s proposal, published last year, set out our approach to pursuing future FTAs collaboratively by engaging the widest range of stakeholder groups. We are committed to an inclusive and transparent trade policy that benefits the whole of the UK.

We are also creating a new strategic trade advisory group, which will advise Department of International Trade Ministers and trade negotiators on trade policy as we move forward. The group will be co-chaired by the Minister for Trade Policy and we are now finalising the selection process for membership. I will shortly write to the successful candidates, with an announcement to follow. This group is composed of core members, representing a diverse range of interests and expertise,
drawn from different groups—from business and the trade unions to consumers and non-governmental organisations among others—but all with an interest in our future trade policy and its impact on the full spectrum of issues facing the UK, from the workplace to consumer choice and the environment. The membership of this group, with its balance of interests and representation from across the UK, is designed to allow the Government to harness advice, insight and evidence from a cross-section of experienced voices already actively involved in trade-related issues.

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. Let me go back to the issues around Australia—as an Australian this area is of particular interest to me. The Japan-Australia economic partnership agreement took seven years from start to finish to establish. How long does the Secretary of State estimate it will take to establish a similar agreement with Australia?

**Dr Fox:** At the other end of the scale, the Australia-US trade agreement was an extremely short one to negotiate. So where there are compatible economies, it is possible to do that. I spoke to my Australian counterpart yesterday, and we hope that, given the openness of our economies and their compatibility in terms of shape, we will be able to conclude an agreement as soon as possible. There is no way, in advance of a negotiation, to say how long it will take. At the beginning of this process, our Australian colleagues are likely to be involved in a general election, which may mean that it will be slightly later when we can get into the process, but I hope to be able to conduct bipartisan negotiations with them to ensure that we can make progress as quickly as possible, which is in our mutual interest.

On 20 July 2018, we launched four online public consultations, providing the public with an opportunity to give their views on potential future trade agreements with the US, Australia and New Zealand and on accession to the CPTPP. All four consultations were open for 14 weeks—two weeks longer than the EU’s trade agreement consultations—and collectively attracted more than 600,000 responses, making it one of the largest consultation exercises ever run by the UK Government.

Alongside the consultations, we ran 12 events across the different regions and nations of the UK to seek their views on how prospective trade agreements could support prosperity and growth. The evidence provided in the responses to those consultations will inform the Government’s overall approach to our future trading relationship with these countries, including our approach to negotiating any trade agreements. Decisions made as a result of the consultations will be published before potential negotiations start.

This is the first time that the United Kingdom has consulted on potential future trade agreements independently. The volume of responses across all four consultations, run simultaneously, means that it is only right that we take time to consider the responses and the views of this House in detail. While there are many other markets that the UK will look to for new agreements, our shared values and our strength of trade with the US, Australia and New Zealand make them the right places on which to focus our initial attention, alongside our interest in potentially negotiating accession to the CPTPP.

Let me turn to future scrutiny of our free trade agreements—a topic that has received much discussion in both Houses, including through the inquiry co-ordinated by the International Trade Committee and the published response.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Let me provide a little extra scrutiny. The Secretary of State has talked a lot about trade policy and trade agreements, but these are very different from trade; trade is a different thing. I am thinking about my constituency, where there are guys who travel to the European continent on a weekly rotation basis with lorries containing live shellfish. Now, if we have trade agreements with New Zealand, it is not so easy to drive there on a weekly rotation with a lorry of live shellfish. These guys would also face snarl-ups and there would not be the openness that there currently is to access the French, Spanish, Italian and German markets. How will the interface between trade, trade policies and trade agreements actually work in practice for lorry drivers of shellfish? That is what these people need to know.

**Dr Fox:** The mechanics of the market become immaterial if there is no market to sell into. We are looking to ensure that UK producers have increased market access so they can trade more, sell more of their products and make more profit, which enables us to employ more people. That is what the whole concept of free trade is about. The hon. Gentleman is quite right that the mechanics at borders need to be ensured—not only in the United Kingdom, but in many of the other countries that we are selling into. That is what the trade facilitation agreement that we signed last year was all about. There has to be an improvement in global trading mechanics, including through using new technologies.

The Government are committed to the established principle that Parliament must be able to scrutinise trade agreements at the beginning, throughout and at the end of negotiations. We must have a mechanism that balances real and meaningful scrutiny with the need to maintain the greatest possible security for sensitive negotiating positions and potentially market-sensitive data. I am grateful to Members on both sides of the House for their encouragement and the private conversations that we have been able to have on this issue. The Government are considering how best to balance these elements and I will bring forward further proposals very shortly, not least because we need this for the Trade Bill to make progress on Report in the other place. We will of course take account of views expressed on the subject in this debate.

As we leave the European Union, the United Kingdom will have the opportunity to negotiate, sign and ratify free trade agreements during the implementation period. Working with like-minded partners such as Australia and New Zealand in bilateral agreements and adding our weight to the CPTPP—a modern and ambitious agreement—alongside an agreement with the largest and one of the most innovative countries in the world, the United States, will allow the United Kingdom to take advantage of the opportunities that leaving the European Union affords. This will allow us both to break down barriers that exist with our established partners, and to adapt to the momentous changes taking place in global trading patterns and the growth of the global economy.
Across the world, new markets are emerging that will provide golden opportunities for British goods and services, and it is right that the Government seek out like-minded partners to build the relationships and trading environments that will best maximise those opportunities for the benefit of the United Kingdom and the wider world.

12.14 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): There is a saying that the longest journey begins with the first step. I have always thought that very foolish. Surely the longest journey begins with deciding upon one’s destination. Without a destination, one is simply wandering about aimlessly. Of course, the other part of key journey planning is knowing what we want to do when we get there. Well, it seems to me that today’s debate shows that, when it comes to trade, the Secretary of State has identified the countries that he wants to visit—New Zealand, Australia and the United States—but that he is not really sure what he wants to do when he gets there.

The Secretary of State must persuade the House today that he has a clear itinerary and agenda. What are his objectives in securing these new trade agreements? What are the attack sectors in the markets that he has particularly identified as ones where we need to secure liberalisation and access for our suppliers and exporters? Which are the defensive sectors in our own markets that these other countries may seek to attack in response? What are the measures that he is proposing to use to defend those sectors in the UK?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) intervened on the Secretary of State to elicit a clear statement of his firm intention to safeguard our NHS. Perhaps the Secretary of State would confirm that he was not actually quoting from the CETA, but from its non-legally binding interpretive side document. What sacrifices is he prepared to make in the negotiations from its non-legally binding interpretive side document.

All Members in this House should be concerned about that. The point that my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland said, as the Secretary of State mentioned, that there was no imputation that this decision was made as a result of Brexit, but there was a clear indication that it was as a result of Japan now being able to import tariff-free to Europe—including the UK, but the whole 28 member states. At the point when this Government should have been making representations during the negotiations on that agreement, they were not doing so.

Dr Fox: The Labour party’s position is that it would be inside the customs union, where it would inherit the very agreements it says it does not like—did not vote for CETA and it does not like the Japan economic partnership agreement. It would not only be bound by those agreements but would have no say in any future policy because it would be applied by the EU through the customs union.

Barry Gardiner: It is always the way with the Secretary of State: when he sees that a valid point has been made and that he is vulnerable to it, he tries to go on the attack. It does not work. It is a pathetic response when he knows and should, with some humility, accept that the proper impact assessments were never made.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that there is some concern among Japanese car manufacturers about whether the US will end up imposing tariffs on EU products and that that might make exports from the EU to the US very uncompetitive? Is that not potentially a much better reason why, in this case, sad though it is of course, they are consolidating low-volume production models back to Japan?

Barry Gardiner: I have a fair point, and I will address it because he has done so in an open spirit. It could well be the case that the risk of America doing as he has suggested could have had that impact. I think he will concede that it is more likely to have been the case in the high-value sectors of our automotive industry, such as Jaguar Land Rover, where we export prestige vehicles to the United States, than in the bulk sector—the Nissans, Hondas and Toyotas that form the bulk of our domestic production and of our exports to Europe. He is partially right. It could well have affected their decision making, but it is more likely to have been at the high end of the market than the low.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I have a philosophical question. There are two schools of thought regarding what is to blame for the Honda situation. It is either Brexit and the anticipation of trouble at the borders either now or in 21 months’ time as the Prime Minister kicks the can down the road and we leave the customs union and the single market; or, as the hon. Gentleman has just postulated, it is the EU-Japan free trade agreement. If it is the latter, is it not negligent for a country within the EU not to raise this issue as a defensive interest and ensure that this situation does not happen? It would seem to be extreme UK negligence for a country within the EU to have burned its car industry on the basis of getting a free trade agreement.

Barry Gardiner: The hon. Gentleman makes two distinct points. Of course, he is right to talk about the impact of Brexit on the automotive sector in the UK. All Members in this House should be concerned about that. The point that my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland quite rightly made was that Honda said, as the Secretary of State mentioned, that there was no imputation that this decision was made as a result of Brexit, but there was a clear indication that it was as a result of Japan now being able to import tariff-free to Europe—including the UK, but the whole 28 member states. At the point when this Government should have been making representations during the negotiations on that agreement, they were not doing so.
Geraint Davies: Does my hon. Friend think it is a cruel irony that Margaret Thatcher was instrumental in creating the single market and getting Japanese car companies to come here as a platform to access that market? The EU-Japan trade deal is one of the reasons they have gone there. The other imperative is that, had we not been Brexitting, those car manufacturers would in all probability stay in the EU, in Britain, where they are already. Given that car workers who voted to leave are now finding that they voted to lose their jobs, should they not have a final say on whether we leave at all? They certainly did not vote to lose their jobs. It is completely farcical.

Barry Gardiner: My hon. Friend tempts me into a discussion about Brexit, but I am sure that if I were to be tempted, Madam Deputy Speaker, you would be on my case in a flash, urging me to deal with the matter of future free trade agreements instead.

This debate was originally promised at the last International Trade oral questions on 7 February, but anyone reading Hansard will not have been blind to the fact that the commitment was made as a response to an entirely different question. We did not ask for a general debate on putting trade deals with specific countries. What was asked was when the Government would bring forward a debate about the scrutiny of trade deals. Even if the Secretary of State has not yet got round to reading my eight-page letter of 21 January on the subject—there are many copies on this side of the House if he wants a spare—he cannot have been unaware of the matter, because, to his embarrassment, the Trade Bill’s progress in another place has been delayed as the Government lost a crucial vote.

Their lordships required the Government to set out their proposals for the process, the consultation, the mandate and scrutiny of making international trade agreements in the first place, including:

“Roles for Parliament and the devolved legislatures and Administrations in relation to both a negotiating mandate and a final agreement.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 21 January 2019; Vol. 795, c.506.]

The House will note that no such proposals have yet been brought forward, so perhaps the Secretary of State will tell us what progress he has made in this respect and when he intends to introduce such a debate.

Today’s debate certainly cannot be considered to constitute that important discussion. It is a general debate on a Thursday, in a week that was intended to be recess, talking about potential agreements before Parliament has even debated the whole process of consultation, impact assessment, negotiating mandate, parliamentary debate, transparency of negotiation, ratification and subsequent review and periodic appraisal that should constitute a framework within which the Government intend to bring such agreements into being.

Furthermore, people watching today’s debate will be incredulous that, given that just last week the Secretary of State was forced to come to this House and admit that he had thus far failed to replicate the 40-odd trade agreements that he promised would be ready to sign one second after midnight after Brexit, last week only five had been agreed, nine were off track, 19 were significantly off track, four were said to be impossible to complete by 29 March and two were not even being negotiated. If there has been progress since then, I will happily give way to the Secretary of State if he wishes to advise the House. No. In that case, I take it that his silence is an acceptance that that is the state of play of the agreements that we currently have. Indeed, the fact that we are instead discussing a host of entirely new trade agreements when we have yet to secure trade continuation with all the countries with which we already enjoy a trade agreement by way of our EU membership rather calls into question the Government’s priorities at a time when businesses are screaming for certainty, clarity and continuity.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the shadow Secretary of State for giving way and for the excellent speech that he is making. When I asked the Secretary of State earlier whether, given the different sizes of the UK market and the EU market, the UK could succeed in negotiating a better deal than the EU, his response was that the EU had yet to negotiate a deal, seeming to imply that no deal could not be worse than a bad deal that he might negotiate. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is contradictory to the Brexiters’ position, and that a bad deal for us negotiated with the United States of America could have a really devastating impact on our agriculture and automotive trades specifically?

Barry Gardiner: I certainly do agree with my hon. Friend. Some in the Secretary of State’s party have been claiming that no deal would be better than a bad deal. Others have been claiming that going on to no deal would be no problem at all, that we would be trading on WTO terms. I am sure that she also wonders, if working on WTO terms is as good as those Conservative Members believe it to be, what the green sunlit uplands are that the Secretary of State is speaking about in terms of getting rid of the WTO terms in all these new trade agreements. I think he was the one who referred to having it both ways earlier, but it rather seems to me as if he is doing just that.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The Secretary of State’s reference to the sunny uplands of post-Brexit trade rather prompts the question why the Government Benches are not a little fuller today. Would my hon. Friend like to comment?

Barry Gardiner: There is no need for me to comment. The empty Benches are screaming my hon. Friend’s point louder than I could amplify it.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Barry Gardiner: I will make a little progress.

The Government’s primary focus must be securing a deal with the EU, which accounts for 44% of all our exports. The Department for International Trade’s primary focus must be to secure the so-called roll-over agreements—a promise repeatedly made by the Secretary of State, which he has now only 35 more days to deliver. Thousands of businesses depend on the ability to continue to operate their just-in-time supply chains, and thousands of jobs in this country depend upon the same.

Questions have repeatedly been asked of the Government’s capacity to handle even the volume of work required to get these deals over the line—more so given the UK’s relative lack of trade negotiation experience after some 40 years of not being able so to do under the
EU’s common commercial policy—yet today’s debate is to consider a number of potential new free trade agreements with Australia, New Zealand and the United States, and the potential accession of the UK to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership.

The Opposition want to see progressive, positive trade agreements that benefit the UK, help to grow our export potential and further enhance the UK’s attractiveness as a destination for investment, but we have been clear from the outset that the priority must be securing a deal with the EU and ensuring continuity of trade for British business, including with respect to trade agreements that the EU has with third countries. There is a good reason for that, which is that any major trading partner will want to know what trading arrangements we have with the EU before concluding a trade agreement with us in future. That seems self-evident. If we are not able to conclude the free trade agreement with the EU, perhaps right into the transition period, that will substantially impair our ability to secure a new trade agreement with any of the three countries that we are considering today.

The Secretary of State is like a general who fails to secure his rear before charging off in search of a new enemy to fight, but that is not his only embarrassment. The letter written to the Prime Minister this week by the chief executive of the British Ceramic Confederation is excoriating about the total lack of understanding displayed by the Secretary of State of the impact of the proposals he favours for a move to zero tariffs in as many areas as possible. The chief executive sets it out in surgical detail:

“Removing import tariffs gives a leg up to foreign competitors, thus threatening British manufacturing jobs.”

She continues:

“Our manufacturers would still be paying other countries’ import tariffs including, in the event of no deal, EU MFNs and other countries’ MFNs where we will have just lost our preferential access. The net effect across all sectors could be to increase imports at the same time as exports are being put under pressure with a resulting adverse effect on balance of payments.

No tariffs makes the UK’s emerging trade remedies system ineffective from the outset by lowering the cumulative duty paid on the distorted imports, for example, by 12% in the case of dumped Chinese tableware.

It would weaken the UK’s hand in making free trade deals with other countries. If we give away access to Britain for free, why would anyone need to do a trade deal with us?”

Helen Goodman: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Barry Gardiner: I will, but my hon. Friend has promoted me.

Helen Goodman: I am grateful; my hon. Friend is making an exceptionally important point. I have had the ceramics industry in touch with me because I have a brick factory, Wienerberger, in my constituency. Zero tariffs would also be catastrophic for farmers. Does he not agree that if the Secretary of State is planning to bring forward a statutory instrument in this form next week, he should have had the decency to announce it at the Dispatch Box today?

Barry Gardiner: I do not know whether my hon. Friend was in the Chamber just prior to the debate starting, but I raised a point of order with Mr Speaker—obviously, you were not here, Madam Deputy Speaker—to say that the fourth written statement due to be laid before the House today had not been made available prior to this debate. I thought that was a great shame. Mr Speaker expressed his view that, of course, these things sometimes happen inadvertently. If it was inadvertent, he deprecated it. But of course, there is a pattern here, and my hon. Friend is right to point to that pattern. I share her hope that we will not find next week that there are further documents that either would have been vital for today’s debate or are being produced at exactly the wrong point for Parliament to have the maximum opportunity to scrutinise what the Government are doing.

The British Ceramic Confederation letter continues:

“Some members thought if we are importing, say, a raw material, that was not manufactured or quarried in the UK a liberalisation might be acceptable. Our members are clear this should be an exception rather than a general rule and comprehensive consultation would be needed.”

Of course, the chief executive rightly also points out that most other sectors have not had the same level of discussion with officials that ceramics has had, and so are largely unprepared for the potential impact of a unilateral snap move to zero most favoured nation tariff rates. There has been no comprehensive formal consultation, no comprehensive impact assessment and no prolonged transition proposed. Such a significant decision would have far-reaching consequences for the UK economy and would demand full parliamentary scrutiny.

Consultation, impact assessments and parliamentary scrutiny—those are all the things their lordships are still waiting for before returning the Trade Bill to this House, and all the things this debate ought to have been about, rather than putative future agreements whose working groups have been mired in secrecy and which the Secretary of State sees as his vanity project of restoring the Anglophone.

The letter continues:

“In a no deal Brexit, already highly damaging and disruptive for our sector, the shock of zero tariffs would be devastating, affecting businesses, jobs and communities across the country as well as affecting UK manufacturing more generally.”

Of course, it is not just the ceramics industry that is horrified by the Secretary of State’s proposals. The Manufacturing Trade Remedies Alliance, which is made up of eight national trade associations, as well as three trade unions, only yesterday put out an equally strong press release damning the folly of a wholesale reduction to zero tariffs, saying that

“the move could ruin the home market for many sectors. Increased imports would flood the market, jeopardising tens of thousands of jobs and fundamentally changing the British economy.”

Ian Cranshaw, head of international trade at the Chemical Industries Association, said:

“The idea of a new tariff regime is something which should be subject to proper consultation. With less than 40 days to Brexit, British manufacturers already dealing with Brexit uncertainties are now having to assess how their business might be impacted by an increase in non-EU competition should the government remove MFN tariffs on key chemical products.”

Finally, Jude Brimble, GMB national secretary, said:

“Zero tariffs in the event of a no-deal Brexit is a short-sighted move. While it may lower prices in the short term, it will ultimately put thousands of British manufacturing jobs at risk.”

Dr Fox: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
Barry Gardiner: In a moment. Jude Brimble continued:

“Manufacturers are often based in the heart of their communities and supporting many more indirect and supply chain jobs.

Zero tariffs could destroy the proud history of making and manufacturing”

in this country.

Is this really what the Secretary of State intends? I will happily give way to him now if he will rise to confirm that he has abandoned that folly.

Dr Fox: The need to produce a new tariff policy would be required only in a no-deal scenario. I voted for there to be a deal to avoid that—will the hon. Gentleman?

Barry Gardiner: I have two points. First, of course I will vote for a deal, but I will not vote for the Secretary of State’s bad deal. That is why we have put forward our own proposals for a good deal that would protect manufacturing in this country. Secondly, he says that new tariffs will be necessary only if there is no deal. Why then have he and his departmental officials been talking to industry about his proposals for zero tariffs? I will very happily give way if he will come back to the Dispatch Box and explain that. [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman cannot sit down. He has to keep going.

Barry Gardiner: I was seeking an intervention, Madam Deputy Speaker.

According to the Office for National Statistics, Australia was our 16th biggest export market over the past 20 years, with machinery, Scotch whisky and particularly motor vehicles being among our primary exports. House of Commons Library data suggests that we exported £10.8 billion of our goods and services to Australia in 2017, representing 1.8% of our total exports. In turn, we are Australia’s primary EU market, with primary imports consisting of metals, including precious metals, as well as gems, wine and agricultural products.

The UK Government have recently announced that a UK-Australia mutual recognition agreement has been agreed alongside an agreement on trade in wine. [Interruption.] This is not a glass of Australian wine that I am drinking. That agreement is intended to replicate the terms of existing agreements between Australia and the EU. Australia maintains a number of trade co-operation agreements with the EU, and the current state of play on the UK Government’s progress in rolling over these agreements remains unclear. Although Australia does not currently have a free trade agreement in place with the EU, discussions towards an agreement began last June. Australia has repeatedly made it clear that the EU agreement remains its priority agreement, and that any trade agreement with the UK will not be possible until Brexit is settled.

The European Parliament approved the negotiating mandate for the trade agreement, but noted that there must be “special treatment for some sensitive agricultural products, for example, through tariff-rate quotas or transition periods, and a request that consideration should be given to the exclusion of the most sensitive sectors; and the preservation of governments’ right to regulate with a view to achieving legitimate policy objectives.”

Furthermore, the European Parliament called on the Commission “to conduct negotiations as transparently as possible”, and said that “the role of the Parliament should be strengthened at every stage of the FTA negotiations.”

I ask the Secretary of State whether the UK Government will be adopting the same mandate in the negotiations. Where they are not adopting the same mandate as the EU-Australia agreement, will he set out precisely where it will differ?

In the same year, our exports to New Zealand totalled £1.5 billion, representing 0.2% of our total exports. The ONS statistics for the period show that New Zealand was our 54th biggest export market over the past 20 years. Again, our biggest goods exports to New Zealand were primarily motor vehicles and machinery, with agricultural products and wine constituting some of our major imports. The US was our primary export destination in that period, and of course it continues to be our biggest trading partner, discounting the EU. We record a trade surplus with each of these countries, so it would be fair to imagine that it is in their interests to ensure that any future trade agreement grows their own export base.

The EU and New Zealand also commenced negotiations towards a free trade agreement last year, with the mandate again being presented for a vote in the plenary of the European Parliament. Concerns were raised about the impact of agri-food imports on farmers, and the European Parliament requested “that due consideration should be given, for instance, either to the inclusion in the FTAs of transitional periods or appropriate quotas, or to the exclusion of commitments in the most sensitive sectors.”

It said that the negotiations should seek to ensure “the inclusion of a specific chapter devoted to generating business opportunities for micro-enterprises and SMEs; special treatment for some sensitive agricultural products, for example, through tariff-rate quotas or transition periods, and a request that consideration should be given to the exclusion of the most sensitive sectors; and the preservation of governments’ right to regulate with a view to achieving legitimate policy objectives.”

The European Parliament called on the Commission “to conduct negotiations as transparently as possible,” and MEPs stressed that “the role of the Parliament should be strengthened at every stage of the FTA negotiations.”

Again, I ask the Secretary of State whether, in pursuing the trade agreement with New Zealand, he will be adopting a mandate that is similar to the one already adopted by the EU. If not, will he now set out precisely where it will differ?

With that in mind, we must be clear about what the opportunities and threats are in respect of further liberalisation of trade with these countries by way of a free trade agreement. It would therefore have been helpful had the Government set out their priorities for each of the trade agreements we are talking about. I had hoped that this would be an opportunity for the Secretary of State to come to the House and do precisely that—to set out the sectors of attack, the sectors of defence and exactly what trade-offs he might foresee.

The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) and his colleague who speaks on trade for the SNP, the hon. Member for Dundee East
or of our ongoing capacity to export motor vehicles to
it would be helpful to know what assessment the
our largest goods exports to Australia and New Zealand,
For example, given that motor vehicle exports make up
figures and statistics, but the Secretary of State did not
do so.

What impact assessments have the Government done
on the specific rises in GDP and volume of trade that
the UK seeks to secure from the agreements his working
groups have been working towards? With those assessments
we might be able to hold him to account in the future.
For example, given that motor vehicle exports make up
our largest goods exports to Australia and New Zealand,
it would be helpful to know what assessment the
Government have made of recent market developments,
or of our ongoing capacity to export motor vehicles to
those countries.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I hesitate to intervene to
make a discordant point, because the hon. Gentleman
was being generous. However, on balance I think
I should say that if we have a customs union only and are
not in the single market, which is the Labour party’s
policy, that itself will probably mean a hit to GDP of
about 4%. If we need about 30 agreements at 6%, then
we would need about 20 similar agreements—20-ish
such American agreements—to make up for the damage
his policy would bring in loss of trade to the European
Union.

Barry Gardiner: Yes, indeed. That is why I have
consistently said that I believe that Brexit will do economic
damage to this country. Unlike the hon. Gentleman,
however, I believe in democracy. I believe that, after the
referendum took place, this Parliament had an obligation
to do what the British people said we should do.

There is also the question of geography to overcome,
with the traditional trend towards trade being with
one’s nearest geographical neighbours. That is called
trade gravity. While we may share a common history,
have cultural relationships and even share a legal system—in
trade terms, that is critical and very helpful—but we can
be no avoiding the significant logistical challenges of
shipping goods right around the world to the Pacific. It
is worth our considering that these countries are all
major agri-food producers and exporter nations, with
Australia and New Zealand being members of the
Cairns Group bloc at the WTO.

The Cairns Group is an interest group committed to
the abolition of agricultural subsidies and the elimination
of tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade for their agricultural
exports. Other members include Canada, Chile, Malaysia,
Peru and Vietnam, which, alongside Australia and New
Zealand, make up of seven of the 11 CPTPP countries
and seven of the 19 Cairns Group members. There may
well be potential to grow our exports to those markets,
and the ask on their side is clear. It goes precisely to part
of the question posed earlier by my hon. Friend the
Member for Bishop Auckland.

The ask on their side is clear: “Open up your markets
to our food products.” The impact on our domestic
agricultural sector could be substantial as our farmers
find themselves struggling to compete with an influx of
cheaper food products.

The Secretary of State has repeatedly welcomed the
perceived benefit to UK consumers of cheaper New
Zealand lamb, and today he again dismissed—I was
glad to hear him be so robust—safety concerns over
things such as GMO foods or chlorine-washed chicken
from the United States. In response to one of his
colleagues, he said that there will be no lowering of
either sanitary or phytosanitary standards or of animal
health and welfare regulations in this country. I welcome
that, and we will hold him to it.

If a trade agreement between our countries requires
the removal of all tariffs on such goods and the abolition
of tariff rate quotas, that could well mean the end of
our livestock and poultry sectors. We already know that
there has been a big push by the agricultural lobby in
those respective countries to seek greater market
liberalisation, and some of those countries, including
New Zealand and the United States, have slowed the
progress of our accession to the Government procurement
agreement. It is likely that some countries have also
voiced objections to the lodging of our WTO schedules
and that the Government have had to agree to a number
of future concessions to smooth the road. Again, I
would happily give way to the Secretary of State if he
wanted to come to the Dispatch Box and deny that is
the case, or to set out any concessions or commitments
he may have given, but he appears unwilling to do so.

The farming sector in this country is extremely nervous
about the impact on its ongoing viability should the
UK open up market access for imported agri-food,
particularly from the United States. Concerns over
production standards, animal welfare, sanitary and
phytosanitary standards have not been put to rest by
the Environment Secretary’s repeated assurances that
our domestic standards will not be lowered. At no point
have the Government ruled out allowing access to our
markets for goods produced to lower standards than
our own. Indeed, the latest rumour is that the Government
will seek to counter the impact of the importation of
such goods with tariffs. The Secretary of State did not
rule that out in his earlier remarks—again, I would give
way to him if he sought to intervene, but he does not.

Where a trade agreement is in place, such tariffs are
likely to be removed and therefore will do nothing to
defend our farmers from cheaper imports from those
countries. The argument that that will benefit consumers
must be demonstrated credibly, with a proper impact
assessment and economic modelling that fully considers
the effect on our domestic producers and jobs in that
sector. Lower prices will not benefit consumers who
find themselves out of a job as a consequence of our
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sector. Lower prices will not benefit consumers who
find themselves out of a job as a consequence of our

discussions about our relationship with the EU post Brexit. It is not only our farming sector that is concerned about the impact of those agreements. Last week, we saw reports that the US is planning to block or restrict access for UK producers to Government procurement contracts in the United States under the terms of any potential trade agreement. Indeed, President Trump has been abundantly clear with his America first agenda that he will not countenance any trade agreement that he views as being counter to American interests—namely, domestic protectionism and ensuring a US trade surplus with trading partners.

President Trump has publicly stated that the US is “losing billions of dollars on trade” and would find a trade war “easy to win”. Such rhetoric should be alarming to British businesses as Trump is clearly not out to do a good deal for us. President Trump stands on an America first platform and believes that by forcing trade partners into submission and competitor companies out of business, he can restore manufacturing in the United States. In truth, those tariffs are hurting US businesses who participate in global supply chains and face countervailing tariffs overseas. As part of his trade war, President Trump has also refused to endorse nominations to the WTO appellate body, thus blocking the progress of dispute resolutions and the enforcement of the rules-based system. We should be very wary of doing a trade deal if we cannot seek enforcement at the WTO for any actions taken in violation of those rules by another country, and the US is blocking that possibility.

A recent report by a number of right-wing think-tanks—many linked to the Secretary of State, who is understood to favour the report—suggested that a US-UK free trade agreement should “enshrine” the “negative list” approach to liberalisation across goods, services, investment and Government procurement, which is conducive to faster, broader and deeper economic integration. The Secretary of State will know that the negative list system, which has been adopted in some trade agreements that we have already entered into, means that future sectors—some of which we cannot currently even conceive—would automatically be liberalised, no matter what the public policy consequences would be. That is extremely dangerous, and it would be good if the Secretary of State assured the House that when he considers future trade agreements, he is mindful of that point and would not wish to have a negative list system that could expose us in that way.

The Secretary of State has established a number of trade working groups, including with Australia in 2016, New Zealand in 2017, and the US in July 2017. To date, we have precisely no information about what has been discussed in those working groups, what progress has been made towards a future trade agreement with those nations, what assurances have been sought and concessions agreed, or what representations have been made on those issues. The Secretary of State has made no secret of his desire to fast-track these agreements and have them ready to go after the UK withdraws from the EU, but it is not at all clear that his counterparts share quite the same ambitions.

Australia has repeatedly stated that its priority is securing a trade agreement with the EU, and the American President has suggested that a trade deal with the US is all but impossible with the Government’s preferred approach to Brexit, as set out in the Prime Minister’s proposed deal. Just this week, Simon Birmingham, Australia’s Minister for Trade, Tourism and Investment, poured cold water over any idea that the UK could quickly accede to the CPTPP noting “obviously it’s a statement of fact that the UK is not within the Pacific.”

[Interruption.] That is not me; that was Simon Birmingham. He went on to say that “some of the other TPP members would think that there are some nations within the Asia Pacific region who might be earlier starters in terms of coming in.”

Does the Secretary of State believe that he can confidently conclude these agreements with the same speed and ease with which he promised he would secure the roll-over agreements?

Has the Secretary of State had conversations with CPTPP member countries about the UK’s accession to that agreement, and what commitments has he received or given in respect of the same? He will no doubt be aware that New Zealand has sought, through a series of side letters with other members of that agreement, to disapply the investor-state dispute settlement provisions of that agreement. I would be delighted if the Secretary of State said that he is going to do the same. Will the UK be seeking ISDS provisions in trade agreements with Australia, New Zealand and the United States, despite the fact that, as he said, the Secretary of State believes they should not be necessary “under systems such as the UK’s”?—[Official Report, 7 February 2019, Vol. 654, c. 385.]

Many colleagues will be extremely concerned that a number of those issues will already have been discussed privately through the trade working groups and that assurances and commitments may already have been exchanged. We are here debating potential agreements that may well already be loosely drafted. This debate can hardly be considered to be a meaningful say from Parliament on the terms of those trade agreements. The Government’s approach to trade agreements has been little more than warm words and window dressing. Public consultations were opened by way of an online survey on the Department’s website on July 2018 and have since closed, but we have yet to have any report on the findings of those consultations.

This approach does not constitute a proper consultation and oversight framework that ensures the best agreement possible for the entire country as we withdraw from the European Union. Key stakeholders are concerned that they are being invited to give views merely as a tick-box exercise, with no real say on helping to shape trade talks and with no capacity to feed back on any complications that concessions during negotiations may present. That is why my party has repeatedly called for a proper consultation structure that would require formal engagement with affected stakeholders, civil society, trade unions and the devolved nations.

Such a process must also ensure that Parliament has a role in the approval of mandates, impact assessments and reviews of trade agreements. The Government voted down every amendment to the Trade Bill to that effect. We have also been clear that consultation alone is not enough. A comprehensive, independent sustainability impact assessment needs to be conducted in advance of the launch of new trade and investment negotiations to establish the potential social, economic and environmental consequences for all sectors and regions of the UK.
To conclude, we in the Labour party would welcome trade agreements that grow our export base across all regions of the United Kingdom and that help maintain and elevate rights and standards. If the Secretary of State could show that these potential trade agreements could achieve those objectives, we would of course welcome them. However, we are extremely concerned at the lack of information presented to Parliament on the prospective benefits and on the potential threats to our domestic producers, which are clearly evident. The Government must ensure that proper assessments are carried out and must ensure that Parliament has a proper say in future trade agreements that are ultimately to be concluded between our nations.

1.2 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): As usual, I have a couple of declarations to make. First, I belong to the National Farmers Union, not as an active farmer but certainly as a member in this country. With my background that is to be expected. Secondly, as my accent has already made clear, I have dual nationality. I come from New Zealand and I have a New Zealand passport. I also have a UK passport and I have lived here longer than there. I am extremely supportive of what the Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) says, particularly when he talks about negotiations to join the TPP, and working on negotiations for a deal with Australia and New Zealand. Australia and New Zealand can teach us a number of things as we head into a field that they headed into as we went into the EU.

There are at least two relevant factors involved in the negotiations on going into the TPP. First, most people see Britain as an asset as a TPP partner. After all, free trade agreements are two-way—or perhaps I should say that they cut both ways. Secondly, as I have made clear, we almost certainly have at least two friends, two Commonwealth friends, who have been supportive for generations, even kith and kin. They will be supportive as we move towards the TPP.

When we went into the Common Market, New Zealand’s trade with this country teetered overnight from 90% to 50%, and then dwindled to 5%. It must find it a bit strange and have a wry smile that we want to go back. Fortunately, it is most likely to be helpful and positive to our interest, but equally, we must remember, with its own interests definitely in mind. After the crash of the New Zealand economy when we entered the then Common Market, New Zealand and Australia forged an aggressive export drive. They also shocked their economies into action. In New Zealand’s case, I remember the Prime Minister, a few years after that trade blow, explaining to one of our well known characters on the “Today” programme that it had lifted its trade export market to over 100 more countries. We need to watch that as we go out. There was a slight but not too serious hiccup between Australia and New Zealand when a small group of Australians suggested that New Zealand should become another state of Australia. That generated much antagonistic steam. In fact, the New Zealand Prime Minister at the time stated that

“Any New Zealander moving to Australia would increase the IQ of both countries.”

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Australia and Scotland has left the Chamber. [Laughter.]

The main export for New Zealand then and now is agriculture. New Zealand farming was radically shaken up very quickly. Farming subsidies were removed at a stroke overnight, but so were the restrictions. The freedom that gave those farmers made such a difference to them entering a really effective market. Farming became an industry. It became open, competitive and free market. Australia did much the same. They will be our competitors and partners both through our trade agreements and if we go into the TPP.

I find the thought of a Pacific link curious, because the only UK geographic link to the Pacific is the overseas territory of Pitcairn Island. As has been said, I understand that Simon Birmingham, the Australian Trade Minister, did not sound particularly enthusiastic—we heard a couple of quotes. Contrary to that, however, he has also said that Australia is ready to fast-track some sort of deal with the United Kingdom. New Zealand, on the TPP, was a little more confrontational. Commenting on New Zealand’s membership of the TPP, Catherine Beard, the executive director of ManufacturingNZ and ExportNZ, said:

“New Zealand would benefit from $222 million in tariff savings yearly.”

As an NFU member, I am also aware that she said:

“Agriculture is widely expected to be a big winner with kiwi fruit, beef, wine, dairy, forestry, and seafood products all expected to benefit from savings on tariffs and the chance to more easily make aggressive entries into foreign markets.”

That could be a warning for us. I think of that when I look round my Mole Valley farms. My constituency has a dairy farm that is supposed to be big. It has 350 cows. Mole Valley has sheep farms with perhaps 1,000 sheep, and some of those farms get 90% of their income from subsidies. These farms are tiny compared with New Zealand and Australian farms. Two dairy farms near where I lived as a youngster in New Zealand milk 1,500 and 2,500 cows, twice a day. The farm I came off in the middle of the South Island had 1,000 head of cattle, 1,000 head of deer and 23,000 lambing ewes. When they lambed we had 50,000 sheep. The land, the atmosphere and the weather resembles much of the hill country of Scotland. It is right up where “Lord of the Rings” was filmed.

We have nothing to compare with that here in the UK. The size and the power of the industry in New Zealand could shatter our farming. If we are going for free trade, we have to wake up. We have time. We can do something about it, but we have to give our farmers the chance to dramatically improve. There is protectionist talk of product care and standards matching ours. That is the correct approach, but it is the correct approach for food safety reasons, but not for protection because Australia and New Zealand meet those standards already.

Vineyards are another classic example. There are square miles of vineyards in New Zealand. You can stand on a high hill and see nothing but vineyards.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman talks about improvement. I just wonder what he means by that. Does he mean expansion and growth? When he talked about having 23,000 sheep, with 50,000 after lambing, my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) asked
me, “How many do you have?” I said 32—just 32. We are talking about a hugely different scale. Is he talking about farms in the UK getting bigger and amalgamating, and a whole change in the structure of UK farming?

Sir Paul Beresford: There is a list of ways in which we can look at that. Perhaps I can answer with an old story. I was upbraided by my farmers some time back and they finished with an anti-politician joke. I explained to them that the son of one of my Surrey farmers had gone out to New Zealand and had bought a farm the same size out there. When shearing time came around, he called up the shearing contractor and said, “Will you come and shear my sheep?” The contractor said, “I’ve got two gangs near you. One’s up the Waimakariri and they have 17,000 sheep to go, and the other ones can be with you next week. How many sheep have you got?” He said, “17.” The contractor said, “17,000?” He said, “No, no—17 sheep.” The contractor said, “Oh, are you English?” He said, “Yes.” The contractor said, “Are you from Surrey?” He said, “Yes.” The contractor said, “Right—you’re English, you’re from Surrey, and you have 17 sheep. Can you tell me their names?”

What I am getting at is that we have an opportunity—I will touch on this in a minute—to counteract that. Australia is a huge agricultural producer. The gross value of Australian farm products in 2016-17 was $60 billion. The Australians export about 77% of what they grow and produce. Fortunately, through the TPP and other arrangements, those two nations are pouring their products into Europe, China, the middle east and even the US, and they are not fulfilling their quotas. There is a real opportunity for us to improve our efficiency in farming and everything else, because Australia and New Zealand may well be looking for us to help them to fulfil those quotas, including, particularly, the quota for lamb meat going into the EU.

Chi Onwurah: I really appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s anecdotes about sheep farming. He talks about improvements in efficiency, but does he recognise that our landscape—I am thinking particularly about the landscape of Northumberland and County Durham and the beautiful landscape of the north of England—is driven by the scale of farming that we have now? Its beauty would be much affected and, in my view, much diminished by the kind of efficiency that we see in New Zealand farms.

Sir Paul Beresford: All I can suggest to the hon. Lady is that she gets disc two of “The Lord of the Rings”, and if she does not find that beautiful, she needs to go to Speessavers.

Chi Onwurah: I do not need to get disc two of “The Lord of the Rings”, because I already have it and have watched it on a number of occasions. There are different types of beauty; I am talking about the beauty of Northumberland. I appreciate the beauty of other countries, but I wish to retain the beauty of our gorgeous countryside.

Sir Paul Beresford: So would I, but I think it is quite possible to have some dramatic improvements in farming. Part of the reason for that is that, having left the EU, we will be able to have a bonfire of the rules and regulations that the EU has applied to farming. That would make a huge difference. Also—I say this to the Minister—if we are going to continue with farming subsidies, could they be paid on time and without, in the case of my farmers, my having to constantly badger the Department for the payments? We need a total rethink of the subsidies and regulations. We need to provide an opportunity for farmers to meet standards but not have to suffer from the regulations. If we do not do that, we will suffer from some of the gloom and doom that we heard from the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, except that we will have the help of our allies—Australia, New Zealand and most of the people in the TPP—because they will need us to help them to fulfil their portfolios. That will give us an opportunity to make sure that our farming is up to scratch and can meet standards. However, at the same time, as a few hon. Members have already said, free trade is double-edged.

1.14 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I start by agreeing with what the Secretary of State said about looking to have trade deals with developing, emerging and growing markets. That is absolutely right, whether the UK or the EU does it. He made big play of Australia and New Zealand, which we just heard about from the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford). Australia takes about 1% of the UK’s exported goods—half of what we sell to Turkey. New Zealand takes 0.1%—about the same as we sell to Algeria—so however important Australia and New Zealand are, they are not developing growth markets. They are mature, established markets.

The Secretary of State also spoke about being dictated to by the EU—I much prefer the language of “working together with our European partners”—and even that language tells us a great deal about where some of this is driven from. Of course, he made big play of a potential deal with the US. I visited the US last year with the Treasury Committee. We were told in no uncertain terms by anyone who spoke to us about trade that the UK would be required to put everything on the table and that the US would be required to put nothing on the table.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a great point about the demands made by countries such as the US. A lot of constituents are rightly worried that we will have to sacrifice such things as a public NHS to get a deal done with countries such as the United States. Does he agree that that is a clear and present threat?

Stewart Hosie: I am going to say more about the ISDS component—the arbitration competent—of these things later. I do not want the public sector to be impacted on in any way by trade globalisation with the US. If there is to be some deal cut, there is language that can be used—for example, that used to exempt military and intelligence operations. That should be included rather than the vague protections for the NHS that many of our constituents simply do not believe are robust enough.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): One of my constituents’ biggest fears is that private companies will be able to buy off parts of the NHS in future deals with the USA. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be catastrophic for our NHS to be sold off to the highest foreign bidder?
Stewart Hosie: I do. It was interesting to listen to what the Secretary of State said earlier. He laid out very clearly, to be fair, the component parts of the NHS that were kept by the state. I listened very carefully, but let me give an example of something that was not included: cleaning. People might say, “Big deal,” but in Scotland, when cleaning was contracted to the private sector, hospital-acquired infection rates went up. We then took a decision to bring back NHS cleaners, and hospital-acquired infection rates came down. Had that contract been won under the terms of one of these agreements, we could have been sued and challenged if we had tried to take a public health measure to return something as simple as cleaning from the private sector to the public sector. When it is considered on terms that people can understand—my hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this point—it demonstrates how, and I will give a few more examples later, public health concerns can be overridden by some of the provisions in these international trade deals.

I look at trade and the proposed deals that we are discussing today through four prisms: how they will affect the success of Scotland’s export businesses; how they will support the Scottish Government’s trade and investment strategy; by asking if the processes suggest we ensure that there is proper scrutiny of trade deals; and the attitude towards investor-state dispute settlement arrangements, which can give foreign companies special legal rights outwith our national legal systems. I think it is right that we look at trade through these four prisms.

Scotland’s exporting businesses—it is businesses, not Governments, that export—have done a remarkable job. Last year—I use these figures because they were immediately to hand—Scotland’s exports rose to £29 billion. That was 12% up on the previous year, the largest rise in any part of the UK. With imports at £24 billion, Scotland is a net exporter, which is a fantastic position for the economy to be in—a position that we should strive to retain but one which is put in jeopardy not just by a hard Tory no-deal Brexit, but by any form of Brexit, and that is the point. We hear about the Prime Minister’s deal, but that is only the transitional arrangement. It is not the deal we will have to cut to kick in in 20 months’ time, at the end of the transitional period; that is the bit the Government always seem to ignore.

I said it is businesses that export, not Government, and that is true, but Governments do and must support exporting companies. The Scottish Government’s trade and investment strategy is first class. It brings together trade, investment and the internationalisation of our economy. It defines our ambition and the importance of the “One Scotland” approach. It links to Scotland’s innovation and investment hubs. It tells us what our global opportunities are, and it supports global Scotland and our approach to boosting export performance. Anything the UK Government do should support that.

Although we can and do support trade, we do not negotiate our own deals or have a seat at the top table in the EU, which strikes the best trade deals currently. Until we do—this relates directly to any new deal—we demand a formal, statutory input to trade deals, including the ones being discussed today, at every stage of every trade deal, from setting the mandate for negotiations right through to implementation.

Angela Crawley: To pursue that point, the increasingly broad scope of modern trade agreements is such that often we will have to deal with a wide range of reserved and devolved policy areas. Does my hon. Friend agree that if the UK Government consider Scotland to be an equal partner in the Union, they must commit to allowing legislative consent in the Scottish Parliament for any deals that affect Scotland?

Stewart Hosie: Yes I do. That ties in directly to the powers the UK Government have seized over public procurement. In Scotland, we have a fantastic record of small and medium-sized enterprises winning public sector contracts. The Westminster figures are rather less compelling. We could lose that advantage because of what has happened in Westminster; equally, we could lose it if foreign companies were able to challenge the way in which we currently do our public procurement.

Trade deals need to be fair, not only to every partner in the UK but to every citizen. That means we cannot accept deals that allow secret investor dispute courts where taxpayers can be put on the hook or public services subjected to forced privatisation and competition in a one-way ratchet, limiting the ability of any Government to deliver services the way they feel is best for the benefit of their public, not for the profit of international businesses.

Even excluding the EU, many of the UK’s biggest trading partners already have or will soon have a free trade agreement with the UK via the EU, so it is unlikely—perhaps even impossible—that net trade with those countries could be increased as a result of the UK leaving the EU. It is far more likely, because the UK will be in a weakened position, that the terms of trade will be less advantageous, but even if they were not, any new FTAs would simply be filling the gaps in trade left behind, and that gap is likely to be very wide indeed.

I intervened on the Secretary of State to ask about the NIESR report published in 2017, which showed a 22% to 30% fall in total UK trade, depending on the type of Brexit. It also suggested a total rise in UK trade of about 2.6% from an FTA with the main English-speaking economies, and a similar rise with an FTA with the BRICS countries—Brazil, Russia, India and China and South Africa. That is nowhere near close to filling the trade gap that Brexit will cause. It is hard to believe that the deals being discussed today with the main English-speaking economies, plus the CPTPP deal, would do any better.

My key questions today are mainly about process. Current procedures are such that this could be the only opportunity MPs have to debate four major trade deals. That would be woefully inadequate. General debates, unaccompanied by objectives, strategies or impact assessments, and lacking a vote or the possibility of tabling amendments, do not provide adequate scrutiny.

Stewart Hosie: That demonstrates that it can be done and there is nothing to be afraid of. It is vital so that Scotland’s national interests, as well as those of Wales and Northern Ireland—all the devolved nations—are given equal weight to the needs and ambitions of exporting companies in London and the south-east.
and could lead to trade deals being signed that are bad for the UK, contain controversial provisions, or do not have public support. Is this, in effect, the debate on the mandate for these trade deals, or will other debates follow? If they will, how will they be conducted? Will there be a public set of negotiating objectives and comprehensive impact assessments?

Modern trade deals can have major implications across the economy and society. They can touch on financial regulation, public services, environmental policy, intellectual property and Government procurement—all areas where sovereignty normally resides with the legislature. A vague proposal to initiate negotiations is, therefore, concerning. We know that the US is insisting on an agriculture chapter, which would seriously affect UK farming. The US also wants to change chemicals regulation and access to public service contracts—potentially locking in contracting out for public services such as the NHS.

The CPTPP is already written. It contains worrying provisions, including ISDS mechanisms that allow investors to sue Government in secret arbitration courts. Have the Government produced impact assessments of the CPTPP and other deals, and when will Parliament see those assessments? Will they include consideration of third country impacts? Will the Government accept ISDS provisions in any trade deal they sign? Will they promote such provisions? Will the Government exclude public services from future trade deals, and will they use the same strength of wording as is used for military and security exemptions?

It is encouraging that some 600,000 individuals have contributed to the consultation so far, but it was woefully inadequate because it failed to give any sense of negotiating objectives or red lines. What steps will the Minister take to address the serious public concerns raised in the consultation? Will there be a further consultation based on the negotiating objectives accompanied by impact assessments? Will this consultation be a model for future consultations on other trade deals?

My final substantive remarks are more about ISDS or equivalent arbitration. The SNP and many members of the public have real concerns about the impact those provisions could have on Governments. I will give two brief examples.

In the first case, between 1995 and 1997, the Canadian Government banned the export of toxic PCB—polychlorinated biphenyl—waste, in order to comply with their obligations under the Basel convention, to which the United States was not a party. Waste treatment company S. D. Myers then sued the Canadian Government for $20 million in damages under chapter 11 of the North American free trade agreement, which is a similar arbitration scheme. The claim was upheld by a NAFTA tribunal in 2000, even though Canada had taken action to remain in compliance with an international treaty.

In the second case, in April 1997, the Canadian Government banned the import and transport of petrol additive, MMT—methylocyclopentadienyl manganese tricarbonyl—over concerns that it posed a significant public health risk. Ethyl Corporation, the additive’s manufacturer, sued the Canadian Government, again under NAFTA chapter 11, for $251 million, to cover losses resulting from the “expropriation” of both its MMT production plant and its “good reputation”. The Government opposed the Canadian dispute settlement panel, and the Canadian Government rejected the panel and paid Ethyl Corporation $15 million in compensation.

Those cases involved toxic PCB waste and a petrol additive that was deemed to have a public health impact. It is quite wrong for large corporations to be able to sue Governments simply for taking steps to protect the wellbeing of their citizens, or for enacting public health measures which they believe to be right and for which they may well have an electoral mandate.

While we will welcome new trade deals, whether the United Kingdom cuts them or, better still, they are cut by the EU—for those would be better deals—they need to be fair, and the process of agreeing them needs to be transparent and inclusive, with, for instance, the formal involvement of the Scottish Government and other devolved Administrations at all stages. There needs to be an honest appraisal by the UK Government of the fact that no number of new FTAs can possibly compensate for the damage to trade that will be done by Brexit. There also needs to be a clear understanding that FTAs that include secret ISDS-type courts, which limit the ability of Governments to act in the best interests of their citizens, are simply unacceptable.

1.31 pm

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeo) (Con): Future trade deals must be part of a coherent trade strategy, and it is imperative that, as part of that strategy, we rapidly set out what our tariff schedules will be in all eventualities, and our attitude to tariff-rate quotas. Many people in business throughout the land are looking for that guidance. It is a key part of their preparations as we leave the EU, and I think we owe it to them to make clear what the position will be, particularly as the lead times to import are quite long in the case of some products. If products will have to go into catalogues in the future, businesses really need to know what their margins will be, and it seems unfair that they have not, as yet, been given that guidance.

Today’s debate is a classic that has been heard in this place for the last 150 to 200 years: the age-old debate about protectionism versus free trade. It is an argument that has proved to have the potential to split parties, communities and families right down the middle. I think that, in the modern era, it would be wise to try to go about these matters in as well-informed a way as possible, because we owe it to the people on whose behalf we are making our decisions to understand fully what we are talking about.

People in the trade world talk about offensive and defensive interests in negotiations, but, in many circumstances, the attempt to reach mutual agreement means that it is not really a zero-sum game. Approaching negotiations with the right partners and in the right way can bypass such oppositional characterisations of trade and of our own interests. That is not to say that we should not be mindful of the impacts that different trade arrangements might have on our people—our businesses and our farmers, for instance. I am keen to champion the maximum supply of information and the maximum involvement of communities in the preparation of trade strategies and trade policies along the way.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Several Members have expressed concerns about the NHS today. We have probably all been contacted by constituents about the need to protect it, which is close to the hearts of many people throughout the United Kingdom.
Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is important not only to protect it and issue strong statements to that effect, but to provide transparency so that people are clear that what is agreed, what is to be negotiated and the negotiating mandate do not include things that are precious to them and that they do not want to be compromised?

**Mr Fysh**: The hon. Lady makes a good point. The earlier involvement in these conversations, the more confident communities can be about a mandate that the Government can take to a negotiation, and the process of ratifying whatever comes back from the negotiation can then take place in a timely manner, which I think is essential. I shall talk about the NHS in a bit more detail later, but I see no reason why there should be those fears about it. Indeed, I can see reasons for it to benefit, and for its users to benefit, as a result of deals with, for example, the United States that might allow earlier and cheaper access to drugs than is possible now.

This debate is, of course, about future free trade agreements, but those agreements, and the trade strategy, are inevitably coloured by consideration of what our potential relationship with the EU might be, and what obligations we might enter into in order to acquire it. I now want to say a little about the impact of the restrictive nature of the proposed withdrawal agreement, including some of the prejudices to our future trade policy and strategy that it sets up.

The withdrawal agreement commits us to paying a lot of money without real limits, and with oversight by the European Court of Justice of the exact obligations that will be required. It allows the possibility of an extension by up to two years of the transition period that is being contemplated. We do not know at this point what sort of competition or anti-competition legislation the EU might produce in the next four years, but it might affect our economy, and might have an impact on what we could or could not do with future trade partners, either during that time or afterwards. The agreement gives the joint committee very wide powers of interpretation of what it says, and, in fact, powers to change what it says, as if it had the effect of law and Acts of Parliament. That means that the position in another two to four years’ time is very uncertain.

It should be noted that the agreement proposes the acknowledgement and implementation of the current EU system of geographical indications. I am not necessarily opposed to their being implemented in the same way in the future, but that really should be a matter for the future trade negotiation, which we have been told all along cannot take place during the article 50 negotiation period.

What is slightly more worrying for us in this discussion of future trade policy is that the agreement strengthens the current requirement for “sincere co-operation” within the common commercial policy to which we are subject as members of the EU, which effectively means that we are obliged not to undermine the EU’s interests in any international forums. I do not think we should be in the business of trying to undermine its interests, but that requirement may well restrict what we can discuss with future free trade partners during the transition period. That, I think, adds to the uncertainty that already exists about the transition period, and about what has or has not been agreed by the EU and the UK. Whether and how the EU’s existing free trade agreements with the rest of the world will apply to the UK during the transition period remains opaque, as does the extent to which the UK is able to sign free trade agreements during the transition period in the context of that sincere co-operation.

Within the backstop provision, for after the transition period should nothing be agreed, there is a hard veto for the EU on any superseding agreements. Article 20 of the protocol is very clear that there needs to be a joint decision by the EU and the UK for future alternative arrangements to succeed the backstop. So whatever the best endeavours clause does or does not do, that is still a hard veto that needs to be dealt with.

The reality of the operation of the backstop as written for the UK is very dramatic from the point of view of trade and competitiveness. For example, the EU will be able to increase state aid during the period after 2019, but the UK must maintain it at current levels. If that happened for four years, it could really undermine the competitiveness of some of our domestic producers, which is exactly what we have said we need to think hard about in future trade agreements. Because of how the annexes operate, state aid provisions would effectively be applicable to our defence manufacturing industry for the first time in a way that they are not in the EU. That would enable the European Commission to take cases in our courts against defence manufacturers and/or the Government in instances that were considered to be state aid to the defence manufacturing industry.

Those are the sorts of hostages to fortune that are lurking in the backstop, and that is one reason why I am against it. We need to be very mindful of that sort of leverage over our future arrangements with the EU, whether on the status of Northern Ireland within our constitution, if our fishing is open to European actors, the status of Gibraltar, or our defence capability and sovereign ability. Those are all potential hostages to fortune in the current backstop arrangement, which is a big part of the reason why I am opposed to the current proposal and want those backstop arrangements to be replaced now, or at least to have full legally binding guarantees that they will be replaced over time.

As the backstop is currently written, it envisages a customs union. There has been much talk about whether that means frictionless trade.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil**: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who serves with me on the International Trade Committee, for giving way. He has clearly laid out his opposition to the backstop for various reasons, and I respect what he has said on that, but where does he go then: to no deal or to the revocation of article 50?

**Mr Fysh**: I do not think it is as clear cut as that. In the Malthouse compromise, which some might have read about, there is a proposal to replace the backstop with a permanent arrangement that is effectively a zero-tariff environment for the time being with a trade facilitation agreement, which allows very efficient trade to take place across the border. It would not be a unilateral exit from the backstop, and there would not be a time limit on it; I understand communities in Ireland wanting some certainty about that. I actually think it is a much
better idea to replace the backstop within the withdrawal agreement if we want to pass the agreement now, and if that does not happen we should keep offering to do exactly that. I will come on shortly to some of the back-up plans that should not be acceptable either.

The customs union arrangement within the backstop would oblige us to continue to adopt the common external tariff and would potentially oblige us to have the common commercial policy. There is a great deal of uncertainty about the physical operations at our borders. What the annexes of the withdrawal agreement backstop say is required, in black and white, is that every transaction between Great Britain and Northern Ireland and vice versa, and between Great Britain and the EU across the channel, would require an a.uk physical, stamped certificate, effectively showing where the duty has been paid in the customs territory it is coming from. That is a massive administrative burden. Based on the HMRC numbers of transactions with the EU, the number the CHIEF—customs handling of import and export freight—computer has to handle will be going up from 55 million currently to 255 million in the future. That means there will be an extra 200 million of these things every year; that is over half a million physical certificates a day that HMRC officers will need to process. That is wholly unrealistic, and when one talks to the Government in detail about it, or to the EU, they admit this is totally unworkable and will not be introduced. How then can they say they cannot introduce alternative arrangements now that would have another two years to be implemented on the ground?

In addition to those physical stamped certificates there would have to be export declarations into the export control system, which would enable the logging of whether a tariff needed to be collected or indeed whether rectification was needed in the inward processing relief systems. So the idea that this is a frictionless system is wrong, and it needs to be replaced. It is unworkable; it is full of friction and it also prevents an independent trade policy for the time that it persists.

If we were to continue to offer the Malthouse proposals even if we could not get a withdrawal agreement done, we would continue to offer a stopgap measure of a zero-tariff, simple free trade agreement, or an agreement between the UK and the EU to prefer each other’s trade for a period of time, which could be notified to the World Trade Organisation under article XXIV of GATT—the general agreement on tariffs and trade. That is a very simple thing to propose, in a sense: because it would be a goods-only agreement, it would not need ratification by all 27 member states, and it could be agreed and implemented very rapidly.

If the EU did not want to do that either, although that would be best because it would be absurd for us to be charging tariffs on each other, we would need to look at other things we might do. We heard discussion earlier of some elements of the unilateral free trade policy that we would potentially need to put in place to prevent price rises for different goods. That does not mean we would have to unilaterally reduce our applied tariffs for every product; we can make that choice product by product.

We have already heard on the grapevine that we are not planning to zero-tariff agricultural goods in our future tariff policy. That makes sense in many ways, because we need to take a nuanced approach. We need to look, product by product, at where domestic producers need some sort of tariff or programme so that they are not exposed to world prices immediately.

We also need to consider an interesting strategy that would encourage other countries to enter into free trade agreements with us. It would propose that we would take a unilateral free trade approach for a period but that we would reintroduce tariffs going upwards to the bound tariff rate—the common external tariff rate—after say, two or three years. That would encourage the countries that want the continuation of free trade to enter into free trade agreements with us to achieve it.

In the meantime—coming back to agricultural products and taking beef as an example—while we might have a tariff, we would still have a tariff rate quota that allowed some nations zero-rated access to the UK market up to a certain quota. We could open those quotas that would have been for the EU to the rest of the world. The EU would then have a choice. It could enter into a free trade agreement with us and have a quota or it could see the markets that it currently has in the UK being opened to the rest of the world. I personally think that it will want to have a free trade agreement, at least on a temporary basis.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I am trying to follow what the hon. Gentleman is saying as closely as I can. He talks about working on a tariff-by-tariff basis and making judgments or decisions depending on domestic demand or production, but this would open us up to a retaliatory or mirror action from the European Union. For example, if there were no citrus fruits such as oranges here and we decided to get rid of tariffs on oranges, impacting the Spanish and Portuguese orange producers, they could ask themselves what tariffs had existed only to protect the United Kingdom as part of the EU pot. They could then pluck out those tariffs, and we would find ourselves in an even more disadvantageous trade situation.

Mr Fysh: I thank the Chairman of our Committee for his intervention. I absolutely agree that it makes the most sense to have a free trade agreement. That is the simplest thing, and it would eliminate the absurdity of even having to discuss these matters. So it would be my first proposal, my second proposal and my third proposal to have just that kind of FTA. This is really the fall-back to the fall-back to the fall-back position—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The backstop?

Mr Fysh: The backstop to the backstop to the backstop, exactly. I really do not think that we should get into that position. Looking at the sensible contingency planning that the EU is doing in lots of other areas, I see no reason why it should not continue to be sensible and reasonable, just as we are, and I believe that we will get there.

I want to come back to the trade facilitation issues, because they are really important to the consideration of what trade costs and therefore to the potential value of future free-trade agreements as well as the value the EU’s current agreement. I would like to congratulate HMRC on its work to make trade efficient in the event of no deal at the end of March. Indeed, that work will
also be applicable in the future if we are outside a customs union and the single market. These will all be very useful things.

The transitional simplified procedure that has been opened up to operators is really good news, but I think the Government should take it further straight away by making it available to intermediaries such as the logistics service providers that control a large amount of our trade. That would make the most sense, because it would enable them to be authorised consignees so that they could close out the transit documents that will be an essential part of future trade.

The Government should also look at a more comprehensive scope of waivers for transit guarantees, because the financial liability, especially of operators, cannot close out those guarantees. That will be essential to keeping our trade flowing. They should also look at underwriting some elements of the liability to duty in the EU, so that our export side can operate efficiently.

These things come down to the impact assessments that we have seen. When I have spoken to logistics service providers, customs brokers and others, it is obvious that these documents—the transit documents, the export declaration on this side and the import declaration on the other side—will need doing. It is more than we have to do now, so people need to get ready. I say to business: get ready. Businesses being able to do these things, and ensuring that their logistics service providers are able to do them, will be essential to enabling their trade to flow efficiently.

These measures cost about £50, not hundreds and hundreds of pounds. The value of the goods on a truck crossing the channel can be £10,000 if it is carrying bread or bread products and up to £300,000 for beef or beef products, so £50 is just a tiny fraction of that. We are talking about, at most, 0.5% of the value. According to the Government’s impact assessment, the cost of customs administration in the event of no deal would be 5% to 6% of the value, which is wrong by an order of magnitude. We must not underestimate the value of our future trade agreements based on a misapprehension of the real costs of trade.

Similarly, as the Opposition spokesman said, we should not get the gravity relationship wrong. In the UK, the factor of linkage between trade and distance is only about 0.23%. When we back that number out of the Treasury’s forecasts before the referendum, we get the figure of 0.9%. The figure of 0.9% is the intra-continental EU gravity factor, and it is my contention that the wrong one has been used in our models. That undercooks the benefit to us from free trade around the rest of the world and really overcooks the value of the EU’s trade. I am not saying that we do not want the EU’s trade—we absolutely do—but we want to trade with Europe and with the rest of the world. The referendum result was about us wanting both.

The Government really need to pull their socks up over what they have been saying about UK businesses access to Europe. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has again said that there is a big risk of our agricultural products not being allowed into the EU, but that is simply not right. The EU has stated it will put contingency arrangements in place, that we will be listed on the right lists and that we will not be shut out in that way. It is simply wrong to say that we will. I personally think that it does our farmers a disservice to frighten them unnecessarily in that regard.

Similarly, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), who is also in charge of no-deal planning at the Department, said on “The Week in Westminster” on Saturday morning that UK car manufacturers could not be sure whether they could sell their products into Europe because of the regulations. That statement is in grave danger of misleading the British public and the auto industry, and it could be devastating to the confidence of smaller players in the automotive market that may not be aware of what the rules are or what the EU’s position really is.

The reality is that the EU Council and Commission decided on 8 January that UK vehicle certificates can be registered in the EU. There is no reason for UK car manufacturers to fear that their parts or their cars cannot be sold to Europe. That is simply not the case. The Government need to look at themselves in the mirror and stop scaremongering, which is not in the national interest.

Quickly, because I know that everyone wants to get to speak, although it seems that I am the only one left on the Government Benches—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. That does not mean to say that the hon. Gentleman has to take up all the time and stop others getting in. Come on, Marcus Fysh.

Mr Fysh: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): I want to point out that my hon. Friend is not the only one left on the Government Benches, although I really came to listen—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. May I just say that there are no more Government Members on my list, which includes people who were here at the beginning, but we will have interventions.

Mr Bacon: I really came to listen to my hon. Friend, because it is such a privilege to listen to a genuine expert on this subject. He has forgotten more about it than most people know. I am just wondering how he accounts for the fact that we have had palpably inaccurate statements from Ministers. Is it possibly because our esteemed Under-Secretary of State for International Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), was not involved in making those statements?

Mr Fysh: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I am quite sure that the Minister present was not involved in the decision making around such Government mistakes. He is an eminently sensible fellow whom I know well. He used to be my Whip, and I would trust him explicitly. I cast no aspersions on the current occupant of the Government Front Bench.

The Government’s sabotage of the people’s desire for an independent trade policy has to stop. Having an independent trade policy is a mainstream Conservative manifesto promise and desire. People want to take
advantage of the new opportunities for free trade agreements around the world. They do not think that there will be a gap in or loss of EU trade, just as long as we execute on the things we need to execute, and the measures that HMRC could implement right now would go a long way to ensuring that that is not the case.

We also need to deal with the fallacy that the UK is somehow a small player that will get completely taken to the cleaners in any negotiation. The reality is that many players around the world are excited about the return of the UK to the global trading environment and are keen to do business with us. They see some of our leading markets, such as pharmaceuticals or financial services, as regulatory environments in which it makes sense for them to do more business, and we can help to develop the rules-based trading system around the world in a way that helps them, too.

That is particularly true in the US context, and our service businesses have a lot to gain from potential deals with places such as the US and Japan, where being part of the EU has really restricted our ability to do the sorts of deals that would advantage those service industries because, by and large, the European industry is not services based. For example, America has a $700 billion market in insurance in which our insurers, which are only currently selling about £2 billion into the US, could raise their market share. By comparison, sales of insurance into the EU are about £1.5 billion, so the US represents a much bigger market opportunity than the EU—even under single market structures.

By way of conclusion, because I want to allow other people to get a look in—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] I appreciate the House’s time. It is nice to have a bit of time for once on a Thursday to speak in detail about something about which I know, rather than be limited to four or five minutes, which is more often the case in the big debates.

The Department for International Trade has some brilliant civil servants and officials who have been doing incredible work. Even though it is a small market, the roll-over of the Chilean free trade agreement is a benchmark, because the officials have provided for diagonal accumulation between the UK and the EU and Chile. That really should be a benchmark for how we treat our future trade arrangements, which will be the successor arrangements to those that we currently have with the EU. I want to see International Trade Department officials more involved in the thinking about what we are doing with the EU, because that would be of great benefit to the Government and the country.

In conclusion, we need to trust in business and in the ability of businesses to adapt, to innovate and to lift their eyes beyond the current horizons. We need to trade with both the EU and the rest of the world. We need to say no to protectionism, because free trade has driven global growth around the world over the past 150 years, and it is misguided to think that there are not tremendous consumer advantages as a result. We need to be there for our farmers. We need to make the most of the derogations from normal restrictions on subsidy for items such as marketing to ensure that our farmers and producers can get the best prices around the world for their high-quality produce. We must not hang them out to dry. We also need to focus on the tremendous opportunity that leaving the EU gives us to make our way in the world in a different way. We can be best of friends with the EU and best of friends with the rest of the world.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. If Members replicate the length of that speech, not everyone will get in, which seems a bit absurd. Try to think of the others as you go along. I call the Chair of the International Trade Committee, Angus Brendan MacNeil.

2.7 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will take cognisance of the fact that I started at 2.7 pm and will look to not to be too long. I want to thank the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), who reminded me as he was speaking that I had not arranged for somebody to feed my sheep this morning. My 81-year-old neighbour Iain MacLean stepped into the breach quite admirably, but only because I was reminded by the hon. Gentleman.

I was talking earlier about how citrus fruit may not be an offensive trade interest, but I have just heard that the weather today in Aboyne, Lossiemouth and Altnaharra in the highlands of Scotland is about 17°C or 18°C. It is a summer’s day in Scotland, so anybody watching who is looking to have a decent half-term break should head to Scotland and forget about going anywhere else. It seems to be the place to go for the temperatures. I note that the Conservative Benches are empty, but perhaps they are in Val d’Isère taking advantage of free movement while it still exists. This may be the Brexiteers’ last holiday.

I also thank the hon. Member for Brent North for his frank honesty. I was talking earlier about damage to GDP and gains through the trade agreements. Of course, a no-deal Brexit and crashing out would, according to the UK Government, damage UK GDP by 8%. Now, the gain in GDP would be about 0.2% from a USA-style trade agreement, but that would mean we would need 40 USA-style trade agreements to make up the gap. There is only one problem. The USA accounts for over a quarter of the world’s GDP, so needing 40 USAs means that we will have to find 10 planets of people as wealthy as Americans in 2019—not 1919 or 1819, but as wealthy as they are today.

If there is an FTA, which is the route the Government want to take after kicking the can down the road for another 21 months of European Union membership—putting the pain off for another wee while—there would be a 6% hit to GDP. We would then need 30 USA-style agreements, or seven and a half planets.

If we follow Labour’s policy of a customs union only—I pay tribute to the honesty and candour with which the hon. Gentleman admitted this—there would be a 4% hit to GDP, requiring 20 USA-style agreements, or five planets, to make up for the lost GDP caused by ripping up our current deal with the European Union.

It is important to bear that in mind. It is nice to talk about flashy new trade agreements and trade policies but, in actual fact, trade is what drives all this. As I said to the Secretary of State, people who are selling shellfish or frozen fish, as people I know in the north-west of Scotland are, will not be able to do their rotations to

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Europe because of the barriers and all the paperwork listed by the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh), and they cannot exactly drive their lorry on a rotation to New Zealand, South America, Chile or wherever else in the CPTPP, or wherever else we might find ourselves having an accidental trade agreement.

As Chair of the International Trade Committee, I welcome this opportunity to debate these potential free trade agreements with the United States, Australia and New Zealand, and to debate possible UK accession to CPTPP. The Government initiated consultations on these potential trade agreements last summer and, despite having closed four months ago, we have yet to see the Government’s response, which would have helped to inform this debate. The Government received a vast number of responses to the consultations, but I understand that many of those 600,000 responses were duplicates. I hope we will see the responses soon.

The Committee recently went to the World Trade Organisation in Geneva, where there is much bemusement as to what the UK is doing. Trading on WTO terms is the most expensive form of trade, and the deputy director general of the WTO, Alan Wolff, said that if we trade on WTO terms, or something close to it, rather than the open single market we currently have, a “Brexit gap” in economic performance would damage our GDP. That is a good way of seeing it, because we are talking about a 4%, 6% or 8% Brexit gap in our economic performance.

It is good that we are having this debate, because the Committee published a report in December titled, “UK trade policy transparency and scrutiny,” which made a host of recommendations on Parliament’s role in future trade agreements. One recommendation is that Parliament should have an opportunity to debate the Government’s negotiating mandate, or “outline approach,” to use the terminology that the Department for International Trade favours, on a substantive motion before negotiations begin on the free trade agreements. I think negotiators would find it useful to have such a steer on the will of Parliament as to what they should progress in any negotiation.

An example of how not to do it is the Prime Minister’s approach to her international agreement with 27 other actors under one umbrella, the European Union. She came back to Parliament and found herself with a whole range of people, from Yeovil to the north of Scotland, ranged against her for various reasons. Had she tried to carry Parliament with her from the beginning, she might have found herself in a different position. We should be adopting such an approach to future trade agreements. Governments come and Governments go, and an awful lot of work might be done before being stopped and wasted. The resource of trade negotiators and an awful lot of work might be done before being stopped and wasted. The resource of trade negotiators and an awful lot of work might be done before being stopped and wasted.

If there are to be losers, how do we compensate them? If the UK enters a free trade agreement that, say, benefits the south-east of England and destroys, for instance, Welsh lamb, is there any idea of fiscal transfer or compensation for the sacrifice of the Welsh for the south-east of England? Do not think these are esoteric, way-out-there possibilities, because the air agreements that the UK entered into after 1945 specifically mentioned international flights only flying into London airports, which damaged the north of England, Wales, western England, central Scotland, northern Scotland and many other places. Iceland, for obvious reasons of its geography, was one of the first to break that. Having created the advantage of a transport hub in the south-east of England, there was a huge reluctance to cough up for the sacrifice imposed on others.

There are trade-offs in the decisions and directions that Governments take. Interestingly, of course, the Irish Government were quite different during that period. Rather than centralising around Dublin, they actively promoted the west, which is why Shannon airport is still the destination it is, and Knock airport in the north-west has also benefited.

The Committee feels that the Government should publish a trade policy strategy that articulates a vision for the UK as an independent trading nation—if all those things come into being—and outlines the UK’s immediate and future trade priorities at bilateral, plurilateral and multilateral levels. We propose that such a strategy should outline the UK’s key objectives, interests and priorities in respect of its trade policy. Sadly, we have yet to see such a strategy, so I urge the Government to publish one, as it would allow potential new FTAs, such as the ones we are debating today, to be seen in a wider context.

The UK has been spoken of as being a dwarf in comparison with the US, and the Secretary of State robustly jumped to the Dispatch Box to say that the UK is absolutely not a dwarf compared with the United States and that it is the fifth largest economy. When we actually look at it, the United States makes up about 28% of global GDP—about a quarter, as I said earlier—and the United Kingdom is about 2.3% of global GDP, so it is about a twelfth of America. If I came across somebody 12 times taller than me, I might feel rather dwarfish. We might find that the muscle that can be applied in trade negotiations by a grouping 12 times larger than us is somewhat more substantial than what we bring to the table ourselves.

Ben Lake: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about how many other nations will look at the market size of the UK and will perhaps consider that they do not want to concede in the same way in these negotiations as they perhaps would have if we were still a member of the European Union. Perhaps that goes some way towards explaining some of the difficulties that the UK Government are having in trying to sign off on some of these roll-over agreements.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. There are 40 such agreements with about 70 countries, and the UK’s hope is that we can
stand on the shoulders of the European Union and roll over that work, which of course relies on 70 other countries not seeing a possible advantage in getting better trading terms, as a number of them certainly do. A negotiator who wants to be promoted within their trade negotiating structure will, when the UK appears over the horizon with probably not the most experienced negotiators—they certainly will not have the same track record on international negotiations—see too great an opportunity to resist.

Interestingly, I note that the countries that have concluded the much-trumpeted trade agreements are ones with a tremendous balance of exports in their favour. Chile’s is about £150 million to £200 million in its favour, but the outstanding winner here has to be the Faroe Islands; I like to blow the Faroes’s trumpet as chair of the all-party group on the Faroe Islands, but my goodness! It exports £229 million-worth into the UK while importing only £16 million-worth back. So not only have the Faroes got themselves up the scales of acknowledgement, but they have done themselves a fantastic piece of business by rolling over what was already a very advantageous trade agreement. So well done the Faroe Islands, and I hope the welcome in Torshavn will be as good as it always is.

Let me now look at UK-US trade relations. When we went to the US the farm lobby asked, “Why folks? Why have you done this?” They were just bemused. Ford said that for it, “The UK-US is incremental, but the UK-EU is existential, particularly the interplay with the UK-EU and Turkey. The tariffs that could be accumulated in that direction could be problematic.”

The International Trade Committee’s key recommendation was that “the Government should undertake detailed work modelling the potential effects of a UK-US agreement on the economy.”

Evidence to the inquiry regarding the impact on GDP varied, but it was about 0.2%. We also have to make decisions about whether we have some increase in regulatory barriers with the EU in exchange for the removal of barriers with the US, and what the overall benefit of that is. As someone who keeps a few sheep, as I mentioned to the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), I can see a huge problem if we find ourselves putting up barriers to the EU to please some Americans and the American Administration in order to wave a piece of paper and say, “Trade agreements in our time.” That huge danger presents itself to a UK Government who might rush into trade agreements for the sake of it.

Drew Hendry: My hon. Friend is making a point about trade agreements having an impact on sheep farming in the highlands, but if those kinds of conditions are written into these trade agreements, could they not have a massive effect on trade and exports across the whole of the highlands and islands in respect of a range of different goods and services?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is correct about that. This whole area needs to be fully assessed, as the impacts are as yet unclear. If the Government are looking for trade agreements in our time, we might wake up some while later we have concluded these agreements with whole areas of the economy that we currently rely on being devastated and with the shock of having to realign, which would take a number of years to do. This would have huge impacts on people’s lives, as we saw in New Zealand. There may have been an idea that with New Zealand agriculture an easy and seamless change could be made, but that certainly was not the case.

Before entering into any free trade agreements, the Government must be clear about the relative weight they intend to give to different sectors in the UK economy and about the geographical spread. I could say a number of other things about the UK-US agreement, but I recommend to you our report on it as bedtime reading one of these fine evenings, Mr Deputy Speaker. Of all the reports that any Committee has produced, the International Trade Committee’s reports are the best, and the UK-US one is one of the better of the best, so I am sure you would enjoy reading it from cover to cover. I can see nodding and I am very pleased.

To keep the bedtime reading going, my Committee is currently working on an inquiry on trade with Australia and New Zealand. This is a keen inquiry and, since its launch, we have received 46 pieces of written evidence and heard from 10 witnesses, over two evidence sessions. We have focused on wine and agriculture to start with. Something interesting came up about wine exports from Australia and New Zealand to the EU. A number of these exports come to the UK in bulk, where they then get bottled in England and are exported on to the EU. Of course, the problem might be that if the UK is outside the customs union and single market, the wine that is coming from Australia and New Zealand, and currently providing jobs in England, might have to be re-routed elsewhere in the EU to enable it to be bottled, without picking up tariffs as it crosses the border into the EU member states. The dairy industry in the UK felt that such an agreement might not be a huge priority for it, but Fronterra, a New Zealand-based dairy company, said:

“We see a New Zealand-UK FTA as a great example for setting a benchmark for a high-quality, ambitious FTA for the UK.”

We are also fortunate that George Brandis, the Australian high commissioner, has been paying attention to this, at least he was when he was here earlier. Australia is very keen to have a fairly simple FTA with the UK that has few carve-outs. Agriculture is said by the Australians not to be a major interest for them, as they have so much else of the world to service. Perhaps therefore we might, just like the Americans did with them, carve out a number of areas, and so agriculture might not be part of it. Australians say that it is not such a huge concern for them, but it is a concern for us. When they dealt with America, over 14 months, a number of carve-outs were made by the Americans, on pharmaceuticals, on the investor-state dispute settlement and on sugar access. So people will pursue their own interests and needs in trade agreements.

You will be upset to know, Mr Deputy Speaker, that the Committee has not looked very much at the CPTPP. We have not had time to do that, but we will be addressing it. It will certainly be discussed with the Secretary of State, who is due to appear before us again on 6 March. There are a number of areas where trade is being altered by the political choice made by two of the nations of the UK to take the whole United Kingdom out of the EU. This is seen, by all sides, as being damaging to the economy. The one thing that gives me
[Angus Brendan MacNeil]

hope is that even Brexiteers nearly all agree that the option of a hard Brexit on 29 March is damaging to the economy. The Secretary of State himself said it would damage the economy. Others have said it would be catastrophic, and a number of other adjectives have been used to express the same fear. At least Brexiteers are starting to see that some Brexit options are bad. When we give them the hard percentages, they see also that the upsides of trade deals and trade policies are not quite the same as trade. I hope and pray, and appeal to them even at this late stage, that the thing they really want to do, to save the upheaval and damage to the economy, is simply revoke article 50. An amendment to that end will be tabled next week. I appeal to Liberals, Greens and those who have talked about the people’s vote or extending article 50: it is too late, the damage is under way. They are all agreed that economic damage is coming. The revocation of article 50 could be done in an afternoon and it would save us all. So, Mr Deputy Speaker, 21 minutes after starting my speech, I am finished.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): You said you would be brief.

2.28 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What a pleasure it is to speak in this debate with so many other antipodeans: the hon. Members for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) and for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock). The words “Australia” and “New Zealand” were in the longer title of the debate and therefore we seem to have been attracted out the woodwork. I cannot promise to compete with the knowledge of the hon. Member for Mole Valley about New Zealand sheep farms, but having grown up in Sydney I have a bit of a feel for some of the topics discussed, and it is a pleasure to be serving on the International Trade Committee and looking into the debate on this.

There are not many debates in the House where we go for three hours without a woman speaking. It took three hours for us to get there today, so I will try to set the tone by being brisk—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Quality not quantity.

Catherine West: Exactly.

We are in the bizarre position of not having a proper agreement with our main trading partner, the EU, with which we do almost half our trade, or a little bit more than half, depending on which academic work one reads. The question of Brexit remains unsettled and not at all a done deal, yet at the same time, because of the Government’s rather interesting negotiating style, there remain big questions about tariffs. My hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) hit the nail on the head when he said that the written statement on tariffs that will be published later really should have come in advance of this debate, so that the debate could have been possibly shorter and more meaningful.

We know that right now goods are on their way to Korea and Japan and their exporters do not know what tariffs will be charged on arrival, because in under 40 days Brexit could happen and there could be no deal. That is leading to a great deal of concern, not only about exports but about imports. The hon. Member for Yeovil said that he felt the farming sector was perhaps a bit frightened, or need not be so worried or scared, but every time one opens a newspaper, one finds that reliable titles such as the Financial Times are citing extreme concern about what tariffs will be put on to goods coming into the UK.

The National Farmers Union spokesperson has been eloquent in expressing the union’s concerns. As a Member representing a London seat I would not want to say that I could be any more knowledgeable than she, and she is presenting some very important concerns from the agricultural sector and about our lovely countryside. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) made a good point about whether the sector could be more efficient without our losing the wonderful beauty of the countryside. A move toward an agribusiness model could have a big effect on the countryside.

I can describe the position we face today only as neither in nor out—halfway. With under 40 days to go, that is a dereliction of duty. I feel that to some degree industry is being let down, doubly so after Honda’s announcement this week. It is not just about industry but, of course, about the people who work in industry and all our partners.

Let me briefly set out some principles, because that is far as we can get today, given that we do not really know what is going to happen in the next 34 days. First, liberalisation may sound fine as a principle, but we know that there are problems. Members have mentioned issues relating to the ISDS provisions in various free trade agreements. A famous example is the tobacco companies in Australia taking the Australian Government to court for loss of profit because of changes in Government policy. People find the idea deeply anti-democratic and think we should be very careful in how we proceed. Furthermore, when the International Trade Committee visited Canada, we heard about the Dow v. Canada case, in which the US chemicals giant Dow sued Canada for attempting to ban the pesticide 2,4-D. The full details of the settlement were unclear, but it is likely that some concessions for the company were agreed, despite the environmental impacts of pesticide use. Those two examples show why, if we embrace a form of trade liberalisation, it is extremely important to remain vigilant about the long-term impacts.

The second principle is scrutiny. The Select Committee heard about some impressive best practice in Canada, where there had been regional consultations and the debates around equalities and human rights were an element of the consultation. That is a good way of engaging the regions in discussion about consultation and scrutiny. We need to look more closely at that. Given that the Government are trying to bring forward an industrial strategy—it is difficult to tell right now whether that has been successful—we should look at the best practice in that area.

The third principle is preparedness for our future, depending on what happens with Brexit. In the Select Committee’s evidence sessions on the Trade Remedies Authority, I have been concerned about the period of unpreparedness. I felt that when questioned, the chief executive was not familiar with our current tariff levels with different countries. When questioned on her views about various trade matters, she seemed rather unprepared.
That suggests that the Department desperately needs to do more work. Furthermore, on Member engagement, although I welcome today’s debate, there needs to be more engagement and participation. It is a pity that Members had to look on the Swiss Government website to see details of the Swiss agreement, when we had asked as a Committee for more information and were not given it—and that is Committee members, who are interested in trade, let alone Members of Parliament as a whole. It is disappointing not to see more interest on the Government Benches in today’s debate and what our future is going to be.

The fourth principle is human rights. My fear is that we will lack clout with some of the big players, such as China. Put simply, China is more likely to countenance a dialogue about human rights with a partner with the clout of 500 million people than with the UK. We will struggle to maintain our integrity and what we believe to be important at the same time as managing our twin concerns about national security and trade. The three principles of trade, national security and human rights are hard to get right as a smaller country. It is easy to discount such a country, particularly when we may be giving off a ‘whiff’ of desperation right now, with our debates and the sense that we need them more than they need us. We need to take that into account.

The fifth principle is standards. We currently have the EU’s gold standard for goods. Other Members have mentioned the challenges relating to animal welfare standards, particularly in respect of a US deal and sanitary and phytosanitary standards. That throws up a wealth of questions. I am convinced that the US would like agriculture to be a sectoral element of any future free trade agreement. Again, we need to get the balance right between protecting what we have, the beauty of our landscape and our traditions, and being open-minded about new ways of doing things.

The hon. Member for Yeovil mentioned the NHS and seemed relaxed about how the US health system might be able to “improve”—I hope I am not misquoting him—it. My right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) intervened earlier to emphasise the fact that our National Government set the tone for the NHS and any intervention in it or other public services, but in respect of an interface with the NHS, we must be aware that our national Government set the tone for the NHS (John Spellar) intervened earlier to emphasise the fact that the EU approach—and the approach of countries such as Australia—of involving civil society and other groups ensures that, when it comes to setting the agenda for any negotiation, those points are very much on the table and are clear.

Catherine West: I agree, particularly in relation to some of the really sensitive things such as human rights. We are represented at an EU level, which means that we have our MEPs there in the room. Equally, though, very sensitive discussions can be held on our behalf, without our personally having to make a comment. Perhaps the Secretary of State for Defence might have appreciated a bit more “arm’s length” recently, especially when he was asked in a rather cheeky way yesterday by an interviewer on the radio whether he should button his lip. Again, we have to learn diplomacy if, indeed, Brexit happens and if, indeed, we end up having an independent trade policy. We cannot just go round opening our mouth and saying what we like.

I wish briefly to talk about an element of our future arrangements with Australia. I am not talking so much about the goods side. On agriculture, as those of us on the International Trade Committee know, Australia does not currently meet its quota for the Asia market—Asia in this case is the far east—and so that is less of an issue for our own agriculture here in the UK. However, there are areas around services—for example, equivalence on education, diplomas and degrees—where an already healthy relationship could be enhanced by improving mutual recognition of degrees, diplomas and professional standards. As the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State have said, some of these things will be easy wins.

I will briefly touch on developing countries and fair trade. Many of us are very optimistic that more can be done in this area. I would be very grateful if the Minister, in his closing remarks, talked about how leadership can be shown in intra-Government and intra-country discussions. The situation in the EU has its instabilities as well, with the upcoming elections this spring possibly producing more member states who have an aversion to free trade.
With regard to the US—one of the purported wins on free trade—there are many question marks on future business, particularly given some of the more protectionist statements by the President. In China, we are seeing a changing internal situation, which is having an effect on big infrastructure decisions. China is also possibly overstretched on the Belt and Road initiative. Some commentators suggest that some of these huge infrastructure projects may be overstretched China’s reach to some degree, which means that entering trade agreements in the current climate may be quite difficult. Similarly with Japan, there is a need not just for Ministers, but for Whitehall to have another look at preparedness for a very big challenge.

Once things calm down, it would be helpful if we could find some way of looking at how prepared the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for International Development, the Ministry of Defence and all the different silos are and consider how they could work more effectively together. Such a review exercise could gain a lot of traction and help us to achieve a more streamlined approach—not so much to do with people: more to do with a greater sense of direction. I suspect that that lack of direction comes from the different Departments. Furthermore, the reduction in the number of language experts in the Foreign Office, and in expertise in some other Departments, needs to be reviewed. I am sure that the Minister will mention that in his closing remarks.

2.45 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): It is very disappointing to see how few Members are present in the Chamber today—that applies to the Benches on both sides of the House, but certainly to the Government Benches. I have a lot of respect for the Under-Secretary of State for International Trade, the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), and I am sure that he, too, is disappointed that a topic of such importance should actually have attracted so few people to the Chamber today.

Today’s debate honours the Government’s commitment that was made back in the summer to hold a debate on these future trade agreements, but it does not provide for the much-needed debate on the Government’s outline approach on an amendable, substantive motion, as proposed by the International Trade Committee in our report on trade policy transparency and scrutiny, which is disappointing. It seems that the Government’s conduct of marginalising Parliament in the process of Brexit is evident once more—so much for taking back control. As the Committee stated, handling trade negotiations is the prerogative of the Executive, but there must be a meaningful role for Parliament in the trade policy process.

The Committee has been absolutely clear that trade policy needs to be open and inclusive, maximising the benefits across and throughout the UK; that Government must operate from a presumption of transparency; and that consultative processes must be formalised. Specifically, the Committee was interested in the role that Parliament, the devolved Administrations, local government, businesses and civil society should have in the process—all elements that are included in Labour’s policy on trade deals. However, it would seem that the Select Committee report is being ignored.

Since his appointment, the Secretary of State for International Trade has asserted a great many things: in July 2017, we were told that a deal with the EU would be the easiest in human history, and in December 2017 he stated that the 40 free trade agreements covering 55 countries could be rolled over a second after the UK left the EU. A couple of months earlier, Lord Price, the then Trade Minister, told us that there were 36 FTAs with 60 countries, and he said that they could simply be cut and pasted and that that had almost been done. It was not until the Select Committee was told by Professor Andreas Dür that there were in fact 41 free trade agreements covering around 70 countries—a figure confirmed by the Financial Times—that we absolutely knew where we were. As suspected, the notion that free trade agreements could be rolled over has not proved quite as easy as the Secretary of State originally claimed. Although not central to this debate, that does illustrate the huge challenges that we will face.

Just two weeks ago, the Secretary of State came before the Select Committee to face questions, and it was quite clear that rolling over these agreements was not really going that well. Despite his considerable obfuscation, the reality of the state of the deals was evident from the Secretary of State’s own briefing note. Anyone in the Committee Room could see that on the piece of paper in front of him there was a huge amount of red, a little bit of orange and very little green. Under that green, amber and red traffic light system, the status of these free trade agreements was quite clear. When the Secretary of State was challenged on that point, he claimed colour blindness, yet hours later in the afternoon he was more forthright with business leaders—sadly not with us. It was yet another example of keeping Parliament in the dark.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: On that idea of keeping Parliament in the dark, if the UK and the EU were to enter into a trade negotiation, European parliamentarians would know more than Members of the House of Commons, and our best way of finding out what was happening would be to ask our friends from Ireland. Far from us taking back control, the European Parliament would actually have more control in that particular trade negotiation, which is a supreme irony of the whole Brexit carry-on.

Matt Western: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his chairmanship of the International Trade Committee, which he does so well, and for the important point that he has just made. One senses that we are being kept in the dark, that there is far greater transparency on the EU side, and that we will probably end up learning more from the EU and other countries about how our deals are progressing. The Select Committee has actually found that to be the case when we have visited Geneva, Brussels or elsewhere; we are discovering the reality from trade ambassadors in those other countries.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am very much enjoying my hon. Friend’s speech. It is not just that we seem to be in the dark about our relationship with the EU; Ministers also seem to be in the dark from one another. For example, the Chancellor has said that they do not want any tariffs on food because he wants to keep food prices down, but in today’s Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions the Farming Minister
gave a very long answer about how DEFRA is looking at tariffs, quotas and various other restrictions. It is not very good if Government Departments cannot even talk to one another, is it?

**Matt Western:** My hon. Friend makes an important point, which I was going to come to later in my speech. He is quite right that the Government are kind of fudging the situation along, and no one is absolutely clear how these things will be managed. Our rural and farming communities will be extremely concerned because, having been so dismissive of the common agricultural policy, it is absolutely not clear how we are going to manage our all-important farming and agricultural sector post Brexit.

I was talking about the free trade agreements and the discussions of the Select Committee last week. It has subsequently become clear that the situation is a real mess. The status of the deals has been leaked and we now know that just five have been agreed, nine are off track, 19 are significantly off track, four are not possible to complete by March 2019 and two are not even being negotiated. So much for colour blindness—perhaps it is more of a blind spot.

In the case of the five deals that have been rolled over, their lack of priority and importance is perhaps self-evident. The Faroe Islands, which were mentioned earlier, are the UK’s 114th largest trading partner—critical, then—and account for 0.1% of total UK trade. Clearly we buy a lot of fish from them. Then there is Chile, our 65th largest trading partner, which also accounts for 0.1% of total UK trade. The eastern and southern African region accounts for £1.5 billion and another 0.1%. Switzerland and Israel are the only countries that are bringing deals of the scale that we would have expected earlier in the process. Perhaps most concerning are the agreements with South Korea and Japan, which are way off track, and the lack of diplomacy is only hampering them.

It is clear that the Secretary of State and his Department favour securing deals with Anglosphere countries—the US, Australia, New Zealand and Canada being prime among them. The US is a major market, but so is the EU. Perhaps it is the appeal of another strong and stable leader that is driving the Prime Minister and her Secretary of State to prioritise a deal with the US. Elsewhere, of course it would be good to have better deals with Australia and New Zealand, but is it not more sensible to prioritise the customers on our doorstep? When I did a paper round, I always thought that it was better to do the paper round on my own street, rather than on the other side of the village; maybe I am wrong.

The public should not befooled into thinking that this will be over by 2020 or 2021. As we have heard, these deals will take six to 10 years to negotiate. This will not be easy. The EU-CETA deal took six years. That is typical, and we have heard from trade negotiators, trade lawyers and those involved in other countries just how difficult this will be. The public need to know, as do those in our industrial and business sectors. The US is a great country, but it is an even better trade negotiator. That puts the US at an immediate advantage. Hence, NAFTA was redone. The Select Committee happened to be over there back in the spring of 2018, and the anxiety was palpable among the Canadian negotiators about what that would mean—but not just among them. It was palpable among US exporters and the car industry, as we heard earlier.

Perhaps naively, or perhaps because it is the outcome that the Secretary of State favours, we will face the mother of negotiations when our people sit down in Washington, and we should be under no illusion as to what the US will want to trade on. It will be services and cars, traded for agriculture and healthcare. We should remember the issues from the negotiations on the now-abandoned Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, otherwise known as TTIP. Foremost among the public’s concern was the threat posed to our precious health service from a possible corporate takeover in any form. That deal, lest we forget, was being negotiated between the EU and the US, virtually equal-sized economies.

I have nothing against the US. In fact, I love the US, but I love the NHS more, and I am suspicious of the strategy of the Government and the Secretary of State. I have nothing against him personally, but let us be honest, he was the founder of the Atlantic Bridge, and his motivations and intentions have always been clear.

Like so many of my constituents, I fear not just for our health service but for our excellent, world-leading car manufacturers, local farmers and all those involved in our agri-food industry. None of those working in that sector should be under any illusion that they will be safe in a trade deal that the Secretary of State will seek urgently and desperately to secure in order to preserve the Government’s position. Without doubt, financial services will be his priority.

Our farmers should also be concerned by what concessions are likely to be made in the trade deals elsewhere, especially in the trade of livestock. Likewise our fisheries. Just last week, there was disagreement between the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and that was echoed this morning, as we have just heard, in the comments about who would subsidise our farmers in those circumstances should we leave the EU. While both Australia and New Zealand have much to offer, their markets are still a small fraction of that of the EU, and the Secretary of State should be clear about that. By my estimation, trade with the EU is 30 times the combined trade that we do with New Zealand and Australia.

By contrast, the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership has considerable scale. Naturally, its members comprise the nations around the perimeter of the Pacific, which will benefit from free trade in that sphere. I struggle to see how it will benefit or be appropriate to the UK. Call me old-fashioned, but doing business locally was always easiest and remained the priority. That seems no longer to be the case. Of the countries involved, our trading negotiations with Japan and South Korea are the most critical—far more so than those with Australia or New Zealand. In conversations with Japanese and Korean investors, it is clear how concerned they are by Brexit.

At an event in October last year held by the Japanese Chamber of Trade here in Parliament, its chief executive made it clear to those present, including the Secretaries of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and for Transport, that Brexit would seriously affect its
businesses and investments in the UK. Spring forward three months, and Nissan has cancelled its investment in Sunderland. Honda has announced the closure of its plant in Swindon with the direct loss of 3,500 jobs, and Hitachi has cancelled its investment plans for a nuclear station in Anglesey. A clear pattern is emerging.

Let me return to the question of priorities—let us call them business priorities. Surely our priority must be to secure our existing trade in inward investment. I do not understand why the Government seem so relaxed about walking away from their biggest customer and in the process damaging existing relations and undermining both domestic and foreign direct investment.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman has mentioned Japan. Does he think that the lack of concern that has been shown for Japanese interests in this whole Brexit farrago will not serve the UK very well when it comes to negotiating a trade deal with Japan? The list of companies he gave and the concerns that the Japanese have raised have not registered or led to any deviation in UK policy, and it is understandable that the Japanese feel quite slighted, given their interests and that 40% of their EU investments were on island UK.

Matt Western: I thank the hon. Gentleman, whose constituency name I always get wrong—the Outer Hebrides—for his important point. It is not until we actually talk to investors and their representatives, and to major corporations that have given so much prosperity to these islands over the last 30 or 40 years, and consider how they feel—he used the word “slighted”—that we realise that respect is such a critical part of the culture in Asia. It is absolutely clear that they feel disrespected in this process and that we have not approached them and engaged with them sufficiently well. The Government may well have done that to an extent, but the fact that we are now seeing this haemorrhaging of investment from the UK underlines how seriously that is felt. At that reception held by the Japanese embassy in October last year, attended by the Secretaries of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and for Transport, the words of the chamber’s chief executive were chilling. He said, in summary, about Brexit, “We will be watching you.” Never have so few words concerned me so much.

I cannot help but conclude that this country is being seduced by a prospect of some sort of brave new world—empire 2.0, perhaps—when, in reality, the existing world in which we trade is both stable and prosperous, no matter the present headwinds. Actually, I agree with the Secretary of State for International Trade that we could be performing better in Asia Pacific markets, but I disagree with him on his solution. How can it be that, as I have said previously in this place, German exports to China are 10 times those of the UK? Does he think that the lack of concern he has expressed is due to a lack of importance to businesses based here, and particularly the Japanese companies she persuaded to invest here, such as Honda and Nissan. She will be turning in her grave.

I remain convinced about and committed to protecting our market and our businesses, and our jobs that they provide. Likewise, I am concerned for our farmers and those in the south of my constituency around the villages of Barford, Bishop’s Tachbrook, Hampton Magna and Norton Lindsey, who I believe will be seriously damaged by the industrial-scale farming they will be forced to compete against in future.

I also remain convinced about and committed to the EU market. Surely it provides greater certainty than the prospect of being caught up in the crossfire of the US-China trade wars. The truth is that, whether it be the uncertainty of negotiating with the current President of the United States or the significantly smaller markets presented by Australia and New Zealand, the priorities claimed by the Secretary of State are far removed from the certainty of the EU market. We should be wary of where we are going.

Dr Drew: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way again. Does he accept that one sector that is particularly vulnerable is the pig sector? American exports to China have all but come to an end and the Americans are desperate to find another market that they can populate with their pigs. The obvious one is the UK. Would not that be a real threat?

Matt Western: I thank my hon. Friend for his well-informed intervention—he clearly knows a huge amount more about the pig farming sector than I do. The subject did come up in conversations in the United States and subsequently of the opportunities not just for pig farmers but for soya bean agriculture, and how keen the US is to export those products. We have to be cognisant of what that will mean. As has been said many times this afternoon, this is about concession, trading terms and what we are most prepared to give way on, but I am particularly fearful of the impact on our rural communities and on the farming sector, whether it be the pig farmers or others.

In considering future deals, it is essential in any event that there should be scrutiny from Parliament. That has come through loud and clear in the evidence that our Select Committee has taken: we should involve not only Parliament, but the devolved Administrations, civil society groups, representative business bodies and the unions. We need economic impact assessments, undertaken and shared with the relevant bodies—in particular, Parliament and the Administrations. That approach would ensure transparency and is best exemplified by that followed in the EU’s process, but also by the US itself. We also need to ensure the protection and maintenance of workers’ rights and environmental protections—certainly in our farming and rural sector—and to oppose the use of investor-state dispute settlement mechanisms in future agreements.

Finally, in leaving one of the most sophisticated, most advanced markets that is the EU, we must not allow this or any Government to reduce standards or protections. First and foremost, we must be determined
to ensure that our manufacturing industries and farmers receive the appropriate protections they deserve, not the 0% tariffs on imports that the Secretary of State is advocating.

3.5 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure and an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) in speaking in this debate.

This has been a tumultuous week in British politics and, indeed, a very saddening week for a Labour Member like me. However, today’s debate reminds us of the critical task that this Parliament faces as the Brexit deadline approaches. Trade is at the heart of the Brexit debate, and many Members have made very good and detailed points on the challenges for our trade policy as we leave the European Union. I wish to focus my points on three areas: landscape, cars and negotiating power.

Indeed, landscape, cars and negotiating power are related, as I had reason to realise when my car broke down on the road to Craster in Northumberland on Sunday. After I had sought to negotiate getting a bungee lead from a friendly fisherman, who refused to take any money for it, I had ample time to contemplate the exquisite beauties of the Northumberland coastal landscape while I waited for my exhaust to be repaired.

The labour movement is often associated with our cities and great urban centres. In truth, however, access to and enjoyment of our countryside has been a key part of our labour movement for decades and, indeed, centuries. One only has to think of the Kinder Scout trespass to see the way in which our movement has fought to ensure that our glorious countryside remains accessible and can be enjoyed by everyone.

While Newcastle is uniquely privileged in having a moor, the Town moor—or the “Toon” moor—at its centre, we also have the ability to enjoy the wonderful countryside of Northumberland and County Durham. It is perhaps contradictory to say so, but this stunningly beautiful countryside, with its dry stone walls, little fields and fantastic coastal views, is not entirely natural. It is actually a function of our farming and particularly of our small-scale farmers. They are the ones who have created and who protect our beautiful countryside.

This is of course very different from the situation in the United States, where we can find wheat farms the size of small counties here in the UK and pig farms the size of small towns. How does the Secretary of State expect our small-scale farmers to compete with the American agro-industrial machine? If someone drives through areas of the US that have a similar northern, temperate climate, they will see vast swathes of countryside that, having been cultivated in the 19th and 20th centuries, have been given back over to wilderness because of that inability to compete with the vast farms in Texas and other states.

The hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) suggested that New Zealand might be a model to follow, as shown so wonderfully in the films of “The Lord of the Rings”. However, the landscape of north-east England, with its drystone walls, hedgerows and its people, is not comparable with that. In the Northumbrian countryside, someone is never more than a few hundred metres from a wall, house, field, home or road. New Zealand has only 4 million people but 20 million sheep, and although I admire and recognise those different forms of landscape beauty, I do not want that imposed on the north-east.

Sir Paul Beresford: New Zealand also produces other agricultural products such as wine and fruit—apples, pears and so on. Many of the units in New Zealand are small, but they work together as co-operatives that do not damage the countryside, and something similar could quite easily take place in many areas of this country. The countryside would be preserved; jobs would be created; and the economic value of those small units would be lifted.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, but let us be clear. He gives the example of wine—we are not huge producers of that in Northumberland—and fruit, but I am talking about lamb, sheep and the other products of small-scale farming in the highly temperate climate that drives our beautiful, natural landscape. That is what I want to continue.

British farmers have been able successfully to compete on both quality and price in markets defined by EU food safety rules. For example, British farmers export far more wheat flour to the European Union—approximately 250,000 tonnes last year—than they do to non-EU countries, at approximately 6,000 tonnes, and the same goes for other agricultural products such as barley and oats. The EU is the largest importer and exporter of food in the world, and as part of an EU member state, our farmers have benefited from preferential access to that market through exemptions from the tariffs and quotas that are imposed on non-member countries, and without dropping our environmental and farming standards.

With 85% of seasonal agricultural workers in the EU coming from Bulgaria and Romania, agriculture is one UK sector dependent on freedom of movement. The immigration Bill will clearly do nothing to enable the continuation of what the Government are pleased to call “low-skilled” workers—those who earn below £30,000—but what about the Agriculture Bill? Will it protect our small farmers? It does nothing to address concerns about competition, and it places no duties on the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. It offers no funding and no environmental safeguards.

The Government are showing yet again that they are not prepared to deliver a farming environment that protects our environment as well as the standard and quality of our food.

Our automotive sector is a global success story, although, as we saw in the sad announcements from Honda and Nissan, it now faces challenges due to technology, climate change and Brexit. It is clear that this is not all about Brexit. As I said, there is technology and there is climate change. However, the automotive sector is one of the most competitive and highly integrated industrial sectors. When there is one disabling factor that is a unique disadvantage for UK producers—Brexit is a unique disadvantage for UK producers—we are more likely to lose in the competition for future investment. The inability or the decision of this Government not to take a no-deal Brexit off the table means that our investment is falling.

Matt Western: My hon. Friend not only beautifully illustrates the north-east of England, but she is making very important points about the farming community and the automotive industry. On Honda’s announcement,
this is the first car plant it will have ever closed in its entire 71-year history. That is not coincidental. Brexit is, as she says, just one element, but when working with such thin, narrow margins in such a competitive sector, it is what triggers the review and subsequent decision to disinvest.

Chi Onwurah: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent point. The competitiveness of the sector means that margins are narrow, so any such factor—Brexit and access to markets are significant factors—will place us at a continued disadvantage. The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders says that no deal could cost the car industry up to £4.5 billion in tariffs.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): The hon. Lady makes the powerful case against no deal, which is why the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, and practically the whole of business, is urging her and her colleagues to vote for the Government’s deal. Why will she not do so? Why does she put so many jobs at risk? Why is she peddling the myth that investment is falling, when overall the latest figures suggest that Britain continues to lead Europe on investment?

Chi Onwurah: I thank the Minister for that intervention and for giving me the opportunity to reiterate that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), the shadow Secretary of State said, the false choice between the Government’s bad deal and no deal is in effect an act of economic blackmail. Industry sectors have said they would prefer the Government’s deal to no deal, but they also said that it is a bad deal. It is a bad deal for British industry. It pushes the key decisions out two years into the future. In two years’ time, we will be facing, with less leverage, exactly the same challenges under his deal.

Graham Stuart: Which business organisations have said that they think this is a bad deal?

Chi Onwurah: The Minister knows very well that the business organisations that have said that to me—I speak to them extensively as a shadow Minister—do not wish their names to be given. [Interruption.] They have said it. They do not wish to be named in Parliament, because they fear the negative reaction of Ministers such as himself.

Matt Western: Very simply, the reality is that this is not just about no deal. Businesses, the manufacturing sector, the CBI, the Federation of Small Businesses and all the others are saying that they would prefer for us to stay in a customs union and a single market. That has been the Labour party position since February last year. It is absolutely clear. That is where the manufacturing sector wants to stay. The CEOs of Jaguar Land Rover, Airbus and others all want us to stay in a customs union and a single market.

Chi Onwurah: I thank my hon. Friend for that important point. Many organisations, such as the Manufacturing Trade Remedies Alliance, have explicitly come out against the Government’s deal and repeatedly said that they want a customs union. That is an implicit criticism of the Government’s deal.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Chi Onwurah: I will give way, but I do not wish to emulate others in making long speeches.

Andrew Griffiths: The hon. Lady mentioned businesses that are not prepared to go on the record. I quote: “This is not a Brexit-related issue for us”, and this decision is “being made” on the basis of “global...changes”—those are the words of Ian Howells, Honda’s senior vice-president for Europe. It is clearly disingenuous to suggest that Honda’s decision was based on Brexit. Does she accept that, because Ian Howells says so?

Chi Onwurah: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was in his place when I started speaking, but I acknowledge that Honda’s decision is not entirely based on Brexit. However, as we have been discussing, the uncertainty in the business environment caused by Brexit has an impact on investment. The Minister stated that investment was not down, but investment in the automotive industry has gone down by almost 50% in the last year. At the same time, components worth £35 million are delivered from the European Union every day. That partly reflects the way in which our supply chains are integrated.

Government Members, many of whom pride themselves on their business experience, seem to fail to understand that supply chains—as a chartered engineer, I have been involved in many supply chains—such as the automotive supply chain are highly integrated and highly just-in-time. We have automotive supply chains that cross the channel backwards and forwards multiple times—for example, a crankshaft can be made in France, go to the west midlands to be drilled and milled and then sent to Munich to be put in an engine, which then comes back to Oxford—and the channel would be a tariff border. Such integration requires not only frictionless borders, but agreed standards to define everything from the acceptable frequency of electromagnetic radiation to the atomic composition of a given chemical. In leaving the European Union, what the Government apparently want is not less regulation, but simply more duplication, setting up new regulatory bodies to recreate existing European agencies and regulations. Far from Brussels imposing regulation on the European Union, it was often acting as an outsourcer for regulation that we would need in any case.

The automotive industry delivers not gig economy or minimum wage jobs, but good, well-paid jobs, and we in the north-east, particularly as the only region in the country that still exports more than it imports—we are very proud to have the most productive Nissan plant in the world in our region—refuse to envisage the future that the Government seem to desire, whereby our manufacturing is undermined by taking us out of the biggest free trade area in the world, one which is absolutely essential to us.

Barry Gardiner: It pains me to advise my hon. Friend of this, but in the last quarterly set of figures, that honourable exception of the north-east being the only region that exports more than it imports is no longer the case. I know that, as a doughty fighter for the north-east, that is not what she wants to hear, but it is testament to what happens under this Government.
Chi Onwurah: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I had not seen the last set of quarterly figures. I hope that in the annual figures, we are still exporting more than we import, but that is testament to the fact that manufacturing is not safe in Tory hands. In particular, manufacturing would be devastated by a Tory Brexit. The Honda announcement was devastating for families and friends of the employees there and we do not want to see any more announcements like that.

The thing that really upsets me is when the Tories claim that to take a no-deal Brexit off the table would be like someone telling a car dealer that they were not willing to walk away. With Brexit, we are not trying to buy a car in a car dealership. We are trying to build cars across the European Union that will deliver good jobs. Choosing to leave a no-deal Brexit on the table is an act of unparalleled economic sabotage by this Government.

Matt Western: To highlight the point my hon. Friend is making so well, has she heard and was she as appalled as I was by the comments made by Matthew Lesh of the Adam Smith Institute a couple of weeks ago on the radio, that this is all about free markets, liberalising trade, 0% tariffs, competency and competitive advantage, and if we lost our manufacturing industry in the process of achieving that, so be it?

Chi Onwurah: My hon. Friend raises a very unpleasant memory for me of when, as an engineering student at Imperial, back in the 80s, I heard Margaret Thatcher say that the UK was going to be competitive on the global stage in finance and other services, and the rest of the world could be our manufacturer. The consequences of the lack of support for manufacturing from successive Conservative Governments are seen in the average wages of our constituents, day in, day out.

I want to talk briefly about negotiating power. The car buyer fallacy is not the only Tory fantasy; the idea that we will do so much better in trade negotiations on our own than with the collective power of the European Union is a total fantasy. The Secretary of State said that on our own, we would be nimble, negotiating deals the clunky 27 could not, such as with the United States. European Union gross domestic product is seven or eight times greater than that of the UK, so it offers greater opportunity for profit. Any trade agreement that delivers 1% improved profitability with the European Union would have to do seven times better with the United Kingdom to be as attractive. The Government are arguing that in the margins of the differences between ourselves and other EU members, without damaging environmental standards or working rights, we will be able to deliver seven times the benefits to any trading partner. That is a fantasy we will pay for.

African and other Commonwealth countries are not part of this debate, but the Secretary of State spoke quite extensively about them in his opening speech. One of the many disingenuous—indeed, deceptive—ways in which the leave campaign sought support during the referendum campaign was to promise better immigration and trade opportunities for Commonwealth and African countries in an attempt to draw in Commonwealth and African diaspora citizens to voting leave. Well, the £30,000 salary threshold for skilled immigrants shows clearly that there are to be no greater immigration opportunities for people from Commonwealth and African countries.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Africa, I know how important trade is to African countries. The subject is raised regularly with me by incoming delegations. It is true that the economic partnership agreements between the European Union and African nations are flawed because they lack transparency and because they limit scope for African Governments to make their own development choices and industrialisation plans, but many—indeed, most—African nations see the UK as the entry point to European Union markets, and they are at a loss to understand why we are abandoning the world’s greatest free market area. What they seek is continuity and fair access to our markets, and clearly this Government can offer neither.

In the almost three years since the Brexit vote, we have learned much more about what Brexit involves and what the choices are. Now it is clear that all forms of Brexit involve an economic hit, but this Government’s Brexit trade policies and, in particular, leaving no deal on the table are a form of economic sabotage, and that is something to which I will not be a party.

3.29 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Earlier this week, I did not expect to be here today. I was planning a day in my constituency, working. However, the volume of emails and other messages that I received from constituents asking me to attend this debate and set out their concerns made me change my mind. I am glad that the Secretary of State has returned to the Chamber at such an appropriate time: I can make my constituents’ points to him very clearly.

I fear that I have no erudite or detailed points to make. I want to tell the House about my constituents’ concerns, although I do not think that they will come as any surprise. Indeed, the Secretary of State referred to some of them in his opening speech, and they have been mentioned since. I am sure that I am not the only Member of Parliament whose constituents have been in touch this week, expressing strong feelings about some key principles.

I want to make a few points, quite briefly. The first relates to a matter that we have discussed before. My constituents have fears about the NHS, and about the opening up of our national health service to competition from overseas companies as a result of trade deals. I heard what the Secretary of State said earlier. People in the north-east not only enjoy beautiful countryside—as was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah)—but have strong views about the NHS. They firmly believe that it should not be opened up further to competition. As we have heard today, there is already competition in the NHS, but we do not want it to increase. I ask the Secretary of State to reiterate, very clearly, that our NHS is not for sale as part of a trade deal.

The second issue raised by my constituents concerns environmental and food safety standards. We have all heard many times the classic example of fears about trade deals with the United States involving imported chlorinated chicken, but there are other examples. My constituents fear the impact of these trade deals, feeling that they will weaken our environmental standards and also weaken labour terms and conditions.
Dr Drew: What the Government must do is very simple. They must accept one of the amendments to the Agriculture Bill that rule out any lowering of standards. Surely the Government can do that, and then we can all support where we go as a result of that agreement.

Liz Twist: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and look forward to the Secretary of State’s comments on it.

Dr Fox: The hon. Lady has asked for my reassurance. As I mentioned earlier, article 23.4 of the comprehensive economic and trade agreement states:

“The Parties recognise that it is inappropriate to encourage trade or investment by weakening or reducing the levels of protection afforded in their labour law and standards.”

The protections for which the hon. Lady has specifically asked are included in a document that has already been ratified by the United Kingdom Parliament. My question is this: why did the Labour party not vote for it?

Liz Twist: I thank the Secretary of State for his comments, and for pointing me to that document. I am sure that my constituents will be glad to hear what he has said, but they will also want me to ensure that the issue continues to be at the heart of our discussions and interventions.

That concern about people and labour standards brings me to my third point. Just before Christmas, I was pleased to be able to lead a debate on Traidcraft and the future of fair trade. One of the issues raised was also raised today by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms): trading status with less developed and developing countries. We were seeking assurances that those countries would continue to have access; I noted the Secretary of State’s earlier comments on that matter but would welcome further assurances, perhaps by the Minister in summing up this debate. It is important for trading and the economic development of those countries, but there is also an important gender equality element in dealing with those countries to ensure they continue to have that focus.

Finally, people wanted me to raise the issue of scrutiny. There is real concern that trade deals will be signed off behind closed doors. Again, I note that the Secretary of State touched on that, but we need to be very clear that there is the best possible scrutiny of the trade deals being done; Parliament must be able to take a full part in that, and it must be transparent. My constituents must be able to see that that is happening. It is very important that that happens.

These are not the detailed points that many other Members have raised, but they are the issues that most concern my constituents, and they must be addressed in the discussions. Again, I ask the Minister to address clearly the concerns of my constituents.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I call the Front Benchers to sum up the debate, let me thank the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for her brevity this afternoon. I have been listening to the whole of this debate and the hon. Lady said as much in six minutes as others took over 20 minutes to say. Her constituency is well served this afternoon: because she did not take the extra 15 or 20 minutes she could have taken, none of her constituents have suffered at all as she has spoken well for them. I make this point because I can tell the House that the Front-Bench opening contributors had a very good debate; it went back and forward with interventions and that is how a debate should be. But the Front-Bench contributors at that point spoke between them for 97 minutes—let me repeat that; 97 minutes. But I do not have to repeat that again as many Members have repeated points this afternoon over and over again. It is customary at the end of a debate that when the Front Benches have taken 97 minutes—oh, I did not count the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie), who spoke for the Scottish National party; his was a very reasonable 17-minute contribution, which takes the Front-Bench contributions to 114 minutes if I am to be accurate—the wind-ups normally take 10 minutes. Clearly there is some elasticity this afternoon, but that does not mean the Front Benchers whom I am about to call can each speak for some 40 minutes just because the remaining time would allow that. What kind of example is it for Members of Parliament speaking in the Chamber of the House of Commons to take the attitude that because something can be done it should be done, and that indulgence and self-indulgence is to be accepted? It is not, but I am quite sure that I can rely on the spokesmen from the Front Benches now to sum up in the usual amount of time which is taken for these matters, which is between 10 and 15 minutes each.

3.39 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. It certainly has been a very thorough debate, and I certainly do not intend to go into the Minister’s allocation of time and will be well within my half of what is remaining. I can certainly confirm that.

At the start of the debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) raised a point of order. He said that a written ministerial statement on trade continuity under a no-deal scenario was due to be published today—it was listed as No. 4 on the Order Paper—but that it was not available by the start of our deliberations. It had still not been published on the internet by 2.30 pm, but happily the Vote Office very kindly delivered a copy to me at about 2.10 pm, which was some time after the Front-Bench speeches to which you have just referred, Madam Deputy Speaker. The document is entirely relevant to our deliberations. It refers to mutual recognition agreements with the United States, Australia and New Zealand, and much more besides that is relevant to the debate. I shall take the time to refer to it during my remarks. It is a shame that it was not here earlier, as it would have enabled other Members to have the relevant information.

Distance is important. The value of our trading relationship with Ireland is higher than the value of UK trade with Italy or Spain, even though Ireland’s economy is much smaller than that of either Italy or Spain. Members should not just take my word for it; that is the view of the Office for National Statistics. If the Government have their way, we will abandon the deal that we have on our doorstep for a deal—or a series of deals—on the other side of the planet. Trade by teleport is not a reality, however. I am glad that the Secretary of State has acknowledged the fact that we are on the other side of the world from the Pacific. It is also a fact that he is proposing that we become a nation that is reliant on

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carbon-pumping trade deals, which is somewhat at odds with the claim in his opening speech that he is going to uphold our climate change obligations.

**Dr Fox:** Is the hon. Gentleman’s logic that if we had less trade overall, less carbon would be emitted and that would be a good thing?

**Bill Esterson:** What an absurd intervention—but we have come to expect nothing less from the Secretary of State. Of course we should have trade around the world, but we should not be prioritising trade on the far side of the world over trade on our own doorstep. He knows that only too well. That has been the theme of this debate.

The Secretary of State quoted the interpretative instrument in CETA. As the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) mentioned, the Canadians have the highest use of investor-state dispute settlement arrangements anywhere in the world, so they have form when it comes to the use of such systems. The problem is that the instrument does not alter, let alone override, the text of CETA. Article 31 of the Vienna convention states that treaties “shall be interpreted in good faith in accordance with the ordinary meaning to be given to the terms of the treaty in their context and in the light of its object and purpose.”

However, if there is “any conflict or confusion between CETA’s plain wording and the instrument, it is CETA’s text that prevails...The critical point is that while the parties retain the right to regulate, they must do so in conformity with their CETA obligations and commitments.”

Those are the words of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. The interpretive instrument that the Secretary of State referred to does not overrule the main CETA documents. Those of our constituents who have written to us with their concerns about the threat of the privatisation of the national health service as a result of the negotiation of deals—the subjects of which have been covered in this debate—are right to be concerned, given the contents of the CETA document and the legal opinions on it. They are right to raise those concerns, as was my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) earlier.

Turning to the opportunities to scrutinise the negotiation of these deals, I wonder whether the Minister could pick up on the thread of the debate about whether this is our one and only opportunity to do that or whether there will be further chances for Members of Parliament to debate and challenge the mandate for negotiation and then to scrutinise any proposals put forward during the negotiations. What is going to replace the current arrangements through the Council of Ministers, the international trade committee of the European Parliament, the European Parliament itself, and our own European Scrutiny Committee? I note that the written ministerial statement refers to “full parliamentary scrutiny processes to ratify some UK-third country agreements”, so what are those processes? Do they represent full scrutiny, or are they the Henry VIII powers that the Secretary of State advocated in the Trade Bill, which mean an absence of any meaningful scrutiny of measures, especially given the inability to influence their contents? The same point applies to the new agreements referred to in this debate.

Businesses that want certainty had to change from WTO arrangements with Japan, to which the statement refers, to EU-Japan agreement arrangements at the start of this year. Presumably, they will now have to change back to us trading with Japan through the WTO, which again is mentioned in the statement, and then, once agreed, to UK-Japan bilateral agreement arrangements. That is far from a demonstration of certainty for business, but that is what the written statement appears to confirm, which prompts the question of why there was a delay in the appearance of the missing information.

**Dr Drew:** Does my hon. Friend agree that we need primary legislation, not hour-and-a-half debates in Committee Rooms? Some of us are spending much of our time upstairs rushing through all sorts of incredibly complicated legislation and no one really understands the implications.

**Bill Esterson:** My hon. Friend makes much the same point that my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North and I made when the Trade Bill was in Committee last year about the importance of full scrutiny and a thorough process that goes way beyond the Henry VIII powers that the Secretary of State has been so keen to confer upon himself for the scrutiny of such agreements. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) makes an interesting point about the SIs and the completely inadequate no-deal planning, but that is a discussion for another time, although I share his concern about the pressure being put on Members to vote for the Prime Minister’s bad deal, as my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North described it earlier.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) spoke about the frequency of the legal action being taken by Canadian companies, which was also mentioned by the hon. Member for Dundee East. She also advocated greater regional and national engagement in scrutiny and said we should learn from international good practice, and I agree. My hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) also said that we should learn from other countries. When our own Government say that they cannot give us information because it is confidential and would affect delicate negotiations, it is odd that we can find out what is going on from the other countries involved. He also mentioned the importance of looking after our own street first and referred to prioritising a trade deal with the EU before looking for deals on the other side of the world.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) spoke about landscape, cars and the environment, describing the contrast between agriculture in the UK and the US and the difficulties facing our farmers in surviving and competing in the world trade world that the Secretary of State envisages. She made a good point about sustainability and the importance of the rural environment, and she was right to cite the desire of much of industry, across sectors, for a customs union to support frictionless trade.

We have a trade deal, which represents 48% of our trade, on our doorstep. The deal ensures frictionless trade and access to the single market, as well as access to 11% of the rest of our trade through deals with 70 or so further countries, but as the written ministerial statement shows, only six new trade deals have been signed so far, and we leave the EU at the end of March.

I was startled to find out that neither the Defence Secretary nor the International Trade Secretary has learned the basics of diplomacy. Domestic sabre rattling
on China, which we assume is part of the Defence Secretary’s leadership campaign, has jeopardised talks with China, while the International Trade Secretary has managed to insult the Japanese. [Interjection.] Excuse me. I think the International Trade Secretary had something to say to me there.

Graham Stuart: He was just obliging you.

Bill Esterson: Was he? That is very kind of him.

In 2017, a number of Australian academics warned of the danger that “Australia’s interests get caught up in the possibly unrealistic worldview of the Brexiteers and thus Australia becomes collateral damage of...British politics.” Why might they say that with this Secretary of State in charge?

In the real world, my constituents who put their goods on a ship at the port of Liverpool today do not know whether the ship will be able to dock in Tokyo on 30 March and what arrangements will be in place. They want the Government to show that they understand diplomacy, and they want them to avoid causing offence in delicate trade negotiations.

This week, in Swindon, we have seen what is happening in the real world: real workers’ jobs going—3,500 of them—and real communities affected. We are party to a trade agreement with Japan through our membership of the European Union, and the deal has not prevented the disinvestment of Japanese companies such as Honda and Nissan.

“The idea that Brexit uncertainty is irrelevant to this is fanciful. How are Honda supposed to calculate the costs and benefits of staying in the UK in the overall global context against such lack of clarity on the future terms of trade?” Those are not my words but the words of Sir David Warren, the former UK ambassador to Japan.

Dr Fox: I would have thought that the management of Honda are closer to this issue, and they say it is a result of changes in the international car industry and specifically not a result of Brexit. Why does the hon. Gentleman want to make it so when the company itself says it is not true?

Bill Esterson: As my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North was just saying to me, Honda’s management are far too well-mannered to say these things in public, but a former ambassador will tell it as it is, and I would have thought the Secretary of State wanted to take the advice of somebody with Sir David Warren’s experience.

Dr Fox: That just will not wash. Why, then, is Honda leaving Turkey? Is that the result of Brexit as well?

Bill Esterson: The leave campaign pushed the point rather hard about Turkey’s accession to the EU.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman)—this is the bigger point about the Secretary of State’s involvement—spoke about the failure to ensure, when the EU-Japan deal was negotiated, that there was support for the foreign direct investment and its critical place in our car industry, whether at Honda or Nissan. The Secretary of State’s answer is that he will not change his approach in the future trade deals he negotiates once we have left the EU. That is a pretty grim predictor of what is going to happen under this Secretary of State and his colleagues in their support—or rather lack of it—for our industry, our manufacturing industry and our car industry in particular.

Matt Western: I mentioned Margaret Thatcher earlier. If she were still around today, she would not settle for Honda leaving the UK. She would fight with every fibre in her body to defend our interests in retaining that important business in the UK. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Bill Esterson: We have come to an interesting point, with Labour Members citing Margaret Thatcher and the fact that she founded the single market of the European Union to demonstrate just how wrong the current Government, who claim her inheritance, are in their international trade policy.

I have taken a number of interventions and I am very cognisant of your strictures for me to keep things to a minimum, Madam Deputy Speaker. As I was saying, the alternative is to deliver certainty. That alternative can come with a new customs union and a deal with the single market on regulations, standards and common institutions that protects our trade with the EU and with our partners around the world. The difficulties in renegotiating the deals with our partners have been laid bare in recent weeks by the failure of the International Trade Secretary to make progress on more than a handful of such deals, quite apart from the uncertainty over our future trading relationship with the EU. He wants to align with lower standards from the US.

Dr Fox: That is not what I said.

Bill Esterson: Well, the Secretary of State has been saying that for years. The Chair of the International Trade Committee spoke earlier, and the Committee’s report set out the consequences of a deal with the US: it will inevitably lead to a conflict, with the potential for lower standards, impacting our ability to do a trade deal with the EU. That point should be listened to and the Minister should respond to it in his summing up.

We have had an excellent debate and I sincerely hope that the Minister will respond to the challenges set to him about where we have reached. In particular, I hope he will address whether adequate protection is in place for our agriculture, car industry and other manufacturing sectors and whether there will be further opportunity to scrutinise international trade agreements and their preparation with the US, Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific rim. I thank my colleagues for their contributions to the debate. I look forward to scrutinising the Government in the coming months on these points, but the fact that only five roll-over deals have been completed so far does not bode well under this Secretary of State and his ministerial team. [Interjection.]

3.58 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): I hear urgings from Opposition Members, not least the Chairman of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil). It is a pleasure to conclude this debate about future trade agreements, in which we have
heard interesting contributions, ranging from the profound to, more recently, the bizarre. Nearly all have been interesting and I wish to thank everyone who has taken part. I particularly want to thank the Chairman of the Select Committee and its members for their thoughtful and well-informed contributions.

Today’s debate is just one way in which the Government are seeking to ensure that the House of Commons, the House of Lords, the devolved Administrations and wider society are engaged in, consulted on and fully briefed about future trade agreements. It is the Secretary of State’s profound belief that only a transparent and inclusive approach is appropriate as the UK sets out on its exciting journey towards a fully independent trade policy. Ninety per cent. of global growth over the next few years is expected to occur in areas of the world outside the EU—90%. That is why we should remember that there is a world beyond Europe, and I promise that there will be a time beyond Brexit. The purpose of this debate was to enable Parliament’s voice to be heard on the potential agreements, prior to the UK’s negotiating objectives being formed.

Although international trade policy is reserved, we have committed to holding formal and regular inter-governmental ministerial forums with Ministers from the devolved Administrations to consider future trade agreements. We ran public consultations on the four potential agreements that we are debating. They lasted 14 weeks, as has been said, and closed on 26 October last year. In addition, we held 12 events throughout the UK’s nations and regions to engage business and civil society alike. So, we are not just talking about unprecedented engagement, we are seeking to deliver it. In total, we received a remarkable 600,000 submissions in response to the four consultations. We are analysing those responses to ensure that they can help to shape our approach to the negotiations. Notwithstanding the understandable frustration about wanting that to speed up, I am sure that Members from all parties understand why we should try to get it right. We will publish our response to all four consultations before any negotiations begin.

Emma Little Pengelly rose—

Graham Stuart: As I am talking about consultation and engagement, I shall give way to the hon. Lady.

Emma Little Pengelly: One of the positive things about this debate has been the many voices from across the UK, the devolved regions and the other regions throughout England. As we go through the immediate period, there will be concerns from businesses, particularly in Northern Ireland where we do not have a devolved Assembly so cannot participate formally. Will the Minister have an open-door policy in his Department, and encourage his ministerial colleagues to do the same, so that businesses and organisations from across the regions and right across the UK can articulate concerns and genuinely be listened to? That way, we can make sure that this is a truly global UK agenda moving forward.

Graham Stuart: As ever, the hon. Lady speaks powerfully on behalf of her constituency and, indeed, Northern Ireland. That is a really important point for us to take note of. As I have said, we are led by the Secretary of State in our determination to make sure that we get this right and fully engage people. One of the well-informed Opposition Members said earlier that some of the concerns about TTIP were asinine but, the allegation was, badly politically mishandled. By engaging all parts of the United Kingdom, as I have set out, we are absolutely determined to try to make sure that asinine, false issues do not blind us to the real ones. There are genuine trade-offs to be had in trade agreements, and we should look at and understand them. We need to make sure that we are not spending our time dealing with issues that are not in fact real and are just peddled, often by groups, for political purposes.

Stewart Hosie: I agree with the Minister that it is better to take one’s time to analyse the responses to the consultation, but does he or the Secretary of State intend to go back out for further public negotiation once the negotiating mandate for the deals is agreed?

Graham Stuart: First, I should say that parliamentarians will continue to be able to inform the negotiations. Parliament will be updated regularly as the negotiations progress, and it will be Parliament, through the process set out in the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, which was passed by the Labour party, that will ultimately play its role in the ratification of any new FTA.

Barry Gardiner: Will the Minister give way?

Graham Stuart: I will not.

Both Houses will be fully involved as we balance meaningful scrutiny with the security necessary to protect sensitive negotiating positions and market-sensitive data. Having reflected on the contributions in this debate, including those of the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie), we will return with more detailed proposals shortly, ahead of the next stage of the Trade Bill.

As I said, we have had interesting contributions from Government and Opposition Members. I shall pick on some. The right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) noted in an intervention that he fully accepts that there is no threat to the NHS from the potential trade deals. He has accepted that we are not going to let that happen. I hope that Opposition Members, who have, like me, heard the concerns of many constituents on that front, can not only bring those concerns to the House but help to allay them. If there is a genuine issue, it is worth looking at it, but if there is not, we do not want false fears. There are enough real challenges facing us without spectral ones being introduced as well.

The issue of developing countries and what more we can do was touched on by Members on both sides of the House. One Opposition Member—I cannot remember who it was—sounded rather sceptical, saying that we might go backwards in that regard. I think that there is a real opportunity to go forward. As the Secretary of State has said, bringing trade and development together is really important if we are to help people out of poverty. Ultimately, trade, not aid is the way out of poverty. Therefore, the issues that have been raised here, not least about coffee and other such products, are about making sure that poorer countries can add value in their country and then sell into the UK. That is the kind of forward-looking policy that we have in mind.

Market access was also touched on. While we are talking about these big flagship trade deals, more advantage could well be had by targeting smaller market access
issues. We heard about the pork industry earlier, and we could mention the opening up of Taiwan and China to pork. It has made an enormous difference to the pork industry in this country. There is an opportunity to do much more in many other areas, not least in the new digital and data-related areas as well.

The hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) did his usual gloom routine. I really do not understand how such a dynamic and forward-looking area as Swansea can be represented by someone who is so down on this country and its future prospects. I really hope that, at some point, he will cheer up and recognise that there is an upside, and that every cloud does have a silver lining.

The hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) mentioned differences between the EU mandate and our own. We will set out our plans and a scoping document in due course. As I have said, we really are committed to making sure that this House and, as broadly as possible, civil society and certainly the devolved Administrations can be included, and we will be having that inter-ministerial forum as well.

Barry Gardiner rose—

Graham Stuart: I will give way to the shadow Secretary of State.

Barry Gardiner: I just wanted to say thank you.

Graham Stuart: Excellent. That is delightful.

I have been speaking for eight minutes so far, and will seek to stay within the time. My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) was informative, fascinating and interesting when he talked about the scale of farms. Agriculture was raised in the debate. There is a balancing act to be done between looking after consumers and making sure that we look after the beautiful countryside, not least in the north-east of England, but in the rest of the country as well. If there are to be any changes—liberalisation, for example—they need to be done in a sensible way that maximises the potential upsides and minimises any downsides to any losers.

The Chairman of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), said that we needed to carry Parliament with us, and he is absolutely right. In talking about winners and losers, he mentioned compensation for areas that lose out. By having a central Treasury, this country makes sure that we provide a counterbalance between those areas that do less well and those areas that do better. I point to the behaviour of the Department for International Trade. As the Minister responsible for investment, my job is to lead the investment team. [Interruption.] Well, the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson), seems to invent facts rather than actually access them. If he looks at the latest numbers from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, probably the most respected ones globally, he will see that they suggest that, while global foreign direct investment fell markedly last year, that in the EU fell even more, and the UK—despite that—went up by 20%. So there is little truth in the suggestion, which we hear so often from the Opposition, that somehow things are going downhill. We have more people in work than ever before, more disabled people in work than ever before, rising wages and lower inflation. The truth is that we have fewer unemployed young people than at any time in our history. This is good news. Trying to talk the country down about both its future and its present may be a standard Opposition tactic, but, in the current circumstances, it is, frankly, disingenuous.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Other than spending consequential in this centralised UK state, there are no fiscal transfers from the south to the north of England—for example, when the north of England got damaged by the air transport policy that the UK ran for about 40 years. I just caution the Minister against being too complacent. The UK is not doing what it should to offset the bias of the sterling zone and the UK centralised Government towards the south-east of England.

Graham Stuart: We have seen investment spreading out from London and the south-east. If the Chair of the Select Committee looks at the EY report, he will find that there has been a big change in the amount of investment going into the regions and nations of the country—away from London—over the last number of years. I recommend that report to him. In addition, it points out that there has been an increase in the share going to manufacturing.

The Opposition are again peddling the falsehood that we are somehow seeing a loss of manufacturing. On the contrary, manufacturing is becoming more efficient and competitive. It is competitiveness that will ultimately lead to higher living standards and it is competitiveness that this Government understand. The Opposition too often want to be on the side of protection, rather than enhancing competition while managing it, and that is why almost every Labour Government in history have ended with higher unemployment at the end than at the beginning, and it is why the Conservative party and this Government have a proud record of creating more employment.

I hope that these limited responses have been helpful to hon. Members. As I have said, we are listening closely to the views expressed in this debate and will reflect seriously on them before laying our outline approaches to our first negotiations before the House—and we will do that.

The United Kingdom’s exit from the European Union provides us with a golden opportunity to negotiate, sign and ratify new free trade agreements as an independent free trading nation for the first time in more than 40 years, and it is an opportunity that this Government and this party are determined to seize.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered potential future free trade agreements: Australia, New Zealand, US and a comprehensive and progressive agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.
Northern Ireland Backstop: Conditional Interpretative Declaration

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Craig Whittaker.]

4.11 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): On 23 June 2016, the voters of the United Kingdom gave their instructions to the Government by a majority of over 1 million. Since then, it has been both the duty and the policy of the Government to implement the result of this country’s vote—a vote which the people were promised was a full and final decision, and which the overwhelming majority of Members of Parliament promised to enact. In passing the withdrawal agreement, the Government may find it valuable to use an instrument of international law called a conditional interpretative declaration to clarify our understanding of the temporary nature of the backstop.

I have been a passionate critic of our relationship with the European Union for decades. There has been a fundamental difference between what the EU has always been and what we were told it was. In the 1970s, we were told that it was a common market—a mere economic relationship. Of course, given our geographical proximity, a great deal of economic integration and co-ordination makes sense. We want to facilitate trade so that our workers and businesses can grow in prosperity together. But the EU was always a project for a political union. Indeed, they have made that clear many times. They simply do not want to unpick the agreement. There is a strong opposition within the EU to changing the agreed text. They simply do not want to unpick the agreement. Indeed, they have made that clear many times.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way and for putting forward his viewpoint in the Chamber today. No matter what the issue may be, the Unionist population in Northern Ireland are clear that they do not want a backstop, and if it is going to be removed, it has to be via a legally binding document that will reinforce and give us confidence in any process that goes forward. We do not want Northern Ireland to be treated any differently from the rest of the United Kingdom. I know that the right hon. Gentleman is saying that, so if we move forward, the backstop has to be removed or it has to be time limited within this term of Parliament because we can then control it in the House in the time that is available to us.

Northern Ireland Backstop: Conditional Interpretative Declaration

The weaknesses of the backstop are manifest. There are legitimate fears that, if negotiations for a permanent UK-EU relationship break down, we may find ourselves legally obliged to be stuck in a customs union without end. Indeed, we have read my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General’s opinion, which worries many people. Were we to be stuck in a customs union, it would be a complete betrayal of voters and the referendum mandate, not to mention the Government’s solemn commitments to implement Brexit.

Given the current state of play, it looks as though there are four options at hand. The ideal solution is for the backstop to be withdrawn and the protocol to be withdrawn from the withdrawal agreement. A new protocol could be submitted committing the UK and the EU to sorting out a trade facilitation agreement using electronic documentation, trusted trader schemes and remote electronic monitoring of cross-border traffic, with no hard border or any kind of physical infrastructure. It is not impossible to get such an agreement in place by 29 March, but it is unlikely, unfortunately, given the strong opposition within the EU to changing the agreed text. They simply do not want to unpick the agreement. Indeed, they have made that clear many times.

Sir Edward Leigh: I entirely agree with that. I have been working on this issue with international lawyers for some weeks precisely to try to implement what the Democratic Unionist party wants, first because that is the way to get this through Parliament and secondly because I agree with it. I agree with the DUP. In fact, I agree with the DUP on most things. If the hon. Gentleman will be patient, I will try to outline a legally enforceable way in which we can time-limit the backstop. That is terribly important. It has to be clear cut, legally enforceable and, above all, not subject to any kind of arbitration that is in any way in the hands of the EU. I am trying to get to where the DUP is, and if the hon. Gentleman will listen, I hope that I can help him out with a way forward. In fact, I hope that I can help out the EU and our Government.

We all know that the unfortunate thing is that the current deal cannot get through Parliament because people do not trust the EU not to spin things out, but the EU says that it will not unpick the agreement. That is why everyone says that there is an impasse. I am not sure that that is entirely correct. I think there is a way of proceeding.

I was saying before the hon. Gentleman’s intervention that we could get an agreement and get rid of the backstop altogether, but that is unlikely given the EU’s attitude. Secondly, there is a reasonable possibility that even without any amendments to the current agreement, “alternative arrangements” could start to operate on
the Northern Irish border during the transition period. These would supersede the protocol and make it irrelevant before it could even be applied. Indeed, the Prime Minister has said many times that she does not even want the backstop to come into force. Unfortunately, but understandably, there is not enough trust in the Commons to rely on that happening.

Thirdly, there is the suggestion of a unilateral exit mechanism. It would be contained within the withdrawal agreement, which would be renegotiated, but the EU is unlikely to agree to any amendment that allows the UK to exit from the backstop if negotiations have broken down, without the EU’s consent. That is where we are at present. Even if such a thing were agreed, the EU could easily prevaricate and deny negotiations had broken down. That is why I made the point earlier that it is important that nothing is subject to international arbitration.

That leaves us with a fourth option: a clear time limit—it would be difficult to arbitrate about that, as we would have reached the time limit or we would not—or an end date for the backstop, which can be obtained by a conditional interpretative declaration. That is what I am now talking about.

I am not sure that in these debates we have had, because of the short time limits that we have been given, anybody has had the time to go into the legal background to this, so it is important that we put it on the record. As far as I know, my understanding of international law is correct, but of course, we have the Minister and my hon. Friends here, and they can put their own viewpoint forward. At least we can get this debate on the record. Let me try to explain.

There is a long-established practice of countries making unilateral statements when they ratify a treaty clarifying how they interpret the wording of a particular aspect of the treaty. The United Kingdom can interpret the wording in the agreement that the backstop is “intended to apply only temporarily” as meaning it must have an end date. What else is temporary? It has an end date, so it must end after a specified period. Such a declaration would be subject to the same rules that are applicable to reservations—another term of art in international law—but would not be a reservation itself, as these cannot be applied to bilateral treaties. Even if the other three options were pursued, whether individually, sequentially or simultaneously, the conditional interpretative declaration would be useful to have on hand already if the first three options ceased to be viable, or if the EU would not negotiate on that basis.

As international law provides that the rules for declarations follow the rules for reservations, it is useful to consult the United Nations International Law Commission’s “Guide to Practice on Reservations to Treaties”. Guideline 1.2 defines an interpretative declaration as “a unilateral statement, however phrased or named, made by a State or an international organization, whereby that State or that organization purports to specify or clarify the meaning or scope of a treaty or of certain of its provisions.”

A conditional interpretative declaration is a more forceful variant of this instrument of international diplomacy whereby the United Kingdom would assert that its consent to be bound by the withdrawal agreement is dependent upon the interpretation that the backstop has an end date.

Lest one think that interpretative declarations are just a back-door way of applying a reservation to a bilateral treaty, it should be clarified that their applicability is much less extensive than that of a reservation. Conditional interpretative declarations cannot negate any part of a treaty. That is a vital part of what I am arguing. I am not trying to negate any part of the withdrawal agreement.

These declarations can only constrain the meaning given to part of a treaty. A state’s declaration when ratifying a multilateral treaty does not stand in the way of that state remaining a party to the treaty. With a conditional interpretative declaration to a bilateral accord, the outright rejection of the declaration by other parties means the treaty would not come into force. I am going to go into this in more detail in a moment.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I want at this stage to ask my right hon. Friend to get on the record the fact that, of course, this is only a draft withdrawal agreement. Furthermore, it is not signed; we know that. If signed, it would be, prima facie, a treaty. Would the question of a manifest violation of our internal law arise if the consequences of what was in the withdrawal agreement vitiated the constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom in relation to Northern Ireland?

Sir Edward Leigh: That is an interesting political argument, and I am not sure I am qualified to give a firm reply. However, there is clearly a lot of concern in the House of Commons, and if the EU is following debates such as this one, it should be aware that there is no way in which the House of Commons will ever vote for any agreement that in any way divides up the United Kingdom. I think we have to make that absolutely clear. If it wants to get a deal through, it has to try to listen to creative solutions, such as the one I am advocating.

I presume that the EU is absolutely sincere in saying that it wants a deal and that it is sincere, as Mr Juncker made clear today, in saying that no deal would be catastrophic not just for the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, but for the EU. I presume it is sincere, and it has to understand what my hon. Friend has said and find a way around it.

Sir William Cash: I want to add a short and simple point to my right hon. Friend’s comment that this would be a political consideration. I used the words “manifest violation”, which is in fact a term of art that arises under article 46 of the Vienna convention. I thought I would put it on the record that this is not political, but legal.

Sir Edward Leigh: As always, I am very grateful to my hon. Friend. One of the advantages of these debates is that we can get such legal points across and put them on the record, and I am grateful to him for making that clear.

With a conditional interpretative declaration to a bilateral accord, the outright rejection of the declaration by the other party means the treaty would not come into force, as I said before the interventions. While there is every chance that the EU might object to a conditional interpretative declaration, that objection might fall short of outright rejection. I want hon. Members to listen to...
that very carefully, because I am trying to find a way forward for Mr Juncker. If they like, I am actually trying to save his face. I am trying to give him an opportunity to object, but not to indulge in outright rejection.

The EU could argue that attempts during negotiations to achieve an end date were rejected, and I am sure it might start by arguing that. It might also argue that an end date would be incompatible with the concept of the three protocols forming an integral part of the agreement, as provided for in article 182 of the withdrawal agreement. However, perfectly valid counterpoints to those objections exist. We would need to argue that our declaration is compatible with our commitment to use “best endeavours” —a very important phrase—to negotiate “alternative arrangements” so that, as provided for, the backstop applies “temporarily”, if indeed it is ever applied at all. That is a fundamental point.

The fact that the backstop would not necessarily come into force under the terms of the agreement means that, in my view, it is not actually integral to the agreement at all. The termination of the backstop within a reasonable amount of time is fully in accord with the agreement, rather than an amendment to it. I therefore think that the arguments in favour of the applicability of just such a declaration are very strong.

What about the European Union’s likely response to such a move? There are four main possibilities. First, it could accept our interpretative declaration and move ahead with obtaining the consent of the European Parliament to the withdrawal agreement. This might include making a political protest, while accepting the declaration’s legality and applicability. That is the ideal response so far as we are concerned. As guideline 1.6.3 states:

“...the interpretation resulting from an interpretative declaration made in respect of a bilateral treaty by a State or an international organization party to the treaty and accepted by the other party constitutes an authentic interpretation of that treaty.”

In other words, we would have obtained a legally binding commitment from the EU to end the backstop—victory.

Secondly, the EU could reply with an assertion that the interpretative declaration is in effect an attempt to impose a unilateral reservation, and therefore has no legal validity, but at the same time agree to negotiate solely on the question of an end date for the backstop to solve this issue head-on. This would mean it had abandoned its previous insistence that no further negotiations were possible—again, a way forward.

Thirdly, the EU might reply that the interpretative declaration has no legal validity, but request further negotiations in the hopes of obtaining something of value in exchange for giving way on an end date for the backstop.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for all his work on this issue, and for securing this debate. Unlike me, he is an eminent lawyer, and I am trying to get my head around some of the complexities of this issue. If we invoke this interpretative declaration and the EU objects, is that legally challengeable, and if so in what court?

Sir Edward Leigh: I think the EU probably would object politically, but that is not enough. That is the point. If it does not want the interpretative declaration to have effect and provide an end date for the backstop, there is only one way out of it: it must refuse to ratify the treaty. A protest or talk of further negotiations is not enough, and that in a sense is the beauty of this. That is why we have these vehicles in international law, and why they have been used on several occasions in the past by countries such as Argentina and others.

There is no point protesting. My hon. Friend says that this is a complicated legal argument, but it is not. It is terribly simple. It is incredibly simple. Under international law one can say, “We interpret this treaty in such a way.” We can deposit that when we ratify the treaty. It is not a codicil as such or a letter; it is deposited with the treaty and has all the legal enforceability of a treaty. If those who are ratifying the treaty with us want to escape from its obligations, there is only one way out: they have to refuse to ratify it. I suggest—I will make this clear again before I sit down—that for political reasons the EU would be unlikely to do that, because it would put all the onus of a no-deal scenario on to it.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for securing this debate—what he says is incredibly interesting, and I defer to him absolutely because he knows much more about this issue than I do. Could there be a situation where the UK makes a conditional interpretative declaration? He has indicated that such a declaration could not negate an aspect of the treaty, but could the EU come to the conclusion that it is not a valid interpretative declaration, due to the fact that it is trying to do something it cannot do—to negate something—and that because it is not valid the EU can ignore it, so the scenario that the right hon. Gentleman has indicated would not arise?

Sir Edward Leigh: That is an interesting point. I am interested in how the Minister will respond, but I think I can give a firm and strong reply. There is no wiggle room around this. The EU cannot say, “Well, you made this interpretative declaration. We don’t agree with it. We are going to carry on and ignore it, and we will impose this backstop on you forever.” There is only one way out of it. I had better be careful in what I say, but I think I am right in saying that at the time of the ratification of the treaty, or within a reasonable time limit, the EU has to refuse to ratify the treaty, otherwise it is bound by it and that declaration is part of that treaty. As far as I am aware, there is absolutely no wiggle room. I know this issue is terribly important for the DUP. There is a lack of trust, and the DUP wants to shut down all possible wiggle room for the EU to get out of this. As far as I am aware, however, there is no way out other than for the EU to refuse to ratify the treaty. If the Minister disagrees with that he can say so when he responds to the debate.

Emma Little Pengelly: Could the right hon. Gentleman clarify that point? In the sphere of international law and disputes, if such a declaration is made and there is a dispute about the validity of that declaration—for example, if we believe it to be valid, but the EU does not—how will that issue be resolved or arbitrated? If there are two inconsistent positions, the EU could refuse to react by ignoring and refusing to accept the validity of the declaration. In international law, is there a clear arbitration pathway for that?

Sir Edward Leigh: The hon. Lady asks how it could be resolved by the EU. It simply refuses to ratify the treaty. There is no deal—end of story. The interpretative declaration falls, the withdrawal agreement falls. We have
made it clear that we are only going to ratify the treaty on the basis of the interpretative declaration that there is an end date to the backstop. They say, “We don’t agree with that, so we’re not going to ratify the treaty”, and that is the end of it.

We cannot impose this. I think people have misunderstood in thinking that we can somehow impose this idea I have been talking about on the EU. We cannot impose our ideas on the EU, but it has to make it clear that it will refuse to ratify the treaty.

Sir William Cash: Would it also be relevant to consider the situation whereby a reservation by one party to a multilateral treaty is only binding on another party when the second party has not made an objection? That, I think, is part of the parameters within which my right hon. Friend is making his argument. But of course it is not just a matter of whether they refuse it; it is whether they make an objection. Is that not something that also ought to be brought into the debate?

Sir Edward Leigh: Yes, it should be brought into the debate. There is no way a party can ignore the interpretative declaration and argue later in a court of international law that there were not aware of it or that it has no validity. It is pretty clear that this is the time to refuse to accept it.

There is, by the way, an argument—I do not want to get into this level of legal detail—about bilateral and multilateral treaties and letters of reservation, which I have talked about in the past. If I have talked about letters of reservation I apologise, because this would I think be a bilateral treaty with the EU, and therefore interpretative declarations are a more appropriate vehicle than letters of reservation. But I think that is almost to become too embroiled in legalisms and legal descriptions. The important thing is that the House understands that there is a way forward.

I was setting out the various scenarios for what might happen. Fourthly, the EU might reply that the submission of the interpretative declaration in fact invalidates the UK’s ratification of the withdrawal agreement and refuse to move on with obtaining the European Parliament’s consent so that the agreement can be fully ratified and come into force. Aside from the arguably dodgy legal grounds the EU would be on, because we would only be interpreting something that the withdrawal agreement says is the view of both parties, that—I have said this already, but I emphasise the point—would also have the effect of shifting responsibility for a no-deal Brexit from the UK on to the EU.

If we ratify the withdrawal agreement with a conditional interpretative declaration providing for a backstop end date, any ensuing deadlock could be ended in a single stroke by the EU simply deciding to accept the declaration. Again, it must be emphasised that under the terms of the backstop protocol it is perfectly possible that the backstop might never enter into force at all. The withdrawal agreement states that its “provisions shall apply unless…they are superseded, in whole or in part, by a subsequent agreement”. Both the UK and the EU are committed to “use their best endeavours” to conclude an agreement superseding the backstop by the end of 2020, the minimum transition period.

The essential purpose of a conditional interpretative declaration, then, is to achieve, before the end of the time limit, a set of trade facilitation procedures, predominantly by the extension of existing electronic customs procedures applied by the UK to imports from non-EU countries. It is vital that a conditional interpretative declaration brings the backstop to an end without being reliant upon a phrase such as, “subject to the withdrawal of negotiations”. That is a very important point. I know that some in the Government have argued that we could get some sort of codicil or declaration around a breakdown in negotiations, but the trouble is that all that is subject to arbitration. The EU could argue that it was still using its best endeavours to bring negotiations to an end and that it wanted to go to arbitration. That is where all the difficulties would come in and that is why I think that the end point date is much the best way of proceeding.

Sir William Cash: On that point, if the arbitration arrangements to which my right hon. Friend is referring are by reference to the arrangements of the joint committee arbitration panel, that ultimately, insofar as it engages with European law, will be adjudicated by the European Court of Justice. That, of course, takes us back to a point we could not accept.

Sir Edward Leigh: I am really trying to find a way forward for the DUP to support the deal. I am trying to help the Government in all this. I know that one thing the DUP will never accept is anything where there is a whiff of arbitration by the EU, because it does not trust the EU, so we have to close that down. It is opposed to anything that may be subject to arbitration, and I understand its fears.

So long as one side is willing to talk, there is a debate about whether a breakdown in negotiations has been reached, so we have to be careful with that way forward. I am talking about a small legal step that is legally in line with the agreement but that politically would produce a major change, putting the UK on a better, more equal footing with the EU in the forthcoming negotiations on our permanent future relationship.

The EU does not want a no-deal Brexit, or that is what it has said. If the current deadlock continues and the EU forces a no-deal Brexit upon us, personally, I believe that it could be manageable. It might put us back in the driver’s seat and I should think that we would be able to conclude bilateral agreements to continue on current terms until long-term agreements are worked out. Given that we would continue our membership of the World Trade Organisation, its set of trade rules would apply in this situation, which means that in a sense it is not really no deal at all, and it certainly is not “crashing out”.

I know, however, that businesses are desperately seeking reassurance and that there are political problems, which I do not need to go into at the moment, about no-deal outcomes. I know that many farmers and agribusinesses in my constituency in Lincolnshire want to know the trading context of the coming years so that they can plan and adapt accordingly. While the withdrawal agreement is far from perfect—that is the nature of compromise—it delivers on some essentials, and we need to make good on our promise to the British people to deliver Brexit on time.
In conclusion, I hope all this is helpful. It is designed to try to achieve a compromise. It will not please everybody, but if we are not prepared to compromise, if we Brexiteers and our remain friends try to get everything we or they want, one side or another may be in for a very big disappointment. I do not want to take any risks with Brexit—I am sorry, that is my view. I think that would be catastrophic for the Government. We have to deliver Brexit on 29 March, or within two or three weeks thereafter to get the proper legislation through. We have to get through a deal that Parliament can accept, and I hope that what I have been talking about this afternoon may be one small step in making that possible.

4.42 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I want to make just a few comments. I pay respect to my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) for coming forward with this ingenious and no doubt carefully analysed proposal. However, because of the importance of this question, I would not want any smoke and mirrors to come out of this or, indeed, the mouth of the Attorney General when he makes his statement, as I believe he will in due course. I am not sure about its timing at the moment, but hon. Members may recall that I raised this question in the exchanges a couple of days ago, when I said that my European Scrutiny Committee is looking carefully at this matter.

Furthermore, there is the question of the validity of the Attorney General’s opinion or statement, or whatever form it takes when he makes it. It is something that ought to be done at least by Monday of next week to give everybody an opportunity to assess its nature—including some points that my right hon. Friend has made in this debate—to be sure that when he does make such a statement, it stands up. What we do not want is a smoke-and-mirrors operation. We do not want anything that will sound terribly important but, in practice, turns out to be effectively of less significance than it might sound when it is first uttered.

We had this situation during the Iraq war, when I was shadow Attorney General and I sought the opinion of the Attorney General, who was in the House of Lords, through various questions that I raised about him giving an opinion. Eventually, he came forward with a truncated opinion. Subsequently, despite the fact that it silenced a lot of critics during the debate itself, it would be fair to say that, actually, they were blinded by science and did not really know quite what he was talking about because it all came out so quickly. That is what we must avoid, which is why, as Chair of the European Scrutiny Committee, I am insisting that we get plenty of time for proper examination of the wording that the Attorney General, who is in Brussels discussing this very question, comes up with.

I feel that that is an important warning to put down as a marker. We do not want to be bounced. With Chequers, the Cabinet was bounced—there is no doubt about that; the Government had been planning it for about 18 months. We do not want another bouncing operation. Were my right hon. Friend to put forward his proposal and after consideration—I know it has already gone to the Attorney General—his thinking were built into the discussions that our right hon. and learned Friend is having in Brussels as we speak, it is incredibly important that the House is not bounced by it. It is difficult enough—my right hon. Friend and I are pretty much here on our own, with the exception of our hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) and the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly). The House will be packed when—if a statement is made on this subject. Before then, it must have been properly assessed and analysed, and any problems that might arise anticipated.

Let me give an example. As has been stated, the Attorney General in his advice to the Prime Minister concluded that in the situation of the backstop being activated “the Protocol would endure indefinitely until a superseding agreement took its place”.

There is not even a mechanism for the EU and the UK to agree on termination of the backstop if negotiations were to break down. The Attorney General’s advice was restricted to the text of the protocol; he was not asked to consider whether the impact of the protocol could be constrained by a UK unilateral statement in the form of a conditional interpretative declaration.

Emma Little Pengelly: Unfortunately, I have to leave shortly, or I might miss my flight—I may do so anyway. This debate is incredibly interesting. I concur absolutely with what the hon. Gentleman is saying. What is important in all this is not a discussion of what is legally possible, or even what is legally probable; what many of us in the Democratic Unionist party and across this Chamber want is what is legally certain, in so far as legal certainty is possible to achieve. There are lots of interesting ideas, but that is critical: we must all be sure of the legal certainty, in so far as that is possible, before we can agree the way forward.

Sir William Cash: I am deeply grateful to the hon. Lady because she expresses exactly my line of argument. I hope that it is understood that this is not a matter of being obstructive for its own sake. It is incredibly important that the House is not bounced, or confronted with smoke and mirrors or something Members do not completely understand, but then they all go off and vote and afterwards someone says, “Actually, that doesn’t stack up.” I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough entirely agrees with me on that, and I know the Minister does, too—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Kwasi Kwarteng) indicated assent.

Sir William Cash: I see him nodding his head, for which I am grateful. It really is important. We are not talking about something like a free trade agreement, like the one with Canada—the CETA arrangements—at which my Committee has also been looking very closely. In fact, it is a matter of profound and fundamental constitutional significance, and I am deeply concerned that the EU has taken an intransigent position.

We know that Martin Selmayr is reputed to have said that the price the United Kingdom will have to pay for the way in which it has carried on—I am paraphrasing—is Northern Ireland. We know that there are powerful forces in the Republic who want a united Ireland, and there are also those who believe that the whole backstop argument has been engineered to lead to a border poll and ultimately a united Ireland. There are some very clever lawyers at work in all this. It is our job in the House, with such resources as are available to us, to try
to penetrate the fog and make it crystal clear that no solution that would have the effect of undermining the constitutional status of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom could possibly be put forward.

I do not think that I need to say much more. Mine is a profound concern, but I am sure that it will be understood in Downing Street and in the Attorney General’s own mind. Let me simply say that I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough for the way in which he has set out what I have understood him to be seeking to achieve. The danger would arise if we ended up taking a route that looked plausibly good and then turned out to be not merely a bear trap but a disaster.

4.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Kwasi Kwarteng): In my nine years in the House, I have not experienced such an extensive Adjournment debate, and I am very grateful for it. I congratulate my right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) on securing it.

The issue of the backstop reflects our commitment to avoiding a hard border on the island of Ireland. I know from history that my right hon. Friend has experience of trade matters. He was an Under-Secretary of State, as I am today—he was an Under-Secretary in the Department of Trade and Industry—and he speaks as a lawyer, so he has considerable expertise in many of these issues. I should also point out that he has engaged with my right hon. Friend. Friend the Prime Minister on precisely this issue of the conditional interpretative declaration. I shall say a few words about that later in my speech.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, as are the Government, for sharing his thoughts on a mechanism that was not previously known to me. I read his letter with due consideration, and I have done my own research in addition to that with my team in the Department. We have our own views on the strength and plausibility of this mechanism.

As the House will recall, Members sent a clear signal to the Government, and to the country, that a deal could be supported, but that that support was conditional. In the only positive expression of its desired means to achieve our exit from the EU, the House asserted that to secure support for the withdrawal agreement, legally binding changes to the backstop would be required. I must stress that the Government are entirely convinced that that is the question that we need to address, and on which we need to make some measure of progress.

My right hon. Friend highlighted one possible means by which a change to the backstop could be secured. We are still committed to legally binding changes that would deal with the concerns about the backstop that have been expressed by Members on both sides of the House. As for the substance of the changes that we are seeking, we are still looking at various means: we have not necessarily taken one route or another.

I note that the Opposition Benches are entirely empty, but, as a courtesy to the House, I will address those empty Benches.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Just as a matter of fact, I sincerely hope that the Minister will be addressing the Chair and not any Benches in particular; and just as a tip, if he does address the Chair, he will find that the microphone picks up his voice better because of the way in which it is adjusted.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I thank you very much for those tips, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was just making a rather flippant observation; I do not think I have ever seen entirely empty Opposition Benches.

Clearly the Government and the Prime Minister have set out three possible routes—three ways in which the backstop can be addressed. Members will know those three options, but for the sake of the record we should recapitulate. The first was whether the backstop could be replaced with alternative arrangements, and those arrangements are expressed exactly in the political declaration. They are arrangements that will avoid a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, and this process has been constructively led by my right hon. Friend. Friend the Secretary of State and he has been engaging with MPs across the House on that issue.

My right hon. Friend. Friend the Secretary of State has also discussed alternative arrangements with the ongoing alternative arrangements working group in Brussels and with Mr Barnier. The Commission has changed its language over the last few weeks and is beginning to engage seriously with the proposals we have suggested. Although the Commission has expressed some concern about the viability of alternative arrangements, I would suggest that it is more flexible and open to these alternative arrangements than has been the case hitherto.

Sir William Cash: Will the Minister also accept that, as he has made clear, the only basis on which this entire analysis and investigation and possible wording could be effective in the Government’s mind would be if it were legally binding? However, it is manifestly obvious that the political declaration is not legally binding and therefore to conduct the alternative arrangements on the basis of a political declaration which is not legally binding simply does not wash.

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend with his customary acuity stresses and reinforces what I and the Government have already said: we are seeking legally binding changes to the backstop.

The Government have also looked at the issue of a time limit to the existing backstop, and this is where the suggestion of my right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Gainsborough plays its part. His suggestion is that conditional interpretative declarations could be employed as a mechanism for interpreting what exactly is meant by “temporary” in relation to the backstop and defining this in such a way that results in the fact that the UK would not be bound indefinitely to the backstop. It is an elegant solution on first reading, but an issue has arisen as to exactly how binding such a declaration would be. My guidance has been that any changes would still have to be jointly agreed by both parties, and that is a key aspect we must consider. My right hon. Friend has pointed the way on this: in the withdrawal agreement, which I have studied carefully, the Northern Ireland protocol, which is about 185 pages long, sets out in clear, some might say stark, terms the role of the joint committee and the fact that any end of the backstop would have to be mutually agreed. It is unclear to me and a number of people who have looked at this in the
interests of the Government whether such a conditional interpretative declaration would allow the UK unilaterally to impose an end date for the protocol. My right hon. Friend in his comprehensive and excellent speech also suggested that such a declaration could not contravene the withdrawal agreement itself.

**Sir William Cash:** The other point to throw into this equation is the question of whether the European Court of Justice would, at the end of this process, be able to adjudicate on the outcome, because it would be manifestly in the minds of the EU that this matter engaged European law.

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** As my hon. Friend will know, the status of the backstop will be subject, I suppose, to the scrutiny of the joint committee. He is suggesting that the joint committee will ultimately be somehow under the jurisdiction of the European Court. This is not actually—

5 pm  
*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).*

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

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** My hon. Friend has raised an important point about the role of the joint committee and its supervision of the backstop, should we enter into one. This is precisely what we are negotiating: our ability to get a codicil or some form of change to the withdrawal agreement. That is precisely what is being debated, and we have to await the outcome of those negotiations.

I must stress that it is not entirely clear, despite my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough’s excellent efforts to reach a solution in this regard, that a conditional interpretative declaration would have the effect that he seeks in allowing the United Kingdom unilaterally to put an end to the backstop. This is an open question, and the mere fact that it is debatable does not provide the certainty and finality that we would seek in making the changes to the backstop that he would like to see.

Let me conclude by thanking my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough again for initiating and securing this debate. This is my first Adjournment debate, and I am delighted to have been so ably accompanied by two outstanding Members of this House who have graced our presence and contributed to debates, particularly on Europe, over many years. Like them, I was a Brexiteer, and I would like to reinforce the remarks that my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough made about the need to reach finality on this. It is a remarkable testament to my hon. Friend (Sir William Cash) and my right hon. Friend for Gainsborough that, in the course of their parliamentary careers, they will have seen us leave the EU. Perhaps they always believed that they would see this day, but this is something that should be noted nevertheless. It is extraordinary that we are now in the end phase of our membership of the EU, and that should not be forgotten.

The Government obviously continue to look at ideas as we seek to achieve changes to the backstop. My right hon. Friend has provided one possible vehicle for doing that, and I only alert him to some of the circumspect views that we have about this particular mechanism. This is an ongoing debate, and I would like to thank him sincerely for his contribution. He always provides useful detail and good sense in these debates, and I look forward to engaging with him further as we continue this discussion about the nature of Brexit and the future of our country after we leave the EU.

*Question put and agreed to.*

5.3 pm  
*House adjourned.*
Leaving the European Union

4.30 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 224908 relating to leaving the European Union.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. This is certainly not the first petition that relates to leaving the European Union; it is not even the first this month, and nor is this the first debate on such a petition that I have led.

David Hanson (in the Chair): I chaired the last one as well.

Paul Scully: Exactly: we return to it. I will read the petition, entitled “Brexit re article 50 it must not be suspended/stopped under any circumstances”, into Hansard so that it can have its full say:

“The full details are well known to everyone the media has covered it fully, the British people MUST be given the Brexit they voted for anything else is not acceptable to the British public ARTICLE 50 must not under any circumstances be hindered/suspended/stopped for any reason whatsoever the time is here to take action as there has been excessive feet dragging/delaying tactics by those opposed to Brexit.”

The petition ran for six months and received 116,470 signatures.

Obviously this issue continues to exercise members of the public, just as it exercises Members of this House, and it will continue to do so. In recent debates, we have seen that passions run high and that there are different opinions in the House. Similarly, I am sure, colleagues’ inboxes will reflect the number of people saying a variety of things. Although I am a London MP and my inboxes will reflect the number of people saying a variety of things. Although I am a London MP and my situation will be different from that of MPs for other parts of the country, the number of my constituents who want to have a second referendum or stop Brexit entirely is probably equal to the number of people who do not want to go through the process and who want to leave tomorrow with no deal. A whole load of people are in the middle, including myself. I voted leave and campaigned for Vote Leave.

I was happy to support the Prime Minister’s original deal because it did most of the things that I required, although clearly not all of them. It allowed us to leave the EU’s political institutions, to stop paying the huge membership fees to the EU each year, to end freedom of movement—not so we can stop immigration, but so we can have a controlled, better managed immigration system—and to start the process of striking trade deals with countries around the world, and even to ratify them. The deal was imperfect because we would not have been able to get started on putting those deals into place until after the implementation period and we had that future relationship agreed with the EU.

The main sticking point that seemed to trouble a number of colleagues was the Irish backstop. Other issues concern some people but, as we saw in recent votes, the Irish backstop seems to be the main sticking point. Having questioned the Prime Minister, Ministers and civil servants, I concluded that I was a bit more relaxed about the backstop than other Members were, because I believe it is not comfortable for the EU to have it, any more than it is for the UK. I do not buy the line that the EU would want to keep us in the backstop forever, through a pseudo-permanent customs union, because if the backstop were ever to come into force, Northern Ireland would suddenly become the most competitive region of the European Union. It would have full access to both the UK market and the EU single market. Economically, that would be very uncomfortable for the EU because it would allow us to cherry-pick. The EU said, right at the beginning of the negotiations, that we would not be able to cherry-pick and break down any of the pillars, but actually the backstop would allow us to do it, because it would allow us to have access to the single market and customs union, without freedom of movement. Imagine a member state such as Hungary allowing that arrangement to stand for any length of time.

The backstop would allow us to have access to the single market and customs union without paying the membership fees. Imagine France, who would bankroll us, allowing that to stand for any length of time. Looking at new trade deals that the EU would want to happen, those countries looking in would say, “Well, hold on a sec. What is happening with the UK?” It would suddenly become Europe’s backstop, because those countries would not be sure about the relationship they had with the UK for any length of time.

That was my thought process, but unfortunately not enough colleagues agreed. The one good thing about that evening’s vote was that it did not take me long to vote and get through the Lobby—there were not enough colleagues with me. Clearly, the House has had its say. Following the second set of votes, including on the so-called Brady amendment, I am pleased that we now have a clear signal to send the Prime Minister back and say, “Okay, fine. I know we spent a long time negotiating this, but if you”—the EU—“just shift a little bit we can get this done.”

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Why did the hon. Gentleman’s leader—the Prime Minister—say for months and months that there will be no deal that does not include a backstop? Why would she have said that, and was she wrong?

Paul Scully: At the time, she was not wrong. We will have to wait and see whether there is a backstop or an amended backstop, which is the whole point of negotiation. As we speak, Members are meeting to discuss alternative arrangements. The key thing about the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) is that it seeks discussion of alternative arrangements to the Irish backstop, which might include the ability to leave unilaterally, a time limit or sunset clause, or what has become known as the Malthouse compromise, proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse).

All those sorts of thing need to be discussed over the next couple of days, so that we can go to Brussels with a clear ask. However, as I was saying, the amendment stating that we need to investigate alternative arrangements...
to the Irish backstop, and that the chances are that it would then go through, passed the House and has now given the Prime Minister a strong hand to be able to say to Brussels, “If we can get this right, we can do what I hope both sides want: enable the UK to leave in an orderly fashion as possible.” It would be of benefit to the UK to respect the referendum and the will of the 17.4 million people who voted leave while taking on board as many people from the UK who did not vote leave but who acknowledge the result of the referendum, and to ensure that the EU can continue to trade seamlessly with the UK. We can discuss ad infinitum the importance of UK markets to the EU, just as many EU markets are important to the UK. All these things are important.

The vast majority of us who campaigned to leave simply want to be friendly neighbours with the EU rather than its awkward tenants. This is not just a power struggle. The vast majority of people, including me—my main motivation was to leave the EU’s political institutions—wanted to tell Brussels, “You are going in a direction that we do not want to go as a country. Let’s step aside and allow you to develop in the way you want in terms of an ever-closer political union, but let us go in our own direction. We still need to co-operate and collaborate.”

That is why a deal is so important. We can talk about whether a no-deal scenario is a World Trade Organisation scenario, but I am sure the shadow Minister will make the same point that he made last time. He is correct to say that a no-deal scenario covers just trade, which is the whole point of WTO. It does not cover security, education, medical research and so on, which is why a sensible, collaborative deal would be so much better for this country and would allow us to continue relatively seamlessly in the coming months.

Given that the Prime Minister’s hand has been strengthened, I believe that if we develop a clear ask over the next few days, Brussels will give us a bit of flexibility. We are not saying to Brussels, “We’re going to go toe to toe with you.” I still believe that, with a reasonable amount of flexibility, we can get this deal done within the timeframe and will not need to extend article 50.

It would be a democratic travesty were we to follow the line of some of the amendments proposed recently and extend article 50 for months and months. That would let people down. If there is a deal on the table and extend article 50 for months and months. That would let people down. If there is a deal on the table and extend article 50 for months and months. That would let people down. If there is a deal on the table and extend article 50 for months and months. That would let people down. If there is a deal on the table and extend article 50 for months and months. That would let people down. If there is a deal on the table and extend article 50 for months and months. That would let people down. If there is a deal on the table and extend article 50 for months and months. That would let people down. If there is a deal on the table and extend article 50 for months and months. That would let people down. If there is a deal on the table.

**Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con):** It has already been two and a half years since the people instructed us to leave. Does my hon. Friend agree that extending article 50 any further would be treating them with contempt and would be a slap in the face for democracy? People expect us to get on with the job now.

**Paul Scully:** I absolutely agree. All I am saying is that if we had a deal and just needed to dot the i’s and cross the t’s—if there were a technical reason to extend article 50 for just a week or two—it would be churlish not to do that. I and a number of my hon. Friends’ constituents have taken this decision for 40 or 50 years, not for the short term, so let us get it right. I do not mind an extension of a few weeks, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right that it would be a travesty to say, “Let’s extend article 50 so we can start the discussion again. We’ll have a second referendum and extend the uncertainty and division that this country finds itself in.” People expect much more of us.

**Wera Hobhouse:** I always welcome people trying to come together to discuss things openly and honestly, and perhaps come to an agreement. I only regret that the other parties are not involved in this coming together; it seems to be something that is done just within the Conservative party. I am a member of the Brexit Committee, and the proposals that seem to be on the table, such as trusted trader schemes or equivalences, have been looked at over the past two and a half years. The Committee has listened to many experts who have ruled them out, and the European Union negotiators have done so, too. Why does the hon. Gentleman think that something that has not been agreed in the past two and a half years can suddenly be agreed with the European Union in the next two and a half days or the next week?

**Paul Scully:** There is a good reason why I believe it can happen: Michel Barnier himself said recently, “My team and I have done a lot of work on virtual, decentralised controls, which will be useful in all hypotheses—Even in the absence of an agreement, we will do our utmost not to create a hard border in Ireland”.

If it is good enough to use decentralised border checks that do not require a hard border in a no-deal scenario, why is it not good enough to use them in a deal scenario? Michel Barnier is trying his best to use the existing processes to avoid putting in a hard border in the event of no deal. It will be the EU’s responsibility to do that, because the Government have said clearly that we will not put in a hard border, and so have the Irish Government. It will have to come from Brussels. The EU will be the final arbiter if it insists on a hard border. Michel Barnier is clearly saying that he will do everything he can, should we leave with no deal, to ensure that does not happen. Let us hope he can give us a bit of flexibility and does everything he can to make that happen if there were a deal. That would help us with so many other issues.

There is more to be done. We just require more flexibility, not wholesale change. When the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, went to the EU to negotiate ahead of the referendum, he did not get a lot to bring back; in my view, he did not ask for enough, but if he had got a bit more from the EU—if the EU had showed a bit more flexibility at that time—I believe that the referendum result would have been very different. We would almost certainly have voted to remain. I hope the EU will look back at that, reflect on it and say, “Let’s not make the same mistake again. Let’s not dig in our heels in at the end of the process.” As my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) says, this has taken two and a half years. We have come all this way, so let us not trip up at the last step.

The EU just needs to show flexibility. We are not asking for wholesale change. I know that, in all negotiations, people need to save face. There is always a dance at this point in negotiations. We will dance around a bit so the Taoiseach can appeal to his domestic audience; I know he has a difficult balance to strike. I am sure our Prime Minister wants to be able to say that she has delivered
on the promise of the referendum, and all parties in this House will want to say that they have done their best for their constituents and their country. Germany, France, Belgium, Hungary, Spain and Greece—all the member states and the negotiating team in the middle of Brussels—all want to take the credit for it. Frankly, I do not care who takes the credit for it. Some of us have been working on this for 20 or 25 years. We just want to leave the EU now. If we all keep our heads and use the right language, I see no reason why we cannot do this within the timescale.

On the point that the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) made about collaboration in this place, people—the media, especially—often say that the Conservatives are arguing among themselves. There is a simple reason why there are often two Conservatives on panels. The Labour party leadership effectively wants a general election. I have made the point several times that if the Leader of the Opposition wrote a deal, gave it to the Prime Minister and had it presented back to him, he would vote against it because he wants a general election. There are many in his party who have a different view. The Lib Dems want a second referendum, and SNP MPs want no deal. There is the honest point that they do not want to leave. Fine—that is probably the most straightforward and honest point. I fundamentally disagree, but that is nature of debate. Effectively, the Conservative party is the only party saying, “Yes, we want to leave, but how do we do that? Is it with a deal? What kind of deal is it? Or is it with no deal?” That is the vibrant—often tense—discussion that we are having within our party.

I will finish where I started: we must get together and keep our heads. Another reason why we need to keep no deal on the table is so that we have all the options. If Brussels thinks that the options are that we accept the deal or do not leave at all, it will obviously want to keep us in the EU. Imagine someone going to an estate agent and saying, “I don’t want to pay full price for the house. I want at least £20,000 discount, please.” If the estate agent looks over the person’s shoulder and sees their spouse measuring the curtains, that somewhat undermines their negotiating position. That is why keeping no deal on the table is really important. If we just have a bit of flexibility and allow people to pivot and reflect on the alternatives, I truly believe we can do what the petitioners want. We can get a decent deal that allows us to leave in as orderly fashion as possible within the article 50 timescale. We will not have to suspend article 50, and we can leave on 29 March.

4.48 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a real honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Hanson. You will not be surprised to hear that I am going to put forward the opposite view to that of the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully).

We are seven weeks away from Brexit and we have no agreement. There is no agreement in Parliament or, as I can see from my mailbox, among the people.

Brexit supporters, including the Prime Minister, say that 17.4 million people—a small majority—voted for it. So why do we not have an agreement? Why was the Prime Minister’s deal not voted through? If Brexit means Brexit, if 17.4 million people voted for it, and if the Government and the two main parties are committed to it, why are we still arguing? Why has everybody not voted for the Brexit deal that the Prime Minister brought to Parliament? It is because the fundamental flaw of the referendum was that “Brexit” was not defined. Some who voted for it wanted or had no deal in mind; some wanted something like the Prime Minister’s deal. Some wanted to be a lot closer to the European Union—staying in the customs union, for example.

Mrs Murray: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Wera Hobhouse: In a minute.

Brexit was not defined, so how many of the 17.4 million voted for the deal that is now on the table? How many voted for a no-deal Brexit? Six million? Eight million? Never as many as the 16 million who voted to stay in the European Union, which was a defined proposal.

Mrs Murray: I thank the hon. Lady for generously giving way. Does she accept that members of her party voted to have a referendum? Indeed, the former leader of the Liberal Democrats was the first person to say that he was going to give the British people a say on whether to remain in or leave the European Union. He did not say anything about there being different choices. Can she explain that, please?

Wera Hobhouse: I am a new Member of Parliament. Obviously, I followed the discussions about the referendum for many years. Yes, we are a party of democracy—I always believe that we should give people a say. Since the vote was so narrow and we are still arguing about what Brexit should look like and how we should leave the European Union, what is the problem with saying, “Now we have a defined Brexit proposal in the Prime Minister’s deal or we have a no-deal proposal, but we also still have the option of staying in the European Union”? That is the most democratic way of dealing with the issue.

I cannot for the life of me understand why more democracy should mean less democracy. Why can we not honestly put that to the people, now that we have so much more information about what leaving the European Union would actually mean? People can continue to vote for what they voted for in 2016. I do not mind that—I am just looking for some clarification.

Mrs Murray: Could the hon. Lady please confirm that, as far as she is concerned, the former leader of the Liberal Democrats had no intention of honouring the result of the referendum that he was the first to promise the British people?

Wera Hobhouse: I think I answered that question before. We—myself included—honour the referendum result in saying that Parliament cannot cancel Brexit: we had a referendum and we, as parliamentarians, cannot just stand here in Parliament and say, “Let’s not do Brexit.” That is why I believe that we need to put it back to the people. That is most democratic way of going about this. I cannot see a reason why putting something back to the people and letting them have the final say is less democratic; I believe that to be democracy in its full sense.

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that we have had two votes on Brexit? The first was the referendum and the second was the general election, in which 80% of votes cast were for parties that wanted us to leave the European Union.
Wera Hobhouse: I do not agree. In the 2017 general election, many other elements played their part. For the people, it was not clear what leaving the European Union would mean or what the Brexit deal on the table would be, and we knew nothing about the backstop. We now know what that all looks like.

I truly trust in people and I believe that when I put things in front of them, with the honest options on the table—outside the heat of the media and the competition of political parties—they will make good decisions. That is why, by the way, I am very much in favour of citizens’ assemblies. If we get to the point of extending article 50—I believe that we must because we are simply running out of time—we should precede that with several citizens’ assemblies where we put the options to focus groups and where people can discuss them honestly.

I have said time and again that I believe that people will make very good decisions. I trust in them and, if they confirm their former opinions—whether that is a no-deal Brexit or the Prime Minister’s Brexit—and there is a majority of more than 50% for a specific Brexit deal, I will accept it. That is a final say. We have always said that the people must have the final say and that we must give it to them.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I note that the hon. Lady said that the people should be asked whether they want a no-deal Brexit or the Prime Minister’s Brexit. She was very clear. I have heard other Liberal Democrats add another option. Has she left off her list a staying put option? Can she clarify? I hear both versions and I am absolutely not certain about what the Liberal Democrats are asking for. There could be an argument for asking about the two versions of Brexit, but there certainly is not one for putting the issue back to the people as a three-way referendum.

Wera Hobhouse: To clarify: absolutely. The ballot paper has to have the option to remain, because in the previous referendum, 48% voted for that. When I consult my mailbox, and when we consider polling, a majority—

Damien Moore: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Wera Hobhouse: I want to make progress. Now that we have defined Brexit options on the table, a majority of people—if we trust the polling—would vote to remain. How many people actually voted for a no-deal Brexit? Eight million people! Certainly not as many as would vote to stay in the European Union. How many people would vote for a no-deal Brexit or the Prime Minister’s Brexit? The fundamental flaw of the 2016 Brexit vote, as I insist on saying, was that “Brexit” was not defined.

In all honesty, if we leave and want to do Brexit properly, we have to give the final say to the people, because Parliament is divided. That is why we are here: I believe in Parliament. There is no majority for a no-deal Brexit, yet the people who write to me the most seem to be those who want us to leave without a deal. If we strip the numbers down, however, we see that they are a minority of 30% maybe—not an all-out majority. We need to clarify things with the British people. That is why we need an extension of article 50.

I understand that the European Union will agree to an extension if either a general election or a people’s vote is on the table. I hope that an extension of article 50 would give us and the British people time to properly discuss all the options. That would mean discussion in citizens’ assemblies—as proposed by the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), which I supported—so that we can properly discuss the things on the table, rather than being drowned out by media hysteria and by political interests.

People visiting the Electoral Reform Society website will see that it held a citizens’ assembly in Manchester, post-Brexit, with mostly Brexiteer focus groups. The choice of that citizens’ assembly was for a very close relationship with the European Union—including single market and customs union membership—that I would call “Brexit in name only”. That is what people think we should do because, in the end, we do not want a Brexit that damages our economy or our security prospects. If people want a Brexit that truly serves their interests, they will come to the conclusion that the best deal is the one that we already have: membership of the European Union. But hey-ho! Let us put the choice to the people: a painless Brexit, a painful Brexit or a pointless Brexit.

I believe that people will come to the conclusion that the best deal is membership of the European Union and not the deal on the table. Let us ask the people again; let us have an extension of article 50; let us have proper grown-up discussions with members of the public in proper focus groups; and let us have a referendum and see what the people say. Let us ask for an extension of article 50, to which I think the European Union would agree.

4.59 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I am pleased to be called to speak in this debate. Mr Hanson, because sometimes those in the main Chamber are so crowded that it is difficult to get in. This is wonderful—I am told we have hours, which is great—because we can really explore the options.

The important thing for me is to look at the petition. I listened with interest to the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), who spoke with great passion. The Liberal Democrats contested my seat hotly at the last election, making it a Brexit election, but to be fair, they have a fixed view: they do not want to leave the European Union. However, as the hon. Lady said, they offered a referendum and—this is on my wall as a poster—Sir Nick Clegg featured in a leaflet saying, “Only the Liberal Democrats offer you a true referendum, in or out.” I thought, “Fair enough, that’s a fair question.” Now, and this was confirmed by the hon. Lady. Lady—I wanted to check—the “in or out” talked about in that leaflet is not the referendum that the Liberal Democrats want to offer; the new referendum, if that were to be considered, would be a three-way choice, which would split the vote considerably.

Wera Hobhouse: A democracy is a place where things move and are dynamic. The hon. Lady is not being helpful if she keeps harking back to what was said in the past. We are where we are, and we are in a very difficult situation. Is it not important to look at the present, instead of always harking back to the past?

Mrs Main: I completely agree, but we have to learn from the past, which forms part of our future trajectory. All I am saying is that the in-out referendum that the House promised the British people is the only way to go.
The three-way referendum now supported by the hon. Lady’s party and others would ask people to choose between what she would describe as a hard Brexit—a no-deal Brexit, perhaps—the Prime Minister’s Brexit, and staying in. That could not be countenanced as democratic.

As I understand it, the EU would have no truck—I do not blame it—with us wanting to kick the whole thing into the long grass during a long drawn-out process. My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) said that the British public would never forgive us; certainly they would never forgive us for trying to twist the arm of the EU, and saying, “Please can we extend article 50, so that we can offer a three-way referendum?”

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): The hon. Lady says that the British people would never forgive us for asking them again, but would they ever forgive us for a serious economic collapse as a result of a no-deal Brexit?

Mrs Main: That is interesting. The other day in the main Chamber, I tried to intervene on the Leader of the Opposition many, many times. I wanted to know whether the policy of the Labour party is to offer another referendum. The economic collapse, I believe, is a much-hyped fear factor.

The British public had 40 years of trying out the European project, which is certainly not the Common Market that my late parents voted for. That was a vote for one thing. After 40 years of ever closer political integration, the British public were asked if they wanted to re-endorse that membership, or if they would like to say, “We’d like to leave.”

It is not as though we have not discussed the possibility of leaving, or our unhappiness with having treaties foisted on us. The British public have a lot of experience—the history that the hon. Member for Bath does not want to draw on—of looking at how they were treated, how they were talked to, and how they were being sucked into closer integration, which they were not happy with. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), who opened the debate, said, that is what many people were unhappy with. The British public knew that they did not like it, so they decided that they wanted to leave and be an independent, self-governing and sovereign nation again. That is the argument that was made.

I campaigned to leave, and I made it very clear to my constituents that I was for leaving—I did not hide that, or take the easy option—although most of them voted to remain. I made it clear that I believed in leave, but that I was only one vote. Those members of the British public who were of voting age that first time around, however, had seen the direction of travel, which was towards ever closer integration, and they did not want to go there, so they decided get off that bus.

I do not like to talk of winning or losing, but the only way to describe a referendum is in those terms. The leave campaign won because there was more heart in the campaign to get back our sovereignty than there was in saying, “We know the EU’s not perfect, that it should change. And lots of you have had grumbles and complaints over the years, and that we keep trying to change things and it never gives us much—but I am sure it will at some point in the future.” That did not cut it.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The hon. Lady makes the important point that people knew what deal we already had, but I take her back to the wording of the petition: “the British people MUST be given the Brexit they voted for”.

Can she tell me what the Brexit that they voted for was?

Mrs Main: It was made very clear and, for my sins, I watched so much of the debate—

Wera Hobhouse: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Main: The convention is to answer an intervention before giving way again, and I would like to do that. I am sorry.

It was made clear that there would be no second asks—I remember hearing that several times during the campaign—and that if we left, we would take back control of our borders and so make our own immigration policies. I am quite relaxed about numbers, although some people are not, but leaving would mean a level playing field on immigration policy. Also, it was clear that we would deliver on the vote of the British people; Parliament would not tinker and water it down. The referendum was about bringing back a level of control to Parliament—eventually, not right this second—from the European Union. We have got caught up in the argument that that means going back to parliamentarians having control over the people, but the people voted to bring back control from Brussels to Parliament; it was very clear, and they expect us to deliver on that.

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Lady’s answer to my intervention was not what I hoped for. Do not all of us in the House of Commons have different versions of what an acceptable Brexit deal would look like? Some advocate a close relationship with the single market and a customs union; some support the deal that the Prime Minister made; and many in her party say that that is not the Brexit that they voted for. Surely the British public are just as split, if not more so, than parliamentarians here in the Palace of Westminster. If we are to have the trust of the public, we have to present them with a deal and check whether that is the Brexit that they feel that they voted for.

Mrs Main: To me—unless someone would like to iterate a different view—it seems that the official opinion of the majority of Labour Members is that they support the view of the Liberal Democrats. They want what they describe as a people’s vote; some would call it a remoaner’s ask. There seems to be a growing chorus of, “It’s in the ‘too difficult’ box, so let’s put it back to the public.” If that happened, I would be the first to call for the best of three, particularly if the wording was not exactly the same as last time, and did not ask, “Do you wish to leave or stay?”

If the wording was different or three options were offered, I would say, “You’re not asking the same question.” To get to the rub of the petition is about, the public are beginning to be fearful about whether we will honour and do what we said we would do.

I was at Prayers this morning—I am pleased that we have Prayers, because it concentrates the mind for a few moments—and one of the things that we are asked to do in Prayers is not be concerned with the desire to please. In this place, we can try desperately to please everyone, but the reality is that we cannot. We can,
however, come to a settled opinion and try to do our best. The difficulty is that Members of Parliament overwhelmingly voted to remain, and are trying to deliver something that they do not really believe in. We cannot get away from the fact that that is a tension. But we have to deliver what we said we would deliver, and not just try to please, which would be the easy option.

Wera Hobhouse: The hon. Lady is generous in giving way. She will be pleased to know that I agree with her, and I go to Prayers, too. Irrespective of religion, I very much believe that it is important to discuss things honestly, accept our differences and come to a conclusion together. If we are delegates, we are just delivering what the people have said, but if we are not delegates, we are representatives. Is it not for us to make a decision according to our conscience and to what we believe is best for our country? That is exactly what we are all grappling with, including the Liberal Democrats. It does not help to denounce one another all the time and to call some people remoners.

David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. Interventions must be short.

Mrs Main: The hon. Lady has made her speech and interventions; if she does not mind, I will leave it there and we will have to agree to differ.

My concern is that we may end up looking weak because we cannot get behind a deal by the Prime Minister. My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam said that he could settle for the withdrawal agreement. When I went to see the Prime Minister before Christmas, I said, “I truly believe you are trying to do your very best on this.” Whatever anyone from any political party thinks, the Prime Minister has a very difficult job. Her tenacity is astonishing. I said, “At the moment, whether people believe in leave or remain, we have the absolute right to walk out the door, shut it behind us and say, ‘We will not put up with any more interference in our legislation from a group of countries.’ We can choose, but we will not be obliged.” We have the absolute right to do that, but I said we were like a load of nervous sheep in a pen.

I cannot hover around the idea of a backstop that 27 other countries may hold the key to. We are trying to get back sovereignty; we must not dilute that sovereignty by giving 27 other countries the whip hand over us. They have their own agendas. Each country would have a veto. It may well be that Gibraltar, or our fishing, comes up on the agenda. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam: I do not think the EU will want to keep us in the backstop, but I fear what they will exact to let us out.

Mrs Murray: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. At the time, I was very worried about whether there was some undue influence, whether we should have purdah and other things that were taking our brains at that point. The European Union was advocated for by the leader of the Government at the time; a lot of big names tried to make the case for it, and a lot of money was associated with that. Even so, the British public had 40 years of knowing what they had, and they did not like it. People want to call them stupid or deluded—those are some of the things thrown at my constituents who voted to leave—but they were prepared to take the opportunity to leave.

There was a split decision, but did anyone ever think it would be more decisive than it was? It struck me how many people participated in the referendum—it was overwhelming. When I was out knocking on doors, people told me they had not voted for many a year, but they were going to vote. The referendum galvanised and engaged people in a way that we often struggle to. If we do not get on with this, the public will ask, “What is the point of taking part in any votes whatever? We got ourselves out the door for that special occasion; we were motivated.”

I do not know what motivated some people; they may have had different motivations, but they still wanted to leave the club. That is why they got out the door that morning in vast numbers and went to vote. This petition reflects a frustration; people think that we are cloth-eared here and did not wake up to the sheer number of people who decided they had to vote to leave. This was a topic that had engaged them, if nothing else, for decades. No party, leaflets or knocking at their door had got them out, but this did. The former Prime Minister would not like to hear that some people did not bother to read his leaflet, but some people felt they had enough personal experience to make up their mind; the leaflet was not going to change that. They were glad of the opportunity of the vote.

I do not believe the European Union will want a “kick the can down the road” delay to article 50. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam: if it were for a few weeks, that might well be tolerated, but not for the next 2 years. It would be better to get a deal and put it in a leaflet that was delivered to every single home in the UK. We know that the majority of people—17.4 million—voted to reject that.
David Hanson (in the Chair): In the absence of any further Back-Bench contributions, I call the hon. Member for Glasgow North, who, with the two other Front-Bench speakers, has approximately two hours and 20 minutes to speak.

5.17 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, and a rare pleasure to be back in Westminster Hall. Before I was appointed Chief Whip for the SNP, I covered a lot of Brexit debates in here; in fact, we called it the Brexit Minister hall, because we discussed the subject so frequently. It is good to see that has not changed. I do not think I will speak for two hours, but as a Whip this is a rare opportunity for me to speak. As the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) said, the Chamber is usually so busy.

The petition is quite intriguing. It jumps out at me that article 50 must not “under any circumstances” be extended, whether for technical reasons, as the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) said, or for a general election, a zombie apocalypse, alien invasion or any circumstances. Brexit must go ahead on 29 March. But that date is not some sort of geological fixture or part of the fundamental laws of physics. It is a date that was put in to a piece of legislation, largely as a sop to Back Benchers. The original European Union (Withdrawal) Bill talked simply of “exit day”, which would be defined by statutory instrument. I wonder if we might be in a much calmer place if the original clause had stood. People are becoming fixated on 29 March—at least that is what the people who signed the petition seem to think must happen.

I want to dwell on the point made by the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood). We hear that the British people must be given the Brexit they voted for and that anything else is not acceptable, but what is the Brexit they voted for? All the ballot paper said was, “to leave the European Union.” That might simply mean leaving the political institutions, as the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam said and I suspect a lot of people thought. The hon. Member for St Albans said people had had 40 years of Europe and they did not like it. I have had slightly less than 40 years of European membership—only slightly less—and I have quite liked it.

Perhaps some of the people who voted to leave did not like the bogeyman that the European institutions had become. Perhaps they did not like the political institutions. Perhaps they did not like the political establishment that argued for remain, of which many of us in effect find ourselves a part. It is more difficult to make the case that they did not like their European health insurance cards, which allow them to access medical treatment wherever they go in Europe, that they did not like being able to travel visa-free across the European continent and take advantage of sunnier climates and cheaper holidays, that they did not like the medicines they get access to through the European Medicines Agency and that they did not like the safe regulation of nuclear materials.

Mrs Murray: May I give the hon. Gentleman the benefit of my experience? I voted to stay in the European Union when Labour held the referendum in 1975, but I voted to stay in a trading partnership, which is what it was sold as. Of course, this time I voted leave, and I know that a lot of my constituents, and probably a lot of his, feel the same way. As he said, he did not know anything other than the European Union, I thought he might like the benefit of my experience and age. Life did not end before 1972, when we were not members of the European Union.

Patrick Grady: I absolutely take that point. Of course, if we want to keep going back into history, the European Coal and Steel Community was founded in response to the second world war to link European economies, and peace has prevailed on this continent for longer than at any other time in the past several centuries largely as a result of closer European integration. The hon. Lady says the Common Market back then was very different from the European Union today, but rejoining the Common Market—or Common Market 2.0, which some Members are discussing—is not what the House is currently being asked to vote for. If anything, we are being asked to move further away from that.

Let us look again at what people voted for. They were told by the now former Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), that there would “continue to be free trade, and access to the single market.” The current Environment Secretary said we would be “redefining the single market, not walking away from it.” The current International Trade Secretary said in 2016: “The free trade agreement that we will have to do with the European Union should be one of the easiest in human history.” All that is collapsing in front of our eyes. Shortly, the business in the main Chamber will move on to a statement about Nissan in Sunderland and the consequences of our plunging off the cliff with a no-deal Brexit on 29 March.

Mrs Main: Does the hon. Gentleman not wonder why Nissan has chosen to relocate not to Spain, where it has factories, but to Japan?

Patrick Grady: Well, that is where its parent company is and where it currently has factories it can easily locate to. The point is that it is not choosing to stay here in the United Kingdom precisely because of all the uncertainty.

Mrs Main: I have to correct the hon. Gentleman. I think anyone from Nissan would say it is staying in the United Kingdom, and I am sure people in the constituencies concerned would not like to hear that he is closing it down.

Patrick Grady: I take that point. Nevertheless, jobs are at risk and there is massive uncertainty, and it is in large part to do with the cliff edge that we face because of Brexit.

From the SNP’s point of view, three things should happen, two of which are related. One of the effects of extending article 50 would be to rule out a no-deal Brexit. As I said, 29 March was just picked and written on a bit of paper. Frankly, that is true of all the Brexit negotiations. All this comes down to people in a room being willing to talk to one another. It is not rocket science. It is not changing the fundamental laws of
physics. It is about there being political will among the negotiating parties to speak to each other and reach an agreement.

Of course, we are still in the European Union. We will continue to be members until such time as something called Brexit does or does not take effect. The easiest option—the simplest, safest and best option—is to continue on those terms. As the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) said, by definition, the best possible relationship with the European Union is membership; otherwise, nobody would want to be a member. Everybody would want the better deal. Everybody would want those terms and conditions. The point of leaving has to be that somehow we will have more benefits because of our relationships with the rest of the world, but there is absolutely no evidence of that. All the trade treaties we were told we would have simply are not in place.

Mrs Murray: The hon. Gentleman will correct me if I misheard him, but did he not say that we should stay in the European Union no matter what? He is sending the message to all those people in Glasgow North who voted to leave the European Union that he knows better and we should stay in.

Patrick Grady: Well, 22% of the people who voted in Glasgow North voted to leave the European Union. Some 78% voted to remain, and recent analysis suggests that figure will be even higher if and when we get a people’s vote.

Damien Moore: The hon. Gentleman said 78% of people in his constituency voted to remain. Was it a soft remain or a hard remain?

Patrick Grady: That is highly amusing. They voted to remain under the conditions we currently have. I will come back to what the relationship between Scotland and the European Union should be.

I believe we should remain—I believe that is the best option—but the point is that people should now be given a choice, because we now know what leave looks like. The Prime Minister set red lines—incidentally, I think she did so without the agreement even of her Cabinet; she announced them at the Mansion House or somewhere equally grand up the street. She did not set them after consulting on a cross-party basis, as she is Cabinet; she announced them at the Mansion House or somewhere equally grand up the street. She did not set them after consulting on a cross-party basis, as she is. Those red lines are very restrictive, and they inevitably lead us to a much more damaging relationship than the one we have or one we could have. Nevertheless, if we set those red lines, that is the deal we get.

That deal should be put to the people. Why should the Brexiteers be afraid? If the Prime Minister’s deal is so glorious—if it is going to launch mother Britannia into a new position of ruling the waves, global leadership and all the rest of it—why are they so afraid to put it back to the people? Why would people not vote for it? The Environment Secretary said to me in the main Chamber a couple of weeks ago that other countries would be looking enviously at the United Kingdom’s deal. If that is the case, why would the people of the United Kingdom not back it in a people’s vote?

Damien Moore: Can the hon. Gentleman say that, in such a campaign, the remain side would be honest about some of the things the European Union has in store, such as further integration and a European army? Some of those things would be terribly unpalatable to people—even those who want to stay.

Patrick Grady: The United Kingdom has consistently negotiated derogations, alternative arrangements, opt-outs and so on throughout its history. The point of membership of the European Union is that, within the Union, a country can help to shape its direction and its future. Brexit will take us out completely.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, “We want to become a sovereign country again,” is a completely misleading phrase? All of us in the European Union are sovereign members; we are sharing and pooling sovereignty. That is the whole point about the European Union.

Patrick Grady: I was going to make that exact point in my peroration. Members can probably guess what that will be.

The problem is that this deal is not good enough. It has already been rejected by Parliament, and the Prime Minister has had to accept that it needs to be renegotiated so that we have these magical alternative arrangements. That in itself demonstrates that if the House—if parliamentarians, whether we are delegates or representatives—cannot agree on the shape and form of Brexit, then it has to be put back to the people, either in a people’s vote or in a general election. I assure the House that the Scottish National Party fears neither of those.

Mrs Main: I was encouraged to hear the hon. Gentleman talk about the deal. If there were amendments to the deal, could he support it?

Patrick Grady: No, because we support remaining in the European Union. That brings me to my final point, which is about the treatment of Scotland in all of the debate. As I said to the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), 78% of my constituents voted to remain, which was one of the highest proportions in the United Kingdom. I want to listen to and understand the people who voted to leave, but I am not afraid or ashamed to stand up for the vast majority of my constituents. Some 35 residents of Glasgow North signed this petition—it is interesting to look at its geographical spread.

The day after the 2016 referendum, the First Minister of Scotland said that we had to respect the results of both the 2014 independence referendum and the 2016 UK-wide referendum on the European Union. The Scottish Government have consistently put forward alternatives, compromises and ways forward that could respect the result of the Brexit referendum across the United Kingdom. I meant to say at the start that the SNP voted against having the Brexit referendum, as we did not think it
was necessary. We are not in the position of the Liberal Democrats, who now want to revisit an answer that they did not like.

The Scottish Government have not been listened to at all. For example, we proposed ways of retaining single market or customs union membership for Scotland—and potentially for Northern Ireland and parts of the United Kingdom that had voted to remain—and none of that was paid attention to. The promises made to people in Scotland, both in 2014 and 2016, have been broken. The major promise in 2014 was that voting no to independence guaranteed that Scotland remained a member of the European Union, which has proven to be false.

In these circumstances, the people of Scotland will come to the conclusion that it is not the European Union that is failing, but the Union of the United Kingdom; they will choose their own course, whether through a referendum or at a general election, and choose to take back control for themselves. As alluded to by the hon. Member for Bath, independent countries nowadays are defined by their interdependence; a country is known to be independent precisely because it is a member of the United Nations, because it has chosen to pool sovereignty through the European Union or because it has chosen to join any number of international organisations. That is the positive trend that the world should be aiming for, but instead Brexit represents a retrograde step.

Mrs Main: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Patrick Grady: I was coming to a conclusion, but if the hon. Lady is very keen I will give way.

Mrs Main: The hon. Gentleman talks about having a second referendum and potentially asking Scotland to go into the European Union again, stay in or whatever, so would he want a wall?

Patrick Grady: No. I am sorry, a wall?

Mrs Main: Would he want a wall for the hard border, or does he think other mechanisms could be brought about where a wall does not need to be built?

Patrick Grady: I think that would be completely unnecessary. Clearly, there are going to have to be arrangements made for the border with Northern Ireland. If it is possible to do that in Northern Ireland, then it ought to be possible to do when Scottish independence comes. The best solution would be to revisit the whole issue through a people’s vote and ultimately give the people of the United Kingdom the option to remain in the European Union.

5.34 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to wind up for the Opposition with you in the Chair, Mr Hanson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) on his introduction to the debate. I did not agree with absolutely everything he said, which he will not be surprised to hear, but he set the framework for the discussion in his characteristically thoughtful way, so I thank him.

The hon. Gentleman was right when he talked about the passions around this debate. The number of Members here today reflects the fact that we have had days, weeks and months exercising those passions, and there is an important statement in the Chamber at the moment. There are many issues that we could discuss—many have been touched on—but I will focus on the specific issue of the petition in relation to the extension of article 50.

We need honesty in this discussion. The Prime Minister could have given a lead in her answers over recent days by recognising the complexity of the issue and the different challenges that we face, but on this—as so often before—she has reduced things to a simple binary yes or no: we will or we will not. She has been digging herself into a position, as she has so many times on Brexit over the past couple of years, that will change when she is confronted with a cold dose of reality.

It all started with the phasing of the negotiations. As Members will remember, the Prime Minister insisted that there would be no separation of the discussion on withdrawal from the discussion on our future relationship. Back in 2016, the first Brexit Secretary, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), promised the “row of the summer” on that issue, until he rolled over without dissent because he recognised that was the way that things would inevitably go.

Then there was the transition. Recognising the risks of a cliff-edge departure on 29 March, we argued back in August 2017 that there should be a transitional period and that business should not have to adjust to different sets of regulations as we left. “No”, said the Prime Minister: No. 10 said that was “a weak attempt to kick the can down the road.”

That comes from the can-kicking experts. When she secured the transition in March 2018, she claimed that it—or, as she then described it, “the implementation period”—was one of the great achievements of her negotiations. Then we had the mantra of “no deal is better than a bad deal.” Some of the nonsense around that has fuelled the idea that we might crash out on whatever terms, or in the absence of any terms, on 29 March. It was nonsense, but it was endlessly repeated—“no deal is better than a bad deal”—until the Prime Minister struck a bad deal, which will shrink the UK economy by 4%. Then she slipped into reverse gear, with a new mantra, which said, “Support my deal, because the alternative of no deal would be disaster for the country.”

Mrs Murray: Will the hon. Gentleman explain why the leader of his party would take no deal off the table? Is that not a bit like a trade union going over to Europe and leaving strikes at home as an option, when they were negotiating?

Paul Blomfield: We are very clear why we would take no deal off the table. As the Prime Minister now acknowledges, as the Chancellor has spelled out and as the Treasury analysis has demonstrated, it would be a disaster for the economy.

Mrs Murray: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Paul Blomfield: If the hon. Lady lets me finish the point, she can intervene again. By the Government’s analysis, no deal would shrink the economy by about 10%. The impact would be particularly negative in manufacturing areas, many of which have been left behind in the period of economic change we have seen over the last generation.
Mrs Murray: As I understood the Government figures, they said that the economy would not grow as much as it would have done, in the short term—not that it would shrink. Secondly, when someone is entering into a negotiation, surely taking their main negotiating lever off the table means they will roll over and cave in. That seems to be the message we are getting from the Leader of the Opposition, and his party.

Paul Blomfield: The hon. Lady is right, although she is playing with words, on the Treasury analysis. It is not that the economy would shrink 10% from the point where it is now; it would shrink 10% from the point where the Treasury projects it would otherwise be. The net effect is that we would be 10% worse off through a no-deal Brexit.

David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. The Chair is here, and the dialogue is there. I should prefer it if both Members addressed the Chair, as part of their dialogue.

Paul Blomfield: Thank you, Mr Hanson.

Mrs Murray: Apologies, Mr Hanson.

Paul Blomfield: There would be 10% less money for public services, 10% fewer jobs, and we would be 10% less wealthy than we would otherwise be. The Treasury was right to share that with the British people.

As to a no-deal Brexit as a negotiating lever, it has value only if those on the other side of the negotiations believe that it is meant seriously. No one thinks that a no-deal Brexit is in the British interest, and no one believes it will influence the outcome of the negotiations.

Mrs Main: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way—and his tone is very emollient. I want to reassure him. I was terrified when the Chancellor said each household would be £3,000 a year worse off if we voted to leave, but the economy has done very well. Just have a little faith: that is what I am really trying to say. Such predictions are often way out of kilter.

Paul Blomfield: It is always fascinating to hear Conservative Members rubbishing their own party’s Chancellors and former Chancellors. The economy may not have lived up to the former Chancellor’s worst expectations, but the pound has crashed and we have moved from being one of the fastest growing economies to one that is growing less quickly. There has been a negative impact already but, as the hon. Lady will recognise, we have not left the European Union yet.

Wera Hobhouse: It is clear that all Brexit scenarios leave the economy worse off. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the negotiating position of keeping no deal on the table is a little bit like a cartoon that I saw the other day, with the caption “Unless you give me what I want I am going to shoot myself”? Is not that the idiotic negotiating position, which no one believes in anyway?

Paul Blomfield: I did not see the cartoon, but I think that was a line from a Mel Brooks movie, and the hon. Lady is right to characterise things in that way. That is why the idea that threatening no deal would be a great negotiating card for us never had any credibility.

Damien Moore: The hon. Gentleman has mentioned the economy and the pound, but the pound is pretty much at the same level against the euro as it was in 2012, and people were not talking then about the economy crashing out.

Paul Blomfield: We could measure the pound at different points, but the hon. Gentleman will know that the pound has fallen since we took the decision to leave. That produced a short-term benefit in additional exports, although the consequences are now beginning to have an effect, because the component parts of many of those exports are now coming in at higher prices. We could debate these issues for a long time. However, I do not think anyone has yet argued successfully against my contention—the Chancellor’s contention—that no deal would be a disaster for the country. That, of course, is why Parliament has voted twice now against leaving without a deal.

After what happened with the phasing of the negotiations, the transition and the ridiculous mantra on no deal, we are here again, with article 50. Every time the Prime Minister is confronted with the growing reality that 29 March may not be a feasible departure date, she insists that we are still leaving. She seems to be in some sort of parallel universe, which is not occupied by many of her Cabinet. The Foreign Secretary said on Thursday that we might need some extra time. The Justice Secretary told The Daily Telegraph that he agreed, and it reported that nine Cabinet Ministers believe it, too. The ever-thoughtful Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), wrote yesterday that “we have to grasp the nettle of an extended article 50 period”.

I shall be interested to know, when the Minister responds to the debate, which side of that argument within the Conservative party he is on.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris): You have to ask?

Paul Blomfield: We will come to that shortly.

When she is questioned, the Prime Minister just keeps hitting the repeat button. She knows it is nonsense and, what is worse, she knows that everybody knows she knows it is nonsense. It did not have to be like this. The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) has highlighted the original drafting of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. There was provision for multiple exit days for multiple purposes, which was sensible. It was the Government’s proposal.

However, to throw some red meat to those whom the Chancellor described as the Brexit “extremists” of the European Research Group, the Government fixed 29 March on the face of the Bill for all purposes. It was a gimick, and a time-consuming and irresponsible one. The Opposition told the Prime Minister that it was a legislative straitjacket and that the Act would have to be amended. We tried to help her out, and tabled amendments to that effect, but the Government rejected them. They rejected proposals that would have given Parliament control over the dates.

The Prime Minister is now preparing to return to Brussels, following last week’s vote. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam talks about the EU giving some flexibility. Let us just remember what the Prime Minister
is returning to do. She is going to ask the EU27 to change the backstop that they did not want, but that she pressed them hard to accept. The backstop is a UK Government proposal. We can imagine their bewilderment when, having conceded it when pressed by the Prime Minister, they will face her telling them “You know that backstop? We have got to change it.”

Sandy Martin: Does my hon. Friend agree that if the Prime Minister had made a little more effort to secure a deal among her own Members of Parliament it might have been easier for her to get a decent deal with the European Union?

Paul Blomfield: I shall be echoing my hon. Friend’s point in a moment.

The immediate task that the Prime Minister has set herself is to reopen the deal that she said, two weeks ago, was unreopenable. On 15 January, she said:

“Some suggest that there is a fourth option…to vote this deal down in the hope of going back to Brussels and negotiating an alternative deal. However, no such alternative…exists.”—[Official Report, 15 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 1112.]

It is worth remembering, too, with all this focus on the backstop, that the backstop was not the primary objection for the majority of us who voted to reject the deal. It was the impact that the deal would have on jobs and the economy. The hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) is right to say that we have the right to walk away, but we also have the responsibility to the British people to outline the consequences of taking that sort of step, and we have exercised that to some degree in terms of the impact of no deal.

With the country currently despairing of our politics and with business confidence collapsing, the Prime Minister might reflect—to return to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin)—that it did not have to be like this. At the outset, she could have said, “The British people have voted to leave the European Union, but by the closest of margins; it is a mandate to end our membership of the EU, but not a decision to rupture our relations with our closest neighbours, our main trading partner and our key allies.” She could have added, “Therefore, we will seek a deal that reflects that position: a deal that is right for people’s jobs and livelihoods, in a customs union, close to the single market, in the agencies and partnerships”—some of which the hon. Member for Glasgow North mentioned—“that we have built together over 45 years, retaining the rights and protections for workers, consumers and the environment, and keeping up with those rights and with the EU as we move forward.” If she had said those things, she could have secured a majority in Parliament. She could have united a country that had been so bitterly divided by the referendum, and the issue of the Northern Ireland border would never have existed.

Paul Scully: I set out a brief list of the reasons why I voted to leave: leaving the institutions, stopping the payments, stopping freedom of movement and being able to do trade deals. In the customs union that the Opposition are suggesting, can the hon. Gentleman outline which of those would be available?

Paul Blomfield: The hon. Gentleman will recognise that freedom of movement has nothing to do with membership of the customs union. Our position is that we cannot be a member of the customs union of the European Union, because we will no longer be a member of the EU, but we should have a customs union that replicates those current arrangements. That means having a common external tariff; it means recognising that we would not be able to negotiate our own trade agreements, but that we would benefit from the trade agreements, which we were part of negotiating as a member of the European Union, that exist with 70 countries, and hoping to have a say—not a deliberative say, but a say—in future trade agreements. Does that answer his question?

Paul Scully: What about the institutions and the fees we might pay?

Paul Blomfield: The hon. Gentleman raises a much broader question. There would not be fees in relation to the customs union, but, as the Government have acknowledged, there clearly will be payments for other schemes and partnerships that we might want to be part of; the Minister might want to comment on that. There are no fees in relation to the customs union, but there would be if we were to be part of the Horizon 2020 framework programme 9 on research across the European continent. We would pay something in and we would get something out.

There are many other schemes, if we were part of the agencies and partnerships: take Euratom, the European Atomic Energy Community. We are spending an enormous amount of money replicating arrangements that we could have continued to benefit from as a member of Euratom. There is no additional benefit to the UK in that; it is just a separation of functions because of the obsession with the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, which has never ruled on anything relating to Euratom that would be of any concern to the United Kingdom.

My point is that, at that juncture after the referendum, there was an opportunity to reach out to the majority that existed in Parliament for a sensible Brexit. I campaigned to remain, but I recognise the outcome of the referendum. Instead, the Prime Minister let the ERG set the agenda, set the red lines and box her in, leading to the deeply damaging proposal that the House so overwhelmingly rejected a couple of weeks ago. She is putting her party before her country, just as David Cameron did before her, and the country is facing the consequences.

It is not too late. As an Opposition, we are willing to talk about that sensible Brexit deal—a relationship with a customs union, single market, rights and protections, agencies and partnerships. To answer a question that I was anticipating the hon. Member for St Albans would ask, although she did not: if the Prime Minister will not go there, we will consider the option of a further public vote to break the impasse. Nevertheless, whatever happens over the next seven weeks, we cannot and should not rule out an extension of article 50.

5.54 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. You have obviously heard my speech many times before: I believe that is why you are just about to scoot off to do better things. I thank you for the generous way in which you have chaired the debate. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully)
for the thoughtful way in which he introduced the debate. He, like me, campaigned to leave; he, like me, knows that there are many different ways of leaving, but that the British people gave an instruction to their Government, and he, like me, knows that the Government are intent on delivering on it.

I should answer a couple of the points raised in the debate. It is always a pleasure to hear the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) telling us that we cannot cancel Brexit; in general, the Lib Dem policy is, “We can’t cancel it, so we’ll try any other means whatever, parliamentary or otherwise, of undermining that result.” Realistically, I struggle with the Lib Dems when they say pretty much anything, because I remember in 2010 their campaigning vehemently to get rid of tuition fees and then, as soon as they got into Government, doing exactly the reverse. She says she is not campaigning to cancel Brexit now, but I absolutely know that she is, so I think she should be a bit more honest in the debate.

**Wera Hobhouse:** The Liberal Democrats, including me, have never made any bones about the fact that we think the best deal we can get is staying in the European Union, but we acknowledge that we have had a referendum, so what I am saying is: “We have had a referendum, and we now have a deal, so we need to clarify with the British people whether they think this is actually what they voted for.” That is a very democratic way of going forward. But if there were such a referendum, of course I would campaign to stay in the European Union.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** That is remarkably clear for a Liberal Democrat. The hon. Lady mentioned that of those writing to her, the biggest group are people arguing for no deal. That is no surprise, when they have seen the political class argue as we have done. What those on the outside see is people trying to stop Brexit, and that is why they get frustrated.

**Mrs Main:** On a point of clarification regarding the answer the Minister had from the hon. Member for Bath, can he remember any group that campaigned saying, “And when we’ve got the answer, we’ll make sure we come back again and double-check”? I do not think anyone thought we could unpick all this without doing some form of negotiation. Did anyone make the case that we would double-check and then go back to the EU again?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** To the best of my knowledge, I did not hear anybody mentioning that in the campaign, or in the debates in Parliament that led to the referendum being granted. I can honestly say that I never heard that until possibly the day after the referendum result. I was going to come on to my hon. Friend’s contribution; as there are now two Chairmen in the room, I should make the point that they both need to go back to Mr Speaker and ensure that my hon. Friend gets higher priority on the speakers’ list, because more people need to hear what she has to say on this subject. She made a huge amount of sense, and I think she underestimates her value to this place and this debate. She said that she campaigned to leave, and that she was but one vote, but she was joined by 17,410,741 others, of which I was one, and that is a decent-sized number.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I completely take my hon. Friend’s point, and that is why I get slightly anxious in some of these debates to ensure that we are not seen to be cloth-eared here. We have a referendum result that we are delivering on. I agreed with pretty much every word that she said, including about my contribution to whatever debate there was around the deal. I absolutely voted for the deal the first time around. With my personal experience of the European Union, I trust it to deliver on matters that it signs up to, so I was happy to go into the Aye Lobby. However, I can guarantee her that the Government will not ignore the fact that 17.4 million people voted in the way they did.

It is always a pleasure to listen to the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), who, as the Scottish National party’s Chief Whip, is now too silent. It was a pleasure to deal with him when I was a Government Whip. He is always courteous, polite and completely on the money. He will never go back on his word, and that is true in this case, too. He wears his heart on his sleeve in these matters, and he articulated very well that he is a passionate pro-European. I guess I should ask him to forgive me for being exactly the same, but coming from the reverse position.

I would love to quote parts of the hon. Gentleman’s speech back to him—perhaps I can do so over a beer some time—including the bits about how staying within a Union gives people a chance to shape its future and all that sort of stuff. However, we will leave that for another day.

**Wera Hobhouse:** Does the Minister question my honesty about being a passionate pro-European?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I absolutely do not. I just wish that the hon. Lady’s party was as honest as her.

I always enjoy debating with the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), as I do with anybody from the Labour party Front Bench, because it is interesting to see which part of the Labour party they are from. Is he from the bit that wants a second referendum? Does he agree with his party’s leader that article 50 should have been activated the day after the referendum? Is he part of the democratic socialist movement, which actually believes that the result of the referendum should be respected? Or is he from the authoritarian or the metropolitan intelligentsia parts of the Labour party, which believe that the people got this completely wrong?

The hon. Gentleman is a wise pro-European of long standing and is principled on these matters. I do not doubt his sincerity. However, again, I struggle with his party’s position, which seems to be ever changing. [Interruption.] Those outside must have heard that I had started speaking; I like to get that sort of response.

It is fascinating to see people talk about taking no deal off the table, as the hon. Gentleman did. That is not the wisest thing to do in any negotiation.

**Paul Blomfield:** If the Minister thinks that that is not the wisest thing to do, why did the Chancellor reassure businesses that that is exactly what is happening?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** Because we are working towards a deal. There is a deal on the table. When Parliament took back control last Tuesday, it actually gave some indication that there is a possible deal out there. The Government...
That is the highest number of votes cast for anything in higher turnout than any previous referendum, with their voices would be heard. The referendum enjoyed a and that, after years of feeling ignored by politicians, to have their say, trusting that their vote would count is not to revoke article 50. must respect the result and why the Government’s policy to us by the 2016 referendum, which illustrates why we election. I emphasise again to hon. Members the strength vote of the British people in 2016, but the mandates on Union. To revoke article 50 would betray not only the values of this country and of this Government. We therefore cannot and must not frustrate the will of the people by revoking article 50.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I heard that many a time. [Interruption.] No, it is not a call for proportional representation. Members should be careful what they wish for. I was elected under proportional representation for the first time in 1999. While it was a lovely system for getting me elected to the European Parliament, it is not a good system for voters who want democratic choices to be delivered.

Parliament overwhelmingly confirmed the referendum result by voting with clear and convincing majorities in both Houses for the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017. Parliament, informed by the will of its electorate, voted to trigger article 50 and leave the European Union. Further still, in the 2017 general election, more than 80% of voters voted for parties committed to respecting the result of the referendum. Not only Government Members but Opposition Members were elected on manifestos committing to respecting the decision of the people.

We made promises and commitments to the people we represent from when we held the referendum to when we as a Parliament voted to begin the process of implementing its result. The British people must be able to trust in their Government to both effect their will and deliver the best outcome for them. As the Prime Minister said:

“This is about more than the decision to leave the EU; it is about whether the public can trust their politicians to put in place the decision they took.”

To do otherwise would undermine the decision of the British people and disrespect the powerful democratic values of this country and of this Government. We therefore cannot and must not frustrate the will of the people by revoking article 50.

Despite that, I understand that there are those who advocate revoking, extending or otherwise delaying our article 50 notice. Parliament is clear that it does not wish to deliver no deal; it expressed that last week in the House. The obvious conclusion is that we must secure a deal to deliver the exit for which people voted. The only alternative, as the Prime Minister has laid out, is revoking article 50. That is not Government policy and it would, as she said, disrespect the biggest vote in our democratic history. The Prime Minister has also been clear that other delays, such as through extending article 50, would not resolve the issue of the deal with which we leave the European Union. Moreover, as she reminded the House
this week, the 29 March 2019 exit date is the one that Parliament itself voted for when it voted to trigger article 50. The Government are clear on their notice to withdraw under article 50 as instructed by the British people.

I reiterate to hon. Members that this Government are committed to delivering on the result of the referendum. It remains our policy not to revoke article 50 and not to frustrate the outcome of the 2016 referendum, which I trust will please the petitioners. Instead, we continue to work to overcome the challenges and seize the opportunities to deliver on the result of the vote by the British people in the summer of 2016 to leave the European Union.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Paul Scully has one hour and 20 minutes to sum up the debate.

6.10 pm

Paul Scully: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I will get my 40-slide PowerPoint presentation ready, if you do not mind. No, I just want to take a few minutes to say thank you to everyone who has contributed to the debate. Yes, there has been some knockabout fun, shall we say? But on the whole, this matter has been dealt with in the right spirit—in the knowledge that people are looking to us in this place to hold such debates in this way. We can differ, but we can hear and, more importantly, listen to one another; we can hear a lot of things, but unless we listen, we never learn.

We have to look to the time when this process is finished. Yes, the result was 52% versus 48%. We have to work out how to heal the divide—in Parliament, but most importantly, out there in the country—and ensure that we can secure a Brexit that works for everyone. With regard to securing that Brexit, the petitioners and the 116,000 people who signed the petition can rest assured: the Government and a lot of Government Members certainly do not want to revoke article 50, but we do not want to extend article 50, either.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) agreed with my view that no one is going to die in a ditch about a couple of weeks, if there is a technical position to consider—a few of us have talked about that—but people saw what happened in the voting Lobbies a few weeks ago. My right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) were in the same voting Lobby, celebrating the same result. If we do not end up with a deal, one of those people—they are colleagues—is going to be sadly disappointed. They cannot both be right, given the positions that they took at that time. The obvious way to get through this in time to be able to leave on exit day, 29 March, is to ensure that we secure a deal.

I hope, as I said at the beginning, that we put forward a reasonable proposal to Brussels, in a reasonable way that allows people there the space that our colleagues in this place have had over the last week or so, ahead of that vote. That is what I urge. What changed over the previous weekend was that there was more emollient language from people on all sides of the debate, which allowed people to calm the temperature down a little. The hope is that we can do the same with Brussels. If people there are looking at alternatives in order to avoid a hard border and no deal, surely they can just look at this again and give us what we need on the Irish backstop to ensure that we can get a deal through. That would help us, clearly, but it would also help the EU—and without encouraging other people to leave. All we want is to be able to do our thing and to allow the EU to progress in the way it wants to. Let us be friendly neighbours—let us not be awkward tenants—and let us do that in the most clear way we can, so that we can all progress and move on.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered e-petition 224908 relating to leaving the European Union.

6.14 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 5 February 2019

[MR CLIVE BETTS in the Chair]

GWR and Network Performance

9.30 am

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the Great Western Rail (GWR) delays and performance across the network.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank the Buckingham Business Committee for generously accepting my application for this urgently needed debate on the Great Western rail franchise, and the many colleagues from across the House who supported it. It is good to see so many colleagues from across the network in the Chamber; they will represent the concerns of passengers from across the network and the difficulties that they face. It is clear that the deteriorating GWR service affects many hon. Members and their constituents.

I also thank those who shared their stories and frustrations about GWR’s failures on the RailUK Forums and the Great Western passengers forum, and my constituents who did so on Facebook and Twitter. I thank the Parliamentary Digital Service for its outreach work in support of this debate, and the House of Commons Library and my office for helping to compile a list of some of those concerns.

Carmel, who commented on one of the forums, summed up the situation:

“Terrible customer experience with travel and website use. Cannot rely on the train service to get me to work on time despite my rail fare going up year on year. Cancelled trains, delayed trains, high cost...Hopeless and frustrating journeys day after day. Poor Wifi, ridiculous paper filling out to get a refund on tickets. Makes life very stressful for commuters.”

Those are some of the issues that I will touch on.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the way he is leading this very important debate. On that point, my constituents who have contacted me say they want to use the train service more often and not drive to work, but they cannot, due to the issues that my hon. Friend identifies—particularly those relating to reliability. Does he agree that that is simply not acceptable any more?

Stephen Doughty: Absolutely. I concur with that point. It is a great tragedy that the service problems are turning many potential rail users on to the roads. We do not want that to happen, particularly in the south Wales corridor.

As the Library helpfully summarised for Members in the debate briefing, Great Western Railway is currently run by FirstGroup under a direct award that is due to expire in March 2019. The Department for Transport decided to exercise its option to extend the direct award until April 2020, and we understand that it plans to negotiate another direct award for two years until April 2022. It took that questionable decision despite the fact that, as the Library outlined, Great Western’s performance has seriously deteriorated of late. That is reflected in the declining levels of passenger satisfaction on its part of the network. The autumn 2018 national rail passenger survey revealed that passenger satisfaction was just 78%, and had declined from 84% when the survey was conducted three years earlier. Even more shockingly, only two thirds of GWR passengers were satisfied with the reliability of trains, and only 40% were satisfied with the way GWR handled delays.

The Great Western route is unusual in that it is hugely wide geographically. It stretches right along the historical south Wales and west country main line, famously developed by Brunel, and serves the M4 corridor and the commuter lines into the Thames valley. Crucially, it also goes down to the south-west, Devon, Somerset and Wiltshire. It is a lifeline for many communities. People rely on it for commuting between those regions and travelling to and from London.

There have been substantial problems on the network for the past few years, a variety of which have hit the headlines. The bulk relate to the delayed and altered electrification programmes, the responsibility for which lies with the DFT and Network Rail, and to the introduction of the new trains. Surprisingly, the Department extended the franchise without adequate consultation or consideration. The problems include serious delays, poor service, delays in processing compensation claims and other concerns about performance including catering issues, failures relating to reservations and the management of rail replacement services at crucial periods.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): On the point about new trains, does my hon. Friend find it staggering that the trains that have been commissioned for use on the line are in some cases worse than the old 125s, which were introduced in the 1970s? People cannot even walk the entire length of the trains that have been bought, so they can be stuck at one end of the train with no catering services. Even if there is a perfectly adequate trolley on the train, it may not be able to get to them because the train is split into two units.

Stephen Doughty: Indeed. In fact, I had that experience myself on the last Great Western train that I took. There was hot water in only half of the train—there was no hot water in the toilets or for the catering services. The staff simply shrugged their shoulders and said, “We see this problem all the time.”

I met Hitachi yesterday to discuss some of those concerns. I have to say that it has been very frank and forthcoming about the issues it has experienced with engineering the new trains. Unfortunately, that is what happens if a new fleet is rushed into service without adequate testing and operation time, and without redundancy and additional rolling stock. Great Western’s old HST fleet was sold off to Scotland before enough of the new trains were ready and functioning. That is why many of the problems have happened.

I am disappointed that, despite the many meetings that Members from both sides of the House have had with Great Western management, a blame culture seems to have developed among GWR, Network Rail, the Department for Transport and in some cases the developer of the new rolling stock, Hitachi. As I said, Hitachi has been frank and honest about the problems it has faced...
and what it is doing to deal with them, but the net result for passengers is poor service. I am sorry to say that the managing director of GWR, Mark Hopwood appears out of touch in relation to some of the problems, and unwilling or unable to get a grip on the litany of failure over the past few years.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my frustration that, despite the litany of complaints about service, GWR’s franchise keeps getting renewed? The Government do not seem remotely interested in performance and passenger satisfaction levels.

Stephen Doughty: I completely agree with my constituency neighbour. The reality is that the service was underperforming and declining, and yet GWR was given an extension, and could be given another one. Most passengers would find that extraordinary.

Our railways are a vital public service for all our constituents. I want to cover the price hikes, the delays, the new rolling stock, compensation and the electrification problems. Trains are increasingly overcrowded. Many constituents have contacted me and have even sent pictures of the overcrowding on Great Western services, particularly on the London-Reading leg, where the service is very disappointing.

Research released this week by Transport Focus, using results from the national rail passenger survey, which focused on 1,458 GWR passengers, shows that overall satisfaction has gone down and sits at a poor 78%. Only 49% of the group felt that the GWR services provided value for money. Meanwhile, season tickets prices continue to skyrocket. They have gone up by 20% since 2010, and some tickets have gone up by 30%. More fare increases were announced at the start of this year. It is good to see the Chair of the Transport Committee in the Chamber. She made that very clear in her comments in November. She said:

"After the year passengers have had, any increase in rail fares is going to be unwelcome. But 3.1 per cent—the largest increase we’ve seen since January 2013—represents a real kick in the teeth."

That is what my constituents and others who have posted comments on the forums are telling me.

One of my constituents, Mark, spoke about the Cardiff-Portsmouth service, specifically through Trowbridge and Fareham. He said that, until December, he was able to book in advance and get a return for about £20, but since the new year the same journey, departing and arriving at the same time, has almost doubled in price, and yet the service is poorer. His words say it all: the trains are “always packed” and “often delayed”.

Others have shared similar experiences. Azriel said that GWR’s prices were “outrageous”; and that trains were always “very full”, and echoed other comments that point to the frustration that many of us have about the south Wales corridor and the fact that the electrification, which has been delayed and complicated, will stop in Cardiff. It will not even go to Swansea, as was promised.

Jo Stevens: My hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way. A standard return rail ticket to London from my constituency, Cardiff Central, costs £242. For the same price, passengers could fly from our Welsh Labour Government-owned Cardiff airport to Barcelona and back three times, and they would still have change for a taxi home. Is it any wonder that my constituents are giving up on using GWR? Does my hon. Friend agree with them?

Stephen Doughty: I completely agree with them. My hon. Friend’s constituency neighbours mine; they are either side of Cardiff Central station. If someone goes out the front, they end up in my hon. Friend’s constituency, and if they go out the back, they end up in my constituency. I hear the same stories all the time. Many people have told me that they are turning to driving, instead of using trains. They have called train travel on GWR trains “unbearable” and “awful”. One said:

“Since the new rolling stock was introduced on long distance services, I have driven long-distance more as the new trains are (for me and my partner) unbearable.”

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very compelling case on behalf of his constituents. When the Minister replies, he will no doubt say that the Government are investing record amounts in our rail network, and of course he is right, but the problem is that, due to the fragmented nature of our system and the lack of co-ordination, that investment is not leading to the improved services that passengers expect. They understandably feel very angry about having to pay higher fares when they are not seeing an improvement in service. Until that is fixed, there will not be the trust in the rail industry that we want.

Stephen Doughty: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend, who chairs the Transport Committee. Later in my speech, I will come to some of my own views on that, which have been known for a long time. We should have a co-operative, publicly owned service, and a different model for our railways in which we bring the different parts of the system together.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Since 2010, Wales has received 1.6% of investment for 5% of the population and 11% of the railway network. Over a longer period, it has been only 1%. That is fatal underinvestment in Wales. There has not been a lot of investment and we need more.

Stephen Doughty: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. What a contrast with the new investment announced by the Welsh Labour Government for the services for which they are responsible. The new Transport for Wales services have recently encountered many difficulties, but I am absolutely convinced that with new rolling stock, the new services will be hugely improved. The Welsh Government are investing in those services.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way; he is making a well-informed speech to represent his constituents, as he always does.

On the Welsh Government’s investment, does he agree that it is ironic that over a number of years we have seen little to no investment in stations—including in my constituency, in Pencoed, Tondu and Maesteg—yet that remains the responsibility of the UK Government? If it were not for the Welsh Government finding avenues to bring about station improvements, we would see very limited changes. The Welsh Secretary says, “I want to
extend the line all the way beyond Carmarthen,” yet the Department for Transport does not invest in the infrastructure to achieve what is supposedly his grand design for rail infrastructure in Wales.

Stephen Doughty: Indeed; aspects of the process, including which services are covered and where the investment goes, can be confusing for passengers and for our constituents.

I will come back to train delays and cancellations, which are one of the primary concerns that my constituents contact me about. Claire told me,

“At least I’ve been able to take my booked trains this year. Last year 50% of the trains on which I’d booked a seat were cancelled.”

LZ said,

“Appalling, over-priced service. For nearly 2 months in October and November 2018 I travelled between Frome and Bristol 4 times a week….and it was ON TIME just 3 times! The carriages are dirty, too cold in the winter and in the summer trains were cancelled for being too hot.”

The House of Commons Library briefing that I mentioned absolutely confirms that performance has seriously deteriorated. It says that in the last four quarters, fewer than 85% of GWR services have arrived at their final destination within five minutes of their scheduled arrival time.

Research by Which?—interestingly, it just opened a support office in my constituency—ranked GWR 20th out of 30 UK train companies for commuter rail services, with an overall customer score of just 47%. It received just two stars for punctuality and value for money, which are both critical aspects of train travel. When ranked for leisure rail services, GWR also ranked 20th out of 30, and achieved a slightly higher—although not very good—customer score of 56%.

The latest statistics from GWR’s own website, for 9 December to 5 January, show that only 90.7% of trains were punctual within their five minutes on-time allowance—below GWR’s own target for punctuality. That is extraordinary. The reasons for those delays—based on my investigations and conversations with different stakeholders—appear to be a series of problems, including delays and overruns of electrification works; staff shortages and aspects of staff training, to which inadequate time is dedicated; failures of new rolling stock, with the DFT introducing new trains without an adequate testing period; and delays in delivery while old stock was transferred early to Scotland, which left no contingency.

There is also another series of issues to do with communication and confusion among the different parts of this convoluted system, between which a blame game has developed. GWR will blame Network Rail and the Department for Transport; Hitachi will blame the Department and GWR; Network Rail will say, “It’s not us, guv, it’s the GWR franchise owners and the Department for Transport.” That is simply not good enough. In a tweet, the Welsh Labour leader of Newport City Council said to me that the high fares, such as a £200 return from Newport to London, are “outrageous, especially when you have to stand all the way to Swindon on the return journey.”

She also mentioned the delays and cancellations.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way—he is being extremely generous with his time. His point about customers’ and constituents’ frustration about the delays is an important one. In my patch in the west midlands, where GWR also operates, those frustrations are often driven by a lack of staff. That causes frustration to the extent that, when they have a choice, some of my constituents drive up to 45 minutes to use an alternative railway line. Does he agree that that does not make sense for my constituents and is disturbing for them, and does not make sense for the company either?

Stephen Doughty: Indeed—nor does it make sense for the environment and reducing carbon emission, which we all know is crucial. I feel quite sorry for the GWR staff at times, because they do an incredible job and work very hard. When speaking off the record, they are often just as frustrated about the lack of training and support that they are given. They often have to deal with complex problems, such as failures of the new rolling stock when they have not been given adequate support to do so.

I will mention some of those particular problems. On the new trains, there have been door failures. We get frequent complaints about the seats, which are supposedly ergonomically designed but are some of the most uncomfortable seats someone could ever sit on. As for catering, we were told that they were going to get rid of the buffet cars on the London to Cardiff services, but that was not what passengers wanted. Often, a trolley with no hot water comes through, and it will only go through half of the train—that is if it can get through the train because, of course, if the train is overcrowded, it cannot. There have been issues with train safety systems failing, with the reservations system simply not working, as well as generator problems caused by the fact that bi-modal diesel and electric trains are running more on diesel because of delays to electrification. As a result, the engines sooted up and failure rates rose.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman share my frustration about the announcement—one sometimes hears it over the tannoy—that there is not a train crew available to drive the train? Does he share my concern that there seems to be a lack of planning, as well as potential skimping on preparing sufficient resources to crew the trains?

Stephen Doughty: Indeed; I have experienced that, particularly with services departing from Paddington, which should be one of the easiest places to have train crews available, as well as relief train crews if there is a problem.

As a result of all that, GWR has had the third largest increase in complaints rates in the country—behind Northern and Grand Central—with complaints rising in the last quarter. Like Grand Central, a reason for the increased volume of complaints is the quality of the train, as well as delays and cancellations.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): My hon. Friend has not yet mentioned the problems faced by people with disabilities and mobility issues when travelling on trains. I was at a recent meeting with a group people who were mostly wheelchair users or had other mobility issues, and they have problems with ramps not arriving, the wheelchair space being blocked, and not being able to get through the train because it is so packed. Does he share those concerns?
Stephen Doughty: I certainly do—I have seen aspects of that with my own eyes. People with disabilities and, interestingly, people with bicycles who want to travel with them on board, complain about the lack of access on such services. We are supposed to be making the railways as accessible as possible to people, whether they cycle in, use wheelchairs or have other mobility issues. We are simply not doing well enough.

Claiming compensation is another serious issue. Which? research from last year revealed that train companies, including GWR, were providing misleading advice to passengers about their rights by making blanket statements that they were not liable for consequential losses. Hon. Members may be aware that Great Western currently offers only delay repay 30 to London Thames Valley route customers. Other passengers are eligible for delay repay 60. I have been delayed for 40 to 50 minutes many times, but was not eligible for any compensation. The number of people choosing to pursue a claim is relatively low in comparison to the number of people eligible. That is partly due to the failures of the compensation system, which is very complex to navigate. According to Which?, only 51% of people said that they would know how to find information about claiming compensation. Clearly, there is a gap.

One figure reveals all: how can it possibly be acceptable that GWR has had to pay out £22.6 million in compensation for delays between 2015 and 2017? That raises a very serious question for the Minister about whether the franchise should be extended or renewed in any way.

We have also seen problems with electrification, and the National Audit Office made a critical report about that—how it had been managed, the overall cost increases and delivery delays. I accept that that is not GWR’s fault; it is an issue for the Department for Transport and for Network Rail. Again, however, the seeming lack of communication at various points between GWR, the train manufacturers, the DFT and Network Rail has resulted in more problems, with trains having to operate in a way that they were not designed for and needing expensive overhauls and modifications to cope, let alone the huge disappointment about the cancellation of electrification to Swansea and other locations across the network.

Station management has been touched on, in particular at Paddington, and although Cardiff Central, where we see confusion, is managed by Transport for Wales, a lot of GWR services go through it. Other issues include accessibility of toilets, for disabled customers in particular, or toilet facilities not even being available; ticket barriers not working; the failure of rail replacement services, notably over Christmas, with no co-ordination of buses and trains, and many people being delayed even further; and of course the provision of information to passengers.

My view of what is to blame has been clear for many years. It is the separation of track from trains brought about by privatisation, the fragmentation of network and franchises, and the consistent lack of political leadership and oversight—epitomised in extremis by the current Transport Secretary. I am sorry to say. It is time to take back control of our railways and to return them to public ownership or, even better, in my view as a Co-operative MP, to move them to a public co-operative or mutual model, in some combination that brings together the best of a passenger or consumer and staff-led service, where everyone has a stake, and fragmentation in the system is simply reduced.

Many commentators and experts have written important works on how to run our railways in future. Back in 2011, Christian Wolmar did a report for the Transport Salaried Staffs’ Association, and in 2012 an ASLEF and Co-operative party report by Professor Paul Salvesen looked at issues in Wales. The Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), have made clear their support for a “people’s railway”, which would deal with many of the issues.

I have three simple questions which I hope that the Minister will address in his response. What are the DFT doing to hold GWR to its franchise commitments, and does he agree that the issues raised today are unacceptable? What justification did his Department have for extending the franchise, and is he considering further extensions? Why has the DFT set such unrealistic targets for the new rolling stock, and does his Department take responsibility for any delays?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Seven Back Benchers wish to speak, which gives about six minutes each. That is a guideline, rather than set a time limit.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing this much needed debate on Great Western Railway. It allows me to talk about performance and delay problems in south-east Wales, including cross-border ones, and the service to Cardiff. One of the issues that I receive most correspondence on, in particular now the Severn bridge tolls have gone, is the poor quality of cross-border GWR services between Newport, Severn Tunnel Junction and Bristol.

Over recent years, the railway network in our area of south-east Wales has been plagued by chronic overcrowding and unreliable services, which have simply not adapted to growing demand. It is worth emphasising that over the past two decades, Severn Tunnel Junction alone has experienced a staggering 297% increase in station entries and exits, which will only keep growing. More people are moving to our area to commute to Bristol—we have some of the fastest-rising house prices in the UK—and it is estimated that the station’s catchment area will include more than 65,000 within the next decade.

In the past year, passengers on key commuter services between Bristol and Severn Tunnel Junction have endured regular incidents of short-forming, cancellations and delays, compounded of course by the unprecedented level of engineering works on the network in 2018. Statistics from GWR show that weekday closures were up by 66% on 2017, and weekend and overnight work up by 14.5%. Clearly, work to repair, modernise and improve the tracks and the service offered to passengers is welcome, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth said, there is little good feeling among passengers that what they are getting is good value for money for the increasing costs of their commutes, especially compared with many other areas in Europe.
Since 2010, the cost of a season ticket between Newport and Bristol Temple Meads has risen by 38%, and between Newport and Cardiff by an eye-watering 45%. No wonder commuters are feeling fed up. My hon. Friend said, that is reflected in the most recent Transport Focus rail passenger satisfaction survey, which showed overall satisfaction with GWR services at its lowest level in more than four years. The survey also showed that between 2017 and 2018, passenger satisfaction with GWR’s punctuality and reliability fell by 4%, and passenger satisfaction with levels of crowding fell by 6%.

I have expressed concerns about overcrowding and reliability directly to the managing director of GWR, and he has met constituents. I am grateful that he has been attentive to the problems. He has stated frankly that services were not good enough in 2018 and that customers had every right to feel frustrated. He assures me that we can expect some tangible improvements this year, given that the programme of training for drivers on new or improved rolling stock is nearing completion, and given progress on the switch to a newer fleet of local trains.

Over the next few months, however, GWR is still due to be working with a transitioning fleet of trains, which limits flexibility and has the potential to lead to delays. It is therefore important for the operator to redouble its efforts to ensure that any disruption to passengers is minimised. Communication with passengers is key—it is key for people to know what is going on over the next few months.

Locally, I am pleased that the peak Cardiff to Portsmouth GWR services, which are used by commuters to Bristol boarding at Newport and Severn Tunnel Junction, will be permanently upgraded to five carriages by the end of year. That is long overdue, and the sooner in 2019 that change can be delivered the better. The service has been nicknamed the “Sardine Express”. People have been left on platforms and told to travel in toilets, people have fainted, and people have suffered many other incidents of chronic overcrowding just trying to get to work. I understand that GWR is also working on plans to increase morning and evening peak services between Cardiff and London Paddington. That is much needed, and we need further details soon.

It is important that we see what time savings are possible from the trains and electrified lines once they are in place, although it would be far preferable for us to have a proper electrified line from London to Swansea. The Government’s decision to cancel the full electrification of the main line remains a strategic blunder, and an unforgivable snub to the people of south Wales.

While I am on the subject of where the UK Government have failed our Welsh train lines, I look forward to the Williams rail review addressing UK rail investment in Wales. As many hon. Members have said, despite Network Rail’s routes in Wales accounting for 11% of the route length, 11% of the stations and 20% of the level crossings in England and Wales, since 2011 an average of only about 2% of money spent on network enhancements in England and Wales has been spent in Wales. We should have received far more than that.

To conclude, the promise of improved services in 2019 is welcome, but we will continue to hold GWR and the Government to account on cross-border rail services. My constituents have endured a poor quality of service for far too long. Ultimately, the best way to keep fares down and to ensure that services are run in the interests of passengers rather than profit is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth said, to bring our railways back into public ownership.

9.58 am

*Derek Thomas* (St Ives) (Con): I am glad to be able to speak in this debate. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to take part, Mr Betts. In this place, we often speak about things that we do not have personal experience of. However, as the MP for Penzance, the furthest south-west part of the country, I can claim that I have experience when it comes to railways, and Great Western Railway in particular, because I live so far away.

I want my tone to be positive, but it is true that I have seen delays. One time, about 12 Conservative MPs took about 12 hours to get just from Devon to London, missing several votes. That could have been dealt with better by Great Western Railway. However, that was some time ago, and we have not seen a repeat lately. It is also true that far too often the washbasins have no water, which is important for basic hygiene, let alone anything else. Furthermore, the refund experience for delays has not been good enough. From speaking to Great Western Railway, I understand that it gave that job to another company, but it did not go so well. I believe it has been improved.

It is very easy to complain; if we use trains a lot, we can always find reason to moan about something. Obviously, we want value for money, but the truth is that on our rail network, not just in the south-west but across the country, there has been enormous growth in passenger numbers. Since 2010, in Cornwall and the south-west, the number has grown far more than anyone ever expected. There are infrastructure problems right the way down the south-west, but the figures provided by the Library show that there are only 79 complaints for every 100,000 journeys I represent about 100,000 people across my constituency. I would be quite glad to receive just 79 complaints. I imagine many other industries and sectors have a higher rate of complaints.

Many comments were made about price. It is a fair point that people who pay the maximum to go down to Cornwall spend huge amounts of money. However, when I came up on Monday, my advance single was just £19. That will please those who look closely at my expenses. I want to take a more positive tone, but that may change, because from 17 February, as the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) knows, there will be major disruption on the network because of Network Rail’s tunnel improvements. I am not yet sure how I will get here.

I want to talk briefly about my constituents right at the end of the line in Penzance, who have seen 36 brand-new inter-city express trains. That is over and above what the Government ordered. Many of them are specifically to service the route in Devon and Cornwall. I do not recognise many of the concerns raised today about those trains. I do not hear from constituents the complaints about the new trains that have been expressed in the debate. Far from selling all its old rolling stock, Great Western Railway has retained 11 trains purely to serve the Cornish economy and is beginning a half-hourly service. In the near future, passengers will be able to go a platform anywhere in Cornwall and get a train within
[Derek Thomas]

half an hour. That is a significant connectivity improvement for those living in the very rural south-west part of the country.

Great Western Railway has worked with councils and others to invest more than £22 million in a train care centre in Penzance—a massive piece of infrastructure. Often, Cornwall is a poor cousin when it comes to big schemes such as that, so we are delighted to have new skilled jobs, apprenticeship opportunities and huge investment in the heart of Penzance. The sleeper carriages have been completely refurbished. Those who use the sleeper will see a dramatic improvement from the carriages that served for many decades to the plush new carriages. I am not sure whether they are four or five star, but they are certainly very comfortable. I recommend that the Minister and others come right down to Penzance; people are reluctant to do so, but the sleeper service is excellent.

Great Western Railway is expanding depots at Exeter and elsewhere to allow for the half-hourly service. There are positive things to be said about what is happening on our rail network right down to Penzance. If someone were to drive down to Penzance today, they would find a whole load of roadworks in St Erth, which is the last major junction before Penzance. I do not want to discourage anyone from going on holiday, but they should take the train. The roadworks are happening because of the huge investment in the station, which will boost our economy and tourism. People will be able to get to the train station, park their car and get on the railway to go to all corners of the network—Penzance, St Ives and elsewhere. That is a real boost for tourism and a real opportunity to provide much-needed improvements to infrastructure. There was more investment in infrastructure last year than in any year since Brunel built the railway. It is no surprise that there will be some disruption to our journeys. I am confident that there will be better performance, better trains, better capacity and a better timetable.

We are getting to the five-year anniversary of when the railway washed into the sea at Dawlish. Those images are permanently fixed in the minds of those of us who live down there and were cut off for several weeks. People around the world saw the intense damage to that section of the railway. There is no way that Great Western Railway can be held responsible for the delays in getting a solution. The solution has not yet been absolutely confirmed, and I take the opportunity to say to the Minister that we must make progress. We will not be forgiven if there is another catastrophe such as that, with no progress to improve that part of the infrastructure.

There has been major transformation and increased demand, and we should expect teething and growing pains. Mr Betts, I wonder whether you could give me some advice. When our children grow, they go through teething, which can be a very stressful process for them and their parents. They then develop into puberty, which again can be a stressful and difficult process. Is it your suggestion that we hand our children over to the state, or that we continue to work with them and enable them to grow, flourish and make the contribution to society that we want them to? As Great Western grows and develops and the network improves, and we go through growing and teething pains, I suggest that we stick with the commitment to improve infrastructure, to support our industry and to get the services we deserve in the far south-west.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): All the advice I can give is for Members to stick to six minutes.

10.6 am

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this debate. Great Western needs to answer questions not just on the Welsh lines, but on the service to the far south-west. It was good to hear from the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) about Great Western’s service to the far south-west, but I am afraid I am not drinking the Kool-Aid in the way that he is. We need huge improvements.

Today marks five years since Dawlish was washed away. We all remember the hanging Peruvian rope bridge images. Five years on, there have been soundbites aplenty, and we have had press releases and promises coming out of our ears. If we could lay those press releases next to each other to form a railway, we would have the best train line in the world, but we cannot; we need the money. I really hoped that there would have been a funding announcement to coincide with the five-year anniversary, to show that Ministers get it. Instead, we seem to have half-canceled visits, planning applications submitted without the funding to go along with them and a lack of understanding about when the money will come.

The far south-west needs and wants its fair share of rail funding. The programme for which Network Rail has submitted a planning application seems to be a good step forward, which would improve not only Great Western services but CrossCountry services that use that piece of track. We need the Minister or the Secretary of State to announce the money. They do not need to come to Devon to do that; they could make their announcement in Whitehall, or the Minister could make it today. All we need is confirmation that the money will come. To date, we have not had that, and the lack of funding for our train line grates on people in the far south-west.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): The hon. Gentleman mentioned half-cancelled visits in reference to me. I know there was a media story about that yesterday. I have never been scheduled to visit Devon; I am afraid that that is just incorrect. I am very happy to ensure he does not inadvertently mislead the House.

Luke Pollard: I thank the Minister for doing so. If he has not planned to visit, I encourage him to do so, so that he can see the problems we are having at Dawlish.

Andrew Jones: Did the hon. Gentleman just tell me not to bother visiting, but say in the next sentence that I should visit? I look forward to a visit, but I ask that he be consistent.
Luke Pollard: I think the Minister is confused. I would like him to visit, and to reach into his pockets and give us the funding we deserve. I would like the Government of which he is a part not to have spent five years presiding over promises of jam tomorrow, but no funding. I am happy to have this back and forth, but people in the far south-west just want a train line that works, so that Great Western and CrossCountry services will not be cut off.

Five years on, the situation is not good enough, and we need that announcement today. If the Secretary of State visits the west country in two weeks’ time—I hope he does—I hope he will realise that he should have made that announcement months if not years ago, so that we would not be in the situation we are in today.

The anger that people in the far south-west feel is similar to that mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth. Yesterday I asked people on Facebook, and they told me about their decisions to drive from the far south-west to Bristol or London because it is cheaper and faster. People mentioned problems with accessing trains as a result of the high cost, which people on disability living allowance cannot afford. I agree with my hon. Friend that the staff who work for Great Western Railway do a good job, but they are let down by a system that does not give them the focus they need.

Some things, however, have changed. On timetable changes, the half-hourly GWR service from Plymouth to Cornwall was supposed to start in December last year, but because of the timetabling chaos presided over by the Government, it has been delayed until December this year. Can the Minister reassure us that that service will start in December this year, and that passengers will not have to wait any longer for it?

I am grateful that we have new trains in the far south-west. They are a different model from those used in the service to Wales, and I would like the Minister to inject an element of transparency into any problems with the new trains along the Dawlish sea wall. I hope that the new trains will not encounter the same problems as the Voyagers do on the CrossCountry service, but if they do encounter problems, the best thing that the Minister and Great Western Railway can do is to be transparent and open about those problems rather than hiding them away. We need honesty in the far south-west about our funding and services. I agree with the hon. Member for St Ives that the sleeper service is better than one from Cheltenham to London, which is less than one hour. Some things, however, have changed. On timetable changes, the half-hourly GWR service from Plymouth to Cornwall was supposed to start in December last year, but because of the timetabling chaos presided over by the Government, it has been delayed until December this year. Can the Minister reassure us that that service will start in December this year, and that passengers will not have to wait any longer for it?

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from other sectors. Secondly, my real concern is that were the railways to be nationalised, if it came to a bidding war between the NHS and railways, the NHS would win. If it came to a bidding war between schools and railways, schools would win. If it came to a bidding war with any other precious public service, railways would be likely to come off second best.

I am just about old enough to remember the state of British Rail. It was atrocious: old, dirty, clunky rolling stock, and unspeakably awful food. Although I have some sympathy with the idea of renationalisation—there can be limits to privatisation, particularly when dealing with public goods that have a natural monopoly—we should be careful what we wish for.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman makes interesting points about public spending. Does he agree that the current Government are already making a significant investment in High Speed 2? Surely, any Government would balance their investments and spending on a number of different projects. In addition, the current franchise system is hugely costly and is using large amounts of public money very badly.

Alex Chalk: It is true that the system uses public money, but it comes down to how much public money, and what is the proper balance. I simply make the point that although it is easy in the abstract to suggest that if the railways come into public ownership, fares will come down and quality will go up, I suspect that is unlikely in reality. If I am looking for additional funding for my local oncology centre, compared with more rolling stock, I think I know which one I and many colleagues would prioritise.

If train operating companies want to enjoy public support—they do not enjoy enough public support because they are the author of their own misfortune in many circumstances—they must raise their game in two particulars. First, they must be more reliable, and secondly they must be more competitive in their pricing structure. Otherwise, the people of Cheltenham, who I represent, will feel that they are getting a raw deal. Public services must be for the people, and GWR needs to raise its game.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this debate and giving us the opportunity to speak on behalf of our constituents. Every delayed journey has a personal story, whether that is a missed connection for a holiday, or being late for a crucial job interview or hospital appointment. For all the promises we have been given, as we have heard, the figures remain poor.

I wish to talk about the increase in delays and the level of compensation offered to GWR customers, compared with those of other train operators. First, however, I will touch on the promised electrification. The delays and disruption to our current service have been significantly affected by the failings and mismanagement of the electrification programme by the Government and Network Rail. The electrification programme offered much in the south-west. We were promised increased capacity, improved reliability and a better passenger experience, but it was so poorly managed that costs rose by £1.2 billion in 2015 alone. I was on the Public Accounts Committee at the time, and our report into electrification called the situation “staggering and unacceptable”.

I recall the decision, in 2016, to defer the electrification project for the key sections between Bath Spa, Bristol Parkway and Bristol Temple Meads. At one evidence-taking sitting of the Committee I asked Department for Transport leaders whether they had looked at the devastating effects that that would have on the local economy around Bristol South. I was told by the then permanent secretary that the impact would not be “perceptible”. That attitude reinforces the need for more local control over decisions that affect the city’s infrastructure. They should not be left to civil servants in Whitehall with no understanding of local economic needs.

To add insult to injury, the complete mess that was made of the electrification project in our area was spun as a positive thing for passengers. We were told that the pausing of the programme meant that it would be possible instead to embark on customer improvements and to offer passengers benefits that newer trains with more capacity would provide, without the requirement for “costly and disruptive” electrification works. We were promised sleek new Hitachi trains, with more seats, more leg room and better wi-fi. Views differ about the trains. Personally, I quite like the seats. However, the catering is totally pot luck, and the split trains make boarding a nightmare. As to the quiet carriage—there is no indication that it is one. We certainly do not feel that the quality of the experience has improved. The issue remains. The Government made promises to us about electrification and investment in the infrastructure of our city, which is a net contributor to the Exchequer, and which is struggling with air pollution and would like the promises fulfilled.

Despite the lofty promises of 2016, the statistics today speak for themselves. Problems are on the rise, as has been set out in the very good Library briefing for the debate. Most critically, in each quarter of 2017-18 the proportion of trains cancelled or significantly late was greater than in the previous quarter—a trend that accounts for the decline in passenger satisfaction across the network. I understand that GWR’s response has been that improvements to the service have caused short-term disruption, but I expect we would all like to know how long the short term can go on. My constituents have suffered long enough at the hands of the chaos between the Department for Transport, Network Rail and Great Western Railway.

That brings me on to the issue of compensation. There is gross inequality in the amount of compensation being offered to passengers by the different rail operators across the country. The extent of the anomaly was first brought to my attention in July by a constituent who was suffering perpetual delays in her daily commute, with all the negative knock-on effects that that can bring. I wrote to the Secretary of State and argued that it cannot be fair that some train operating companies offer refunds for delays of over 15 minutes, whereas others offer them for delays of over 30 minutes—including, bizarrely, GWR on its Thames valley route. However, GWR does not offer refunds on 30-minute delays on
the route serving my constituents. I also highlighted the discrepancy between the levels of refund paid by GWR for 60-minute delays. On local routes serving Bristol it is 50%, and yet on high-speed trains it is 100%. I urged the Secretary of State to seek amendments to the national rail conditions of travel, to reflect best practice in the industry, and to define 15 minutes as the new criterion for being late.

Three months later, the then Rail Minister replied and explained that the national rail conditions of travel was a national standard, setting out minimum standards, and that most train operating companies offered more than the minimum required. That is not an awful lot of good to my constituents. The reply also set out details of the Government’s delay repay scheme, which compensates passengers for significant delays and cancellations based on the fare paid, with 50% for delays of 30 to 59 minutes and 100% for delays of over 60 minutes. I am pleased about the new scheme, but, as the Library briefing highlights, previous initiatives have shown that it can take many years to bring about such changes. Based on previous initiatives, the Library estimates that the new version of the scheme would not be rolled out until the mid to late 2020s. That means years more injustice for my constituents who suffer poor service that is unacceptable. However, I try to remain hopeful.

The letter informed me that the Department has requested GWR to implement the scheme before the current contract expires. The managing director of GWR also told me that the operator is engaged in discussions with the Department and that it would like to introduce the scheme, although it has not yet been finalised. That was some three months ago.

I want to ask the Minister today what the outcome of those discussions was. Will he confirm that GWR will indeed introduce the delay repay scheme in 2019, as previously indicated, so that I can reassure my constituents and they will no longer be caught in the bad-tempered arguments now going on between the train operator, the track operator, and the Government?

10.24 am

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Briefly, we are, in the first instance, talking about problems with the trains. On the new trains there are problems with the toilets. When someone washes their hands in the sink, water goes all over the floor, and in fact water starts to seep out of the back of the toilet; that is to do with the way they are manufactured. There are fewer toilets and some carriages do not have them. I do not mean to be preoccupied with toilets, but some trains have arrived at Bristol without any carriage with a toilet.

There are issues with wi-fi not working, and with plug sockets between the seats. I found myself in a situation where there was a sleeping woman in the neighbouring seat, and fiddling around to plug a device in can be slightly embarrassing. There is no buffet car and the buffet trolley cannot get down. There are problems of cost, punctuality and cancelled trains. There were eight carriages in the old trains, and now there are two lots of five. Sometimes one of the fives is cancelled at short notice, so that people who have booked particular seats are affected. Families cannot sit together and people with disabilities have to stand up. Those are appalling standards for customers.

As to more strategic issues, as I mentioned earlier, Wales has 5% of the population, about 1.5% of the investment and 11% of the track, so we have been grotesquely underfunded. Since 2011 we have had about £198 million and we should have had £600 million. Electrification to Swansea was cancelled—that was another £700 million; and Network Rail cancelled a further £1 billion. The chronic under-investment has meant that standards simply are not up to scratch. The service to Swansea from Paddington is often only hourly, and it takes three hours. On High Speed 2, people will be able to get to Manchester within an hour. I could compare the Leeds and Manchester area with the Bristol, Cardiff and Swansea area—which is 3 million people. We get two trains per hour on the Bristol to Cardiff bit, and fewer to Swansea, as I have said. In the Leeds and Manchester area there are six trains per hour, and of course an investment of £3 billion is being made in the trans-Pennine upgrade—on top of the £52 billion for HS2. We are grotesquely underfunded, and our economy suffers massively.

Trains run at 125 mph in England, but when they get to Wales their speed goes down to 60, 70 or 80 mph, because we have not had the investment in the track. That is not a western powerhouse, but more of a 19th century infrastructure. After years of under-investment it is time for change and investment. What we do not need is the Secretary of State for Wales coming along with his penny-farthing idea of an extra little Swansea Parkway station, hoping that he can put us on the head and give us a Brexit bung so that we will vote the right way.

We need investment in a Swansea metro, strategic infrastructure and connectivity between the Bristol conurbation, Cardiff and Swansea, so that we can grow a regional hub for the future. I hope that some of the leadership for that can be taken by Transport for Wales—the UK Government obviously have other things to think about—and that with the right money and the right governance we will get the right result. As we approach the appalling disaster of Brexit, we need investment in our infrastructure now, to give us a fighting chance of building prosperity in south Wales. That requires investment, planning and UK money, and it requires the Welsh Government to be given the steering wheel.

10.28 am

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. A number of excellent points have been made with which I want to associate myself, particularly in the speeches of my hon. Friends who represent seats in south Wales—there were several, so I will not mention them all by name—and of my hon. Friends the Members for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and for Bristol South (Karin Smyth).

Obviously, fast and efficient rail services are hugely important to commuters and businesses in my area. Reading has more inward commuters from other parts of Berkshire and nearby areas than people commuting to London. The railway is a crucial part of the economic infrastructure across the Thames valley towards Bristol and, indeed, to south Wales. The importance of the growth strategy for south Wales and towards nearby parts of England has just been described by my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies),
I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) enjoyed sitting in the seats in the new Great Western trains. I rarely get a seat. This morning was a typical example; I was standing up all the way from Reading, which was manageable but certainly not ideal. My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West is absolutely right about the quality of the trains. Although it is good to see new investment—we obviously want that—there has been quite serious mismanagement of it. The internal fitting of the new trains leaves a lot to be desired. The lack of a buffet car, the issues with toilets and a number of other practical issues seriously affect people. That can begin to wear down those who are commuting every day, and is deeply frustrating for many people, not least thousands of my constituents.

As if on cue, I was delayed by 10 minutes this morning and last night I had to put up with half an hour of chaotic mismanagement by First Great Western, which was perfectly timed for this debate, as though it was waiting to help us make our point.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on raising this issue. There has been an average 3% fare rise on First Great Western services since the start of the year, with similar hikes throughout the UK, but at the same time there are talks of a reduced service. Does he agree that at some stage this House and this Minister must underline in a real and meaningful way that the profit margin is not the final consideration? The No. 1 consideration is that the service is viable, that a service is provided to those who need it most and, if the service is not there, there is compensation. Those three things are necessary and must be in place before we go forward.

Matt Rodda: The hon. Gentleman draws on several points that I and colleagues are due to make or have made.

I come back to the issue of delays and quite how frustrating they are for daily commuters in towns like Reading and Slough, in addition to the sensible points made earlier. It is deeply frustrating to have to deal with delays on a daily basis. It has a huge impact on family life and on people’s desire to work in London or to commute into Reading, Slough, Swindon or other business centres along the line. I am sure that applies to the other towns and cities represented here today. It is a deeply frustrating daily occurrence for hundreds and thousands of people in this region, which is a crucial part of our railway network.

I have a series of questions for the Minister about the performance of GWR and the Department for Transport. I will address both infrastructure investment and the management of the railway. First and foremost, why on earth did the Government delay electrification along this line? We have heard about the benefits that south Wales would have had if it had been properly managed. We have also had delays to our rail services because of the lengthening of the roll-out of electrification. The installation of the gantries was hugely delayed and on a number of the local lines that feed out from Reading, such as the lines to Basingstoke, Southampton, Oxford and Gatwick, we do not have that level of investment. Commuters using those lines, including many of my constituents and others in neighbouring constituencies, are suffering and would like to see more electrification, not less. It is a huge issue.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I am grateful that the hon. Gentleman has put his finger on that very important point. In Bath, where we suffer from massive air pollution, electrification has been stopped. That should certainly be a priority, particularly looking at air pollution. Why has the electrification through Bath not continued?

Matt Rodda: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point about pollution. There are three aspects of pollution that are deeply challenging in my area. The first is air pollution from soot and nitrous oxide. The second is the effect on global warming. Electrifying the railways should be the low-hanging fruit in tackling global warming, as it is obviously going to take carbon out of the atmosphere. It is a huge disappointment to many people that the Government have not seen it as a key priority.

The third point, which may affect colleagues in other urban centres, is that as part of the botched electrification, the train maintenance depot in Reading was moved. I believe that that has happened in other areas. We now have diesel locomotives, which should have been taken out of service, revving their engines at 5 o’clock in the morning outside terraced houses in Reading, because the maintenance depot was moved as part of the works. That is completely unacceptable and there is an ongoing legal dispute between Reading Borough Council and First Great Western, so I will not go into further detail.

Noise pollution is a substantial additional problem as well as air pollution and carbon dioxide pollution, which all seriously affect towns and cities along the line and the lives of people who live near the railway.

My second question for the Minister, which is also blunt, is, why has First Great Western’s franchise been repeatedly extended, given all the poor performance issues? I hope that as a new Minister, he will investigate that.

Time is pressing, but I would like to point out that I disagree with the Government’s policy of large increases in season ticket prices. That has a direct impact on people in my constituency and along the line, as we heard earlier. I draw the Minister’s attention to the fact that commuters are already having their salaries squeezed. Many residents in Reading and Woodley commute to London, or to nearby towns. They live in an area with high house prices and rocketing private rental prices, and at the same time their season tickets are going up by very large sums. That means that families, couples and single people are facing large cuts to their disposable income, which has a significant impact on their ability to enjoy life, especially family life. The Minister should address that and rethink this problem.

The railway is a vital public service that could—and should—be run much better. Investment is a key driver for jobs and growth in the Thames valley and along the whole railway corridor. However, as we have heard, there is a clear contrast between the poor performance of the current Government and a much more sensible long-term strategy. Colleagues have mentioned the importance of bringing the railway back into public ownership.

I will highlight that contrast in three simple points. I have mentioned the Government’s poor management of electrification, and that areas such as Reading, Wales
and others have suffered severely. There are other aspects of mismanagement, including the cost to passengers of high fares and delays. In contrast, the Labour Government paid for the vast majority of the rebuilding of Reading station, which is a huge asset to our town and to travellers up and down the network. An incoming Labour Government would invest in electrification, and, most importantly, bring the railways back into public ownership. I believe that that would dramatically improve the quality of life for rail travellers and for businesses that are reliant on the railways.

In my opinion, rail is a vital public service, and the evidence clearly shows that. It brings economic benefit to our region. Given that the Minister is new in this post, I ask him to rethink the Government’s policy and to look again at the dogma and failed economic views that have led to mismanagement, to the chaos of the franchising system, and to the lack of investment in capital infrastructure.

10.37 am

Rachel Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Mr Betts, for yet another crucial debate about our railways.

Over the last few months it feels like I have been taking a tour of our nation, as I have felt the pain of passengers who have been badly let down by the way in which our rail service has been run. We have seen cases of incompetence in governance under the Secretary of State, how the whole franchise system is broken, and the cost of that failure to passengers. We have also heard loud and clear the cry for one integrated rail service, in public ownership. It will be a new model of public ownership—unlike the myths peddled by the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk)—that moves the debate forward into a new era of rail. I say to the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) that it is 25 years since the Railway Act 1993, so it is clear that the broken model has gone through its growing pains and that it is time for change.

The model that we are promoting will address many of the issues and concerns that hon. Members have raised in the debate. It is not least those raised by my hon. Friends, who truly speak up for our whole population and forthright Members of Parliament such as my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), who truly speak up for our whole population and that is to get a seat on the trains.

Sadly, that is what we have come to expect from the Secretary of State. Thank goodness we have creative and forthright Members of Parliament such as my hon. Friends, who truly speak up for our whole population in Wales and the south-west on these matters and have put forward, yet again, a real case for urgency in bringing forward the transition to a modern railway system.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is making some strong points. Would she agree that the innovation shown by the Welsh Government is in stark contrast to the DFT? For example, in my constituency, they are working with a local business partnership involving Investec, Nigel and Andrew Roberts and others to develop a new St Mellons Parkway station in the east of the constituency, which is currently under-served by rail stations. That is an innovative approach, with Government working with the private sector to see that development go ahead.

Rachel Maskell: What the Welsh Government have been able to demonstrate is that rail is not an entity in itself, but is fully integrated into the economy and connected with other transport routes, and I thank my hon. Friend for bringing that point into the debate.

The most powerful arguments I have heard in this debate have come from the voices of passengers, which hon. Members have reflected. We have heard their pain and their stories of woe. The fact that passengers across this line are paying 20% more but getting a worse service is frankly unacceptable.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend for bringing that point into the debate.

The most powerful arguments I have heard in this debate have come from the voices of passengers, which hon. Members have reflected. We have heard their pain and their stories of woe. The fact that passengers across this line are paying 20% more but getting a worse service is frankly unacceptable.

We have heard about innovations that are needed to upgrade stations and making them safe. My hon. Friends the Members for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) and for Bristol
East (Kerry McCarthy) both highlighted how disabled people need a proper service, not only at stations, but on the trains themselves, which has not been delivered even with the new rolling stock. There is a catalogue of problems that must be resolved. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) gave the most powerful of speeches in making the case that, five years on from seeing the railway at Dawlish washed into the sea, the Government have yet to drive forward a programme to protect the whole of that vital south-west economy. We must see peninsula rail moving forward at pace now to protect the economy there.

Of course, we have the route itself, which is crying out for focus and proper governance. We have heard how the delay repay 15 system has not been introduced in an expedient way, yet this is a line that has had three direct awards, which will shortly total nine years, when it only had a franchise for seven years. Surely the Government can set the terms to protect the interests of passengers, but they have failed to do so. I would like more accountability from the Minister when he responds on why they keep issuing direct awards, which clearly shows that the franchise system is completely broken and does not enable the state to demonstrate that it can run the railways far more efficiently.

Alex Chalk: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachael Maskell: I will not, because of time. As frustrations have grown, we have seen satisfaction plummet; we have heard how vexed and unsatisfied passengers are with the poor service on that line.

It was last year’s timetable fiasco that really brought all those issues into focus. Staff themselves, as some hon. Members have highlighted today, have been professional and incredibly patient in their dealings with the public, and have received a quantum of abuse in trying to keep people safe through this time. It is not their fault, after all, that the Secretary of State meddled in trying to keep people safe through this time. It is not their fault, after all, that the Secretary of State meddled in the planned timetabling process by changing his mind over the projects he was cutting. It is not their fault that the private companies could not get their act together to have the trains delivered and up and running on time, with proper testing of the system. It was the Secretary of State who failed to hold the companies to account. It is not the staff’s fault that Network Rail, which is accountable to—guess who?—the Secretary of State, failed to deliver the infrastructure on time.

Derek Thomas: Will the hon. Lady give way on that point?

Rachael Maskell: I do not have time, I am afraid.

The Secretary of State, who treats this vital public service as if it were his own personal train set, is culpable for the pain experienced by customers. It demonstrates the weakness of this Prime Minister that he is still in post. Those who have sought recompense for their loss have clearly seen an inequitable response in terms of the compensation they can access; we have heard today that half of passengers do not even know how to access the compensation system, and that the network itself has paid out £22.6 million in compensation over a period of just two years.

This Government, as my hon. Friends have highlighted, have made promises to passengers time and again, and have let them down badly. Let us get Britain moving again, as our Labour Government will when we come to power. We have a plan; we just need the power.

10.47 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I will start by thanking everybody who has contributed to the debate, and congratulating the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing it in the first place. Many issues have been raised, and I will try to address as many as I can in the short time allowed, so I must press on fast.

The question has been asked, “Are the Government investing in railways?” The answer is yes, of course; we are investing a record amount to deliver more reliable, more comfortable and safer journeys for our rail network. Alongside our investment in infrastructure, we have delivered new, more reliable trains on the Great Western main line. There has been a change, however, in the way we approach investment in the next funding period. In the past, we focused very much on enhancements, but we are now focusing more of our £48 billion budget on reliability, and particularly on repairing and replacing the worn-out parts of our network to increase reliability and punctuality.

Stephen Doughty: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Jones: Oh, crikey—go on. I am always generous about giving way.

Stephen Doughty: The Minister mentioned reliability; I sat with Hitachi, the manufacturers of the new trains on the Great Western service yesterday, and they took me through their own reliability stats, which they admit have not been good, particularly with the introduction of the new trains. Basic things were missed, such as fitting them with filters to deal with pollen and seeds in summer, which meant record breakdown levels last year, during the hottest summer on record since the 1970s. Surely there was some problem with the commissioning of those trains in the first place?

Andrew Jones: With interventions that long we will really have to scamper. I do not accept the hon. Gentleman’s argument. New rolling stock often brings with it some kind of teething period, as we have seen throughout the history of our rail network, but the bottom line is that we are seeing new trains deliver a better service.

The modernisation of the Great Western main line will improve more than 100 million passenger journeys each year and will stimulate economic growth from London, through the Thames valley, certainly through Cheltenham, to the Cotswolds, the west country and south Wales. I fully recognise how vital this service is in not only connecting people but driving the economy.

I also recognise that GWR’s performance last year was not good enough and fell well short of passenger expectations. As a result, GWR worked with partners across the industry and put in place a performance improvement plan, which, although there is of course still more to do, has seen GWR move from delivering 72% of trains between south Wales and Paddington on time six months ago to more than 90% today.
The December timetable change was successfully introduced. The industry significantly reduced planned timetable changes to minimise the risk of severe disruption, which has served to stabilise services and to improve timetable efficiency. In the future, we will stage timetable changes, rather than having one big-bang approach.

I am clear that I expect GWR to do everything it can to minimise cancellations and other disruptions to services. It agreed to and implemented a contractual performance improvement plan, which includes a wide variety of activities across the whole franchise area to improve performance for passengers, including matters under the control of Network Rail.

**Nigel Huddleston:** The Minister is right that there is nothing MPs like more than a bit of railway or GWR-bashing every now and again. However, we need to acknowledge some of the positives. My patch will have a new station, the Worcestershire Parkway station, which will be of huge benefit to my constituents. I just need to make sure that the trains run through it on time.

**Andrew Jones:** Well done for getting that one on the record.

**Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con):** Talking about new stations, will the Minister meet me, colleagues and staff from GWR and Network Rail to talk about a new station in Grove in my constituency, which could be part of a network of two or three stations connecting Oxford and Bristol? As more houses are built in the south-east and south-west, local connectivity, alongside inter-city connectivity, is vital.

**Andrew Jones:** I most happily agree to meet my right hon. Friend. Questions were raised earlier about how the industry is held to account. The answer is through the Office of Rail and Road, the industry regulator, which holds Network Rail to account for its performance and takes enforcement action in the event of unacceptable performance. The Government will hold franchise holders to account when things go wrong by enforcing their franchise agreements, with contraventions dealt with under the terms of those agreements and in accordance with the Department's general management compliance process. Evidence of that can be seen in the recent action taken against Goveia Thameslink Railway.

Passenger satisfaction is obviously critical and will remain an absolute focus for me as an incoming Minister. Colleagues raised questions about the governance of the area, and I am pleased to see that Network Rail has joined forces with the regional train companies, GWR and Heathrow Express, to create a new joint supervisory board to drive improvements. This is the latest stage of the companies’ commitment to working closer together to improve the passenger experience.

Investment in transport infrastructure has been a long-standing problem across the UK. We have not invested enough in our transport infrastructure over decades, which applies to Governments of all colours. However, I do not think that that accusation can be made against this Government. We are investing £48 billion in our rail network in the next control period.

**Geraint Davies:** Will the Minister give way?

**Stephen Doughty:** I thank the Minister for his comments. I very much appreciate the number of colleagues from constituencies across the Great Western network who make against this Government. We are investing £48 billion in the future, we will stage timetable changes, rather than having one big-bang approach.

**Andrew Jones:** I am running out of time. There will also be more electrification works in this period. The electrification to Newbury and to Bristol Parkway was introduced this year, and we are working to complete the electrification to Cardiff later this year. When all that is complete, we will see benefits including journey time improvements of 15 minutes, which is a significant change.

Fares were mentioned. I remind colleagues that we are in the sixth year of capping regulated fares in line with inflation. We have introduced a railcard for 16 and 17-year-olds, and the industry has introduced a railcard for 26 to 30-year-olds, so basically everybody under 30 will be able to access discounted rail fares. It might also be worth reminding Opposition Members that, in its last year in office, the Labour party gave passengers a 10% fare increase, and that, where Labour now has the capacity to run the railways, through the devolved Administrations, we have also seen fares increase in line with inflation. I gently say to those colleagues that they have been saying one thing but doing another.

Perhaps it is worth further reminding colleagues how many miles of the Great Western main line Labour electrified when it was in office—zero. How much new inter-city rolling stock did Labour introduce when in office? Absolute zero. I understand the comments from Opposition Members, but it feels rather like the arsonists complaining about the amount of time it has taken the fire brigade to arrive.

**Matt Rodda:** Will the Minister give way on that point?

**Andrew Jones:** No; we are out of time.

Several colleagues raised delay repay 15, which will be standard in all new franchise agreements. We are also working very hard to make mid-term contract changes to existing franchises, and we are very close to getting that agreed. I will keep colleagues informed of the progress.

We are about to run out of time. I thank everybody who has taken part in the debate. We have covered a wide range of issues, although I am quite sure that we have not been able to cover every single point. I recognise the work taking place at Dawlish, to which we have committed £15 million, and I look forward to going down there. Protecting that line is a national priority, and we will continue to invest in it and to develop solutions to improve its resilience.

I look forward to seeing many areas of the route transformed by December this year, with the new services and new trains that I mentioned. We will continue to introduce improvements during the franchise continuation period. I hope that 2019 brings a further improved service for our constituents and others served by this franchise who are constituents of Members who were not able to be with us today. I assure everybody that the Government are working hard to ensure that the rail industry delivers the service that our constituents rightly expect.

10.57 am

**Stephen Doughty:** I thank the Minister for his comments. I very much appreciate the number of colleagues from constituencies across the Great Western network who...
have come to take part, including those from the other side of the House. They made their points with eloquence and seriousness on behalf of their constituents. I am deeply disappointed that the Minister chose to respond in the tone and with the lack of detail that he did. These are serious issues, and it is simply not good enough to gloss over them with a bunch of statistics, warm words and rhetoric. Passengers deserve better.

There is clear evidence that the services are not good enough. GWR admits that they are not good enough, the independent assessors admit they are not good enough and the House of Commons Library shows that they are not good enough. Reliability is not increasing, and is actually getting worse in some cases. Overall passenger journey satisfaction on GWR services is going down, not up. It is frankly time that the Government, the Secretary of State and this Minister got a grip and took some interest in what is actually going on at GWR, rather than simply glossing over the circumstances, and responded to the serious points that have been raised. [Interjection.] The Minister is chuntering from a sedentary position. The reality is that he has not answered a single question put to him today by Members from across the House and has not engaged with the issues in a serious way, instead simply glossing over them with statistics. He has not answered the serious concerns that have been put. This is very disappointing from the Minister and his Department, but it is what we have come to expect.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the Great Western Rail (GWR) delays and performance across the network.

11 am

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I beg to move.

That this House has considered independent accountability of the BBC commissioning process.

I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, and to have this Minister replying to the debate, as she has done on previous occasions. I am grateful for the opportunity to highlight the lack of transparency at the BBC. There are major concerns about BBC Northern Ireland’s use of public money. I am unaware of the situation in other regions, but if other regions operate on a similar basis to that which I will outline in the next few minutes, there is a problem on a national scale.

I will focus on transparency in Northern Ireland, because BBC NI has not done so. The BBC’s key aim is “to inform, educate and entertain audiences with programmes and services of high quality, originality and value.”

Yes, there are many programmes in which the BBC’s mission is adhered to, but when it comes to the financing and contracting of those programmes, there is a lack of transparency that should not be the case. The programmes are made only as a result of the outdated licence fee, which our constituents are forced to pay if they receive television services. That is public money, but, after many protracted discussions, meetings and correspondence, the brick wall remains—although it can and will be broken down.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. It is one that he has been involved with for a long time, and today’s debate in Westminster Hall is his opportunity to highlight it. Does he agree that the growing number of people who refuse to pay for a TV licence, understanding that that means that they will not be able to watch any BBC programme, either live or on catch-up, indicates that although people are happy to pay £50 a month for Sky or Virgin services, they are not prepared to give the BBC £12 a month? Does he agree that disenfranchisement is not to do with the cost of the licence, but to do with the nature of programming, with many people grossly unhappy with the BBC bias, which has become the norm but remains unacceptable? Does he further agree that independent regulation is only the first step needed if there is to be any salvation whatever for the BBC?

Mr Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. It is one that he has been involved with for a long time, and today’s debate in Westminster Hall is his opportunity to highlight it. Does he agree that the growing number of people who refuse to pay for a TV licence, understanding that that means that they will not be able to watch any BBC programme, either live or on catch-up, indicates that although people are happy to pay £50 a month for Sky or Virgin services, they are not prepared to give the BBC £12 a month? Does he agree that disenfranchisement is not to do with the cost of the licence, but to do with the nature of programming, with many people grossly unhappy with the BBC bias, which has become the norm but remains unacceptable? Does he further agree that independent regulation is only the first step needed if there is to be any salvation whatever for the BBC?

Mr Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. The compulsory nature of the licence fee has been raised on previous occasions, and I am glad that he has raised it again today.

Troubling questions remain on the issue of independent accountability. Independent media companies in Northern Ireland have approached me. They are concerned that they do not get a fair deal because of the lack of transparency. I intend to go into that in a little detail, Mr Betts.

I first raised concerns about the BBC Northern Ireland commissioning process back in November 2016—two years and four months ago—when I asked a series of questions of the BBC. Some hon. Members will recall

BBC Commissioning
that I raised similar matters in the House in September 2017; I was forced down this route after BBC Northern Ireland kept stonewalling.

Initially, I raised the question of how contracts were awarded. I raised that with senior BBC management and with some who were BBC presenters and had benefited from contracts. Answers were not forthcoming. As a result of the lack of accountability and openness, I took the matter to the office of the BBC director-general, Lord Tony Hall, in April 2018, my questions still not having had satisfactory responses. My concern then focused on a single contract that I was aware of relating to a company called Third Street Studios. There are three points to ponder in relation to Third Street Studios. First, the contract was awarded to a company that did not exist at the time of broadcast, the contract having already been paid. Secondly, this particular company has repeatedly received contracts worth hundreds of thousands of pounds. Thirdly—this is the irony—the company had no office and the postal address on its website took anyone who investigated to a taxi rank in Belfast city centre. The lack of independent accountability for these significant sums is staggering.

By August 2018, I still was not getting answers. I then went to the National Audit Office here in London to try to obtain satisfaction about taxpayers’ money, those who were, if I can put it like this, on the inside track in that and how they did not account for their expenditure. I met the National Audit Office, and the meeting was good and constructive. The National Audit Office was then helpful in writing to me to confirm that although it does not normally investigate this type of contractual expenditure, an investigation would be opened up into a number of areas concerning the BBC Northern Ireland commissioning process. I want to concentrate on this for a few moments, just to show the significance of it. This is the first time, to my knowledge, that the National Audit Office of the United Kingdom has found grounds to investigate BBC Northern Ireland on a contract of this nature. “Unprecedented” would be an appropriate word to describe this.

Let us just remember the guidelines that the BBC operates under. I will quote them briefly. On “Editorial Integrity and Independence”, the statement is as follows:

“The BBC is independent of outside interests and arrangements that could undermine our editorial integrity. Our audiences should be confident that our decisions are not influenced by outside interests, political or commercial pressures, or any personal interests.”

On “Fairness”, the BBC states:

“Our output will be based on fairness, openness, honesty and straight dealing.”

On “Transparency”, it states:

“We will be transparent about the nature and provenance of the content we offer online. Where appropriate, we will identify who has created it and will use labelling to help online users make informed decisions about the suitability of content for themselves and their children.”

Lastly, on “Accountability”, it states:

“We are accountable to our audiences and will deal fairly and openly with them. Their continuing trust in the BBC is a crucial part of our relationship with them. We will be open in acknowledging mistakes when they are made and encourage a culture of willingness to learn from them.”

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): Given that last year I was the only Labour MP to join with most members of the Democratic Unionist party in defending press freedom when there was the chance of a state-appointed press regulator, will the hon. Gentleman recognise that investigations such as that into the renewable heat incentive by BBC Northern Ireland are in the long tradition of fearless investigative journalism by both the BBC and UTV that has served Northern Ireland well during the last 50 years, in both good times and bad?

Mr Campbell: Yes, I unequivocally agree with that. The only addendum I would make is that the BBC is not exempt from scrutiny itself—that is the point.

It is an appalling reflection on BBC Northern Ireland’s management that a Member of Parliament who has taken a keen interest in these issues both in Parliament and outside has had to take the steps that I have over many months to escalate concerns to the National Audit Office.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): May I support the case that the hon. Gentleman is making? When we did the BBC charter review, we were keen to get independent regulation of the BBC through Ofcom and to open up the BBC’s books to the National Audit Office, which it resisted. The BBC can be opaque and not transparent. That said, does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that it does not advance the argument for accountability and transparency simply to accuse the BBC, as some hon. Members have done, of bias? I think it tries very hard to present a balanced picture.

Mr Campbell: I accept the right hon. Gentleman’s point, but I invite him to look at more of the BBC’s content. Perhaps then he will reflect on his view. I am sure we will have another debate on that in the coming months.

I will now move on to the specific example I have raised. Third Street Studios has a director who is also a prominent BBC Northern Ireland presenter: Mr Stephen Nolan. The BBC claims that Mr Nolan’s company is an average, independent production company. That is patent nonsense. Mr Nolan quite regularly advertises the television programmes made by his company on his BBC radio show, which is part of his £450,000-a-year job, funded by the licence fee. This is a clear and unfair advantage over other independent production companies, which cannot promote their programmes in the same way.

If an independent production company gets a contract from the BBC, it has to go away, make the programme, supply it to the BBC and hope that the quality of the production will shine through. However, in this instance, as I have outlined, someone who works in the BBC—who has the inside track and knows how it works—can get a contract and then advertise on the BBC for his so-called independent production company, which won the contract from the BBC. That is clearly an unfair advantage.

Since the BBC is effectively funded through the public purse, it must adhere to the same standards as are demanded in other areas of public life. The contract was from 2014—five years ago. I have been asking questions about it for two years, and yet I still do not know basic details about the contract, which we all pay for through the licence fee. The public have paid for it, and therefore they have the right to know the details of how it was awarded and how the expenditure was accounted for. At the moment, we do not know the answers. Why should a contract that was awarded five
years ago remain secret? Why not publish all documentation relevant to that series, after five years have passed, unless there is something to hide? That is why the National Audit Office is digging—digging deep, I hope—into the BBC.

The irony is that BBC Northern Ireland programmes continue to investigate the use of public money by Government, as outlined by the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan), and they are quite right to do that. No one should misunderstand the nature of this debate. The BBC and others are right to conduct such investigations, but we are equally right to hold it to the standard that it holds others to. The BBC is not, and must not be, exempt.

As many will know, the concerns that I and others have do not just stretch to the process of commissioning programmes. I have long campaigned for maximum transparency in relation to pay. We now know that there exists a gender pay gap, but it took a decade for the BBC to come to the point of publishing the salaries of presenters who earned more than £150,000 per year. Does the BBC hope that if it strings people along on the issue of commissioning contracts, the pay issue might disappear? Does the BBC think that just as it dragged its feet on transparency around salaries, it can drag its feet on this? The BBC must think again. It seems to feel as though it can pose questions, but it does not have to answer them; apparently, answering questions is only for the little people. The BBC must—and will—answer these questions.

The National Audit Office sent me a letter dated 30 January 2019. Coincidentally, that was the day after this debate was announced; I will leave people to draw their own conclusions. In that letter, the NAO said, “the BBC centrally decided to carry out a targeted review of the commissioning process in BBC Northern Ireland.” The NAO added: “We are currently reviewing information collected as part of this review and are following up with some specific questions.”

The National Audit Office has confirmed that it will provide answers by the end of February to the questions that were originally asked of the BBC in 2016. In trying to protect and defend those involved, the BBC has further undermined trust in the organisation.

I look forward to the completion of the National Audit Office investigation. I understand that the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport will visit Northern Ireland next month, as he said in his answer to my parliamentary question last week, and I hope he will take the opportunity to get questions answered by the BBC in Northern Ireland. In the past, the Minister has been responsive and helpful in answering questions. I hope that she will deal with this issue in any discussions that she may have with the BBC in the run-up to the mid-term charter review, which will take place in the next two years.

I hope that my worst fears are not confirmed, but the information I have gleaned to date does not fill me with hope, and neither do all the stonewalling, all the delaying or the attempts to avoid answering questions. I hope the National Audit Office will get to the truth of these matters. If there are serious questions to answer about the lack of transparency not just in BBC Northern Ireland, but across the nation as a whole, it will be a national scandal and there will have to be serious consequences for the entire BBC hierarchy.

11.16 am

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) on securing this debate on the accountability of the BBC and its commissioning activity. I value his long-standing knowledge, interest and work in this important area.

Before I address the important issues that the hon. Gentleman raised, I want to speak briefly about the importance of the BBC as a collaborative partner in the UK’s vibrant creative industries. The BBC is one of the UK’s most admired institutions across the world, and I am very proud of the example it sets as a world-leading public service broadcaster. The BBC has provided some of the most memorable moments across television, radio and online services in recent times. From “Planet Earth” to “Les Misérables”, and the “Today” programme to “Killing Eve”, the BBC is at the centre of conversations in homes and workplaces across the country. All of those moments—and those programmes—depend on the BBC working in partnership with a diverse range of organisations across the creative economy. We have seen examples of how these partnerships deliver high quality and distinctive programming.

Such dynamic and innovative collaboration is crucial to the BBC’s success and must be embedded into the BBC’s everyday work with a broad spectrum of independent producers. After all, some of the highest quality and most popular BBC programmes come from those independent producers. Where would we have been, for example, without the excellent “Bodyguard” on our screens last year, or—one of my personal favourites—“Line of Duty”? Both of these excellent programmes were produced by Jed Mercurio and World Productions. They are just two of the brilliant programmes brought to us by independent producers in partnership with the BBC each year.

The BBC is rightly independent of Government, and it is the BBC Trust’s responsibility to ensure that the BBC delivers on its commissioning obligations. It would therefore not be right for Government to intervene in these matters, but later in my speech I will come back to the influence that we can have.

Collaboration was a key theme of the last BBC charter review. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) on his role, when he was a Minister of State in my Department, in securing the new BBC charter review and the important remit now given to Ofcom, which he mentioned in his intervention. It is vital that the new charter requires—as it does now—the BBC to work collaboratively to support the wider sector as a creative partner, using its unique position in the creative industries to deliver the best possible public value.

The charter also requires the BBC to open up content production over time to allow non-BBC producers to compete for BBC projects and further stimulate the independent production market. By the end of the charter in 2027, 100% of BBC television and 60% of BBC radio will be fully open to competition, which will
bring a diverse range of stories to the BBC. However, we recognise that how commissioning decisions are made is crucial, which is why we have also required the BBC to commission programmes in a fair, reasonable, non-discriminatory and transparent way.

I listened with interest to the case raised by the hon. Member for East Londonderry, which has caused me some disquiet. I was not aware of that matter until this debate. He has raised important issues and he deserves answers, which I trust he will get from the National Audit Office in due course. He will no doubt raise those issues with my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State on his visit to Northern Ireland next month.

I expect the BBC to be one of the best partners to work with in the UK. We have established the new framework to ensure that BBC content comes from a range of voices that represents the diverse communities of the UK nations and regions. I am pleased to see the BBC taking action to deliver on those important goals. It has set out a clear commissioning process framework and code of practice that govern the commissioning of TV content from independent producers.

The BBC is also making strides towards full competition for its content. Indeed, I am aware that it recently achieved the first of its requirements to open up 40% of drama, entertainment, comedy and factual production to competition. They are important areas, and I expect the BBC to take its charter obligations seriously, given that it has a unique position in the sector and is the recipient of substantial licence fee income. As hon. Members remind me from a sedentary position, that is vital. When we hold the BBC to account, we should never forget that that is public money.

It is also important that, when the BBC gets things wrong, it takes swift action to resolve those issues. To support that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage reminded us, the Government established Ofcom as the strong independent regulator to hold the BBC to account on its duties and responsibilities and to ensure that it does not have an adverse impact on fair and effective competition. If hon. Members are interested, Ofcom delivered a report at the end of last year that found that the BBC is complying with all the priorities set for it in the process. It is Ofcom’s responsibility to ensure that the BBC delivers on the requirements, and that it does so in the spirit of openness and transparency that we embedded in the charter.

Ofcom recently consulted on whether further regulation might be required to ensure that the BBC fulfils its commissioning requirements. The hon. Member for East Londonderry is nodding—perhaps he had the opportunity to make his views known during that process. I gather that Ofcom will publish the report shortly, at least by way of a statement, and I look forward to receiving it with added interest owing to this debate.

The BBC’s charter obligations, together with Ofcom’s regulatory responsibilities, ensure that the BBC is held to the highest standards and delivers the best outcomes for licence fee payers. I look forward with interest to Ofcom’s commissioning statement and to seeing the BBC’s continued progress on collaboration and competition. I hope that the hon. Member for East Londonderry gets satisfaction regarding his inquiry and concerns in due course.

Mr Vaizey: The Minister has focused on the BBC, but given that the debate is about the BBC and the media in Northern Ireland, it is worth mentioning how successful Northern Ireland has been in supporting the creative industries, thanks to the great tax credits that the Minister oversees. The making of “Game of Thrones” and many others have transformed the Northern Irish economy.

Margot James: I strongly agree with my right hon. Friend, and I am glad that he has made that important point. We enjoy an ecosystem of fine creative talent in Northern Ireland. He rightly praises “Game of Thrones”, which has been an amazing global success, but is far from the only one. I wish the creative industries in Northern Ireland every continued success.

Question put and agreed to.
Economic Growth: South-west

2.30 pm

Sir Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered economic growth in the South West.

It is a great pleasure, Mr Owen, to serve under your distinguished and experienced chairmanship.

It is a delight to see the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) in his place. Today it is my intention, and I think that of my colleagues, to build on the debate we had about two and a half years ago regarding the successes and challenges of our great region—the south-west—and to reiterate the requests that we make of the Government to make our area even better than it is at the moment.

I am a great believer in summaries, partly because I only ever read the executive summary of any report. At any event, a summary of my speech would be: our region actually is. I suppose that the best way of describing it is variable geometry. For some purposes, it is the two counties of Devon and Cornwall. Increasingly, however, we can talk about the four counties of Cornwall, Devon, Dorset and Somerset working together. There are four counties and 13 under a Labour Government, and the reality is that we are not just a tourist region—far from it—but 311,000 people were employed in the hospitality sector in 2017 and it provides roughly 11% of the overall regional employment. So tourism remains significant and it is doing well, thanks partly to the fact that we had some wonderful weather last year and the roads were full all the time.

The second thing that is going well is the collaboration between our local enterprise partnerships, and our local authorities and national parks. That collaboration is the closest and most effective since records began, and in all my time in this House I have certainly never seen our various component parts working together as they are today. There is also a close working relationship with the private sector. Some colleagues in Westminster Hall today will recall the “Back The South West” campaign that we launched in 2016, with the charter—the south-west growth charter—that I will refer to shortly. All of that is driven by private sector companies that are ambitious for our region and determined to deliver.

At the 2016 Exeter conference, the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government came down and made a great and passionate speech, and told us to speak with a single voice in the south-west. We have done that; we are more joined-up than ever before, and I think it is beginning to make its mark upon Government.

Far from being just a tourist area, our region boasts some wonderful companies. For example, Princess Yachts in Plymouth employs 3,000 people and Babcock employs 4,500 people in the dockyard and naval base. That is to name but two; there are many other companies and I am sure that colleagues will mention some of the high-performing companies in their constituencies.

I will single out just two companies from the south-west that are doing particularly well. First, there is the Pennon Group. Brilliantly led by Chris Loughlin, it includes South West Water, which is a leading national water and sewerage company that will make £1 billion of investment in our region by 2025. Its business plan has been fast-tracked by Ofwat for the second time in a row, which I think is unique among the water companies. Pennon Group also includes Viridor, which is the UK’s largest recycling company, so we have this successful and ambitious green company that employs over 5,000 people UK-wide. It is a company that our region is rightly proud of and it generates over 6,000 jobs in our region alone through direct and indirect employment. We thank the Pennon Group for all it does for our region.

The second company is Thales, which is a major global defence contractor that employs over 1,100 people in the wider south-west, including in Cheltenham. Thales
stated recently that it sees huge potential for its business in the south-west and the region as a whole:

"There is the opportunity to put the region on the map in the digital technology and maritime space and with the support of Government we think the region can go from strength to strength."

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The Heart of the South West local enterprise partnership has a focus on the marine environment and in Taunton Deane we have the UK Hydrographic Office, which is the global leader on marine data. It is putting in a bid for a geospatial hub in Taunton, as well as an innovation centre. Does my hon. Friend agree that building on that will help the whole of the south-west to really up this sector, which will bring with it untold economic opportunities for the whole region?

Sir Gary Streeter: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend. That is one of the areas of development for our region that makes it very exciting indeed, and I am very happy to add my support to her excellent support for that project and opportunity.

I will just go back to Thales briefly. It recently opened a Maritime Autonomy Centre at Turnchapel Wharf in my constituency, which I know the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) has visited. That work includes capital investment of over £1 million, which represents the company’s commitment to its future in the south-west as a place where it can invest in digitally transformative maritime technologies—not a phrase to say after a glass or two of wine. This facility will act as the key maritime integration, test and evaluation centre for the combined United Kingdom and French maritime mine countermeasures programme. It is very impressive.

Our region therefore has substantial companies operating throughout it and is not just a place for people to come for their cream tea, although of course, Mr Owen, you would be very welcome to come down next summer and enjoy one.

Our universities are also doing well—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): As I am from the north of England, like the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), who is the spokesperson for the Opposition, I wonder whether my hon. Friend could just clarify an issue, because I think it is interesting. Can he clarify whether someone should have jam or cream on a scone and, if it is both, in what order they should be put on?

Sir Gary Streeter: As I was saying, our universities are doing well. Exeter, of course, is a world-renowned university and part of the Russell Group. Plymouth University is also making great strides as a university and it is really transforming the city of Plymouth, so I pay tribute to the work that it has done, particularly in the marine engineering and science departments. However, let us not forget Plymouth Marjon University—the colleges of St Mark and St John. It has experienced significant growth over the last two years, bucking the current trend and producing ever-greater results for its students. Intellectual capital in our region is powerfully underpinned by excellent places of learning.

The south-west is also home to one of the largest engineering projects in Europe, at Hinkley C, which represents a massive investment in our region and is producing many skilled jobs.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: Notwithstanding the fact that the Chair has Wylfa Newydd in his constituency, with which we have had problems, may I just put some figures on this? We will create 25,000 jobs and more than 1,000 apprenticeships; we have just finished the National College for Nuclear, which is fantastic; our Inspire programme has now reached 15,000 schoolchildren; and 64% of the total build at Hinkley is going to UK companies. My hon. Friend has made such powerful comments on that. If it helps Devon, it helps Cornwall, it helps Dorset and it helps Somerset. I know he is celebrating that, and I thank him for his thoughts.

Sir Gary Streeter: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I do celebrate that tremendous project and success story. He is right that it is something for the entire region, not just for the county of Somerset, and we are pleased to be supporting it.

All of what I have said so far is about the things that are going well in our region. What we have welcomed from the Government in the past 12 months or so includes some of the things that were mentioned in the Budget. The transforming cities fund is hopefully of great benefit to Plymouth, and perhaps the Minister will say something about the timescales for decisions on that. The freezing of cider duty was well received by the apple producers of Somerset and, indeed, throughout the region. We have seen the improvements to the Dawlish seawall get under way in the past few months, and I will come on to talk about the major announcement that we anticipate. We welcome the new Great Western Railway trains, which are having a gradual impact on our crucial Penzance to Paddington link—a very pleasant travel experience. We welcome the £10 million for fisheries innovation, to help local fishers.

In January 2019, planning permission for the north Devon link road was given, and I pay tribute to the persistence of my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones). When he started talking about the link road, we all thought, “That can never happen. There is no money in the jam jar for that.” He is just off on “a frolic of his own”, as Lord Denning once said”. Well, his frolic is bearing fruit, and well done to him for being such an incredible campaigner for his constituents.

We welcome and celebrate the major work to tackle flooding at Cowley, east of Exeter. We all remember the red sausage, or the balloon, that was in evidence some two or three years ago. That should now be a thing of the past, thanks to Network Rail’s investment.
[Sir Gary Streeter]

We welcome the Government's industrial strategy and the fact that our local enterprise partnerships are working hard with officials from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to develop a local industrial strategy, looking especially at productivity, which I know will be music to the Minister's ears.

Finally, we must not forget our farmers. We have excellent farmers throughout the region and they welcome the fact that the Government are listening to them and helping to shape our UK-wide agriculture policy post Brexit. I have said two words that I know some of my friends will be very, very pleased to hear.

What do we now need from the Government? I will focus on that for a few minutes, and I will then conclude and let others have a say. We await, of course, the major Dawlish announcement. Today is the fifth anniversary of those extraordinary images of the railway line waving in mid-air and everything beneath being washed away by the winds and waves of that winter's storms. I will never forget the journey we have been on since then, via Downing Street, the Peninsula Rail Task Force, the 20-year plan and the negotiating with Government. Of course such things take time but, even though the announcement will, I hope, come next week, and even though I think it will be a good and fully funded one that we will all welcome, for me, it has taken at least 12 months too long. The region has become impatient.

That we will all welcome, for me, it has taken at least though I think it will be a good and fully funded one announcement will, I hope, come next week, and even course such things take time but, even though the announcement will, I hope, come next week, and even though I think it will be a good and fully funded one that we will all welcome, for me, it has taken at least 12 months too long. The region has become impatient. It will be fine, provided we get what we are looking for, though I think it will be a good and fully funded one that we will all welcome, for me, it has taken at least 12 months too long. The region has become impatient. It will be fine, provided we get what we are looking for, and perhaps the Minister can say something about that.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): Although we look forward with anxious trepidation, but hopeful expectation, to what might happen next week, does my hon. Friend at least feel encouraged by yesterday's announcement that there is now an application for planning the work that will happen along the Dawlish station wall? That is something very concrete that we can celebrate.

Sir Gary Streeter: Yes, I completely agree with my hon. Friend. It was good to see that announcement. It could perhaps have been better dovetailed in with the Government's announcement, so that we had one and not two. Perhaps that was because of a planning time cycle—I am not sure. I hope that by the end of next week, we will have received all the news we have been waiting and fighting for for five long years. We cannot allow our region to be cut off from the rest of the country just because of adverse weather conditions.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Sir Gary Streeter: I give way to my hon. Friend from London.

Dr Offord: Chair, you probably wonder why, as the Member of Parliament for Hendon, I am standing in a debate on the south-west. Not only did I grow up in Cornwall; I undertook my PhD in economic development on Cornwall, so I thought I would come along and have a listen. My hon. Friend is entirely correct that the county of Devon in particular is cut off. A major component of Cornwall's economic development programmes of the 1990s and 2000s was the Actnow project, which was to bring superfast broadband to the whole county. Does he agree that connections are not only physical but include electronic communications, which are able to reduce the peripherality of a county like Cornwall, bringing the markets to the consumers and, indeed, the consumers to the marketplace through technology?

Sir Gary Streeter: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. If I may say so, I think he summarises the situation wonderfully well. Many of us in this Chamber have often said that our biggest challenge is in the west country and the south-west: connectivity and that the answer is connectivity. When I started my political career in 1992, connectivity meant road and rail, but these days it most certainly means digital connectivity, which is probably more important. Or as important; that is absolutely right. Cornwall has benefited from the programme my hon. Friend talks about. I will come on to say that we want to see the roll-out of superfast broadband speeded up and that we must have 5G in our region. I am getting towards the end because I know so many colleagues want to speak.

First, there is the rail announcement next week—fingers crossed it is what we have been waiting for. It is so important to our region and we look forward to it.

Secondly, there is the A303. I am grateful to the Government for the commitment to dualing it to Taunton and am glad that the work at Stonehenge has started, but we really need to see spades in the ground at our end of the A303 so that that very important project can get under way and be concluded as quickly as possible. The M5 is now snarled up every Friday and Saturday from May until September, particularly from Taunton to Bristol. I do not think there is a plan on the table to consider that, but the Minister may know more than I do. We desperately need a new second major arterial route coming into our region—a dual carriageway at least—that can cope with the flow of traffic at peak times. That is another critical aspect of infrastructure delivery that the region is waiting to see.

Coming on to what my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) mentioned, digital connectivity is absolutely essential in our region. Possibly the roll-out of superfast broadband has been too slow. We have had the hiccup with BT internet in Devon and Somerset, and we now have Gigaclear. I hope that all the targets will be met in the next couple of years. That is critical.

What we are seeing now, and perhaps other regions have seen this before us, is that bright young things are coming to our universities and, instead of returning from whence they came, more and more of them are staying locally and inventing their internet-based businesses—in their bedrooms probably—and planting a business in our region. That is really encouraging, and digital connectivity.

What we are seeing now, and perhaps other regions have seen this before us, is that bright young things are coming to our universities and, instead of returning from whence they came, more and more of them are staying locally and inventing their internet-based businesses—in their bedrooms probably—and planting a business in our region. That is really encouraging, and it is transforming the bottom-up business and economy of our region. It can happen because of digital connectivity. We can do almost anything from almost anywhere if we are online and connected, and that is a game-changer for our region. We are desperate to see the roll-out of all the superfast broadband, including 5G.

Finally, on the issue of marrying together physical transport infrastructure—the trains—and digital connectivity, we must have the capability for people to be online all the time while they are travelling on our
trains. That is what the business community has demanded: it is even more important than shaving five or 10 minutes off the journey time from Penzance to Paddington. We must have connectivity, and I know that the Government are working on that. Of course, that responsibility is a cross-departmental one, but I say to the Minister that it is a huge priority for our region.

To conclude, when we last discussed this matter in 2016, we all mentioned the south-west growth charter. The first headline ask from the region was for a new Government partnership with the south-west, which is starting to take shape. The second was for investment in digital connectivity and high-speed business; some progress has been made in that area, but we would like to see a bit more. The third was for investment in energy connectivity—switching on to opportunity—on which, again, there has been some progress, but there is further to go. The fourth was for investment in transport connectivity and getting business moving, on which there has been some progress, but that is still our big ask. We say to Government that our demand is infrastructure, infrastructure, infrastructure, and may 2019 be the year of delivery, delivery, delivery.

Several hon. Members rose—

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Seven Back Benchers are indicating that they wish to speak. I will call the Front Benchers at 3.40 pm, which leaves about six minutes each. That gives Members some indication that they should keep the debate flowing.

2.51 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow my neighbour, the hon. Member for South West Devon (Sir Gary Streeter). I believe I was just 13 years old—probably causing as much nuisance then as I do now—when he was first elected, and it seems as though some of the issues that affected our region in the 1980s and 1990s were similar to the ones that we face today. There is still a lack of investment in our strategic infrastructure, and the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to signal road and rail as areas in which we need investment. We also need skills and investment in education, delivering benefits for all young people right across the region, so they can stay in our region and create jobs and future prosperity.

Similarly to the hon. Member for South West Devon, I want to distinguish between the south-west and the far south-west. When I talk about the far south-west, I mean Devon and Cornwall, because there is sometimes a temptation for Ministers to lump together improvements in Swindon and in Bournemouth as part of the overall benefit to the south-west. We need to break down the larger region and focus on where some of the benefits can best be felt, particularly around the peninsula of Devon and Cornwall, as well as further up in Somerset and Dorset.

As a region, we have a lot to be proud of. We are a region of immense beauty, immense skill and talent, real professionalism, and huge potential for job creation. However, we do not always talk enough about how good we are as a region. That is certainly true of Plymouth, but I realise it can be true of our wider region: we hide our light under a bushel, and then we hide the bushel. We are not always as good at talking ourselves up as we need to be. If we are to get our fair share from Government, we need to be bolder about our ambition, clearer and more relentless about where we need help, and more proactive about the progress we do so much and excel. That unfairness is one of the reasons why I first thought about going into politics, because as a young lad growing up in Devon, I saw other parts of the country getting stuff that we were not getting. My friends in other parts of the country seemed to have more opportunities than were being afforded to young people in the south-west, and that did not seem fair.

Whether a person lives in Plymouth, Devon, Cornwall, or anywhere else around the country, they should have the same opportunities, but sometimes our peripherality seems to restrict our opportunities in that respect. To engage with those opportunities, we need a structural, long-term, cross-party plan, and I hope that today’s debate will help to put pressure on Ministers to create such a plan, because our region needs a turning point. As the only Labour Back Bencher in this debate, with my regional Tory colleagues sitting opposite me, I feel as though I am up against a very tough job interview—the question is whether I would like the job at the end of it, if it involves working with that employer. I know that the other Labour MPs who represent the region—my colleagues from Bristol and Stroud—would echo this point; sadly, the Whips have timed statutory instrument Committees very well in order to avoid their being present here. However, if we are to succeed as a region, fairness and cross-party working are important, and my Labour colleagues would like me to emphasise the benefits that come from working together in order to achieve that.

We know that as a region, we have been starved of investment for far too long. We know that our education, health and transport spending per head is well below the national average. We know that those structural problems have affected our region, not just since 2010 but for decades prior to that, and we know that we need to change that. I am mindful of the fact that, with the Government’s entire majority sitting opposite me, we have a power and a voice that we should be using more. The sooner our region starts standing together across parties, and being louder and more determined about our key asks, the more likely it is that Ministers will listen to Members from the far south-west. It should not be only the Democratic Unionist party and its 10 Members of Parliament who hold sway in this House. The DUP received about 300,000 votes at the last general election, but 260,000 people live in Plymouth, and we need to start evening out our influence as a region, because there are still some problems that we need to address.

There are also some opportunities, which I will briefly dwell on. The hon. Member for South West Devon spoke about Dawlish. I honestly wonder what went through the minds of Ministers in the Department for Transport when they decided, knowing that today was the fifth anniversary of Dawlish being washed away, to park the announcement on funding until two weeks hence. I cannot understand why that has happened. Frankly, at the end of the funding—I anticipate that it will come in a couple of weeks’ time; if it does not, I hope there is an almighty stink about it—we will still only have a line at Dawlish that closes slightly less
[Luke Pollard]

than it does at the moment. That funding will not deal with the structural inequality and slowness of our service, or its capacity.

The superb Peninsula Rail Task Force report, which I recommend to the Minister and to all colleagues who have not apprised themselves of it recently, talked about our long-term investment from Penzance at one end of the region to Paddington and other destinations. Some £8 billion of investment over 20 years could transform our economy. Just imagine the transformation if an average journey of three hours and 30 minutes from Plymouth to London could be reduced to two hours and 15 minutes, as the PRTF suggests. Imagine the potential for job creation, greater investment, more tourism and greater connectivity, and the broader horizons for our young people that that transformation could create. I realise that the Minister is not a Transport Minister, but any nudges and winks that he could give to his colleagues in the DFT to encourage them to push out the announcement we know is sitting in their press office, waiting to be announced in a couple of weeks’ time, would be greatly appreciated. It is not just rail that we need to improve: we need to extend the M5 from Exeter to the Tamar bridge, and we also need to be bold in some of our vision.

Finally, I will mention the huge potential that our natural environment presents to the region and our economy. I want Plymouth sound to be designated as the UK’s first national marine park. That project has the support of Plymouth Marine Laboratory, the University of Plymouth, the Marine Biological Association and many of the genuinely world-class institutions that just happen to be based in Plymouth. Being able to protect and value our coastal waters is incredibly powerful, and I know that there are people on both sides of the House who recognise the importance of protecting our coastal waters and valuing them more.

Having the UK’s first national marine park in Plymouth sound could send a strong message that Plymouth is open for business not only for marine sites, marine engineering jobs and fishing, but for marine conservation. It could send a message that our wider region is open to the job creation potential that could flow from greater investment in our marine sector, in terms of both science and the exciting element of marine autonomy, keeping our Royal Navy jobs and the marine refit jobs that accompany them in the city of Plymouth. It is an exciting project, and I hope that Government Members will join the increasingly large numbers of individuals who are getting behind this campaign on a cross-party basis. If it works for Plymouth sound, it could work for coastal waters right around our peninsula, and indeed around our country. It could be really quite exciting.

2.58 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I am glad to follow the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard). I also give credit to my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Sir Gary Streeter) for having secured this debate and for his inspiring leadership, driving us to continue to bang the drum for the great south-west.

To take Members a few hundred miles further west, if that is okay, my constituency—which covers St Ives, west Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly—and the Duchy of Cornwall more generally are a brilliant and unique part of the UK, with a thriving culture that contributes much to the UK as a whole. Our tourism industry is a great success, which increasingly attracts visitors from across the globe—so many, in fact, that Visit Cornwall decided to turn them away in the summer, and made that point to the media.

We also have a proud story to tell about supporting and hosting renewable energy platforms and about environmental protections, but the fact remains that distinct economic challenges exist that hold us back from achieving our potential. Handouts are not needed, but Government policy, support and investment are needed to create a thriving and prosperous economy that leaves no one behind in Cornwall. I want to use the opportunity today to flag up the moral case for ensuring that Cornwall and other parts of the south-west receive adequate and appropriate support and funding from Whitehall. Gross value added per head is £17,634, which is 35% below the UK average. Wages are 20% lower than in the rest of the UK. House prices do not reflect that reduced income and are roughly the same as in the rest of the UK. One can imagine that for a family starting out and working on the average wage, the cost of getting a home and having a stake in their area is prohibitive.

Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly is the only local enterprise partnership area in the whole of England that is currently classified as less developed. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate to remind the House that work and effort is needed to change Cornwall’s economic development. The Government have made it clear that a shared prosperity fund will replace European funding streams once we have left the EU. In response to that opportunity, I set up a jobs and growth roundtable bringing together business owners, Cornwall Council, local elected representatives and members of the voluntary sector. We meet every quarter to focus on how shared prosperity funds could address the problem of low wages and sustained deprivation in west Cornwall. That is something that European funds have not successfully addressed.

I was grateful that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury attended our inaugural jobs and growth roundtable and was clearly engaged in the issues we raised. She asked us to set out the barriers to growth in west Cornwall. In response, we said that there were many barriers in the way of ambitious young people seeking a good career in west Cornwall. That results in a skills drain, with young people moving out of the area to find a career. The colleges confirm that the biggest challenge in west Cornwall is providing young people with good employment opportunities. The Government must support employment and apprenticeships and stop messing around with further education curriculums, which are currently not fit for purpose for small companies that are keen to take on apprentices.

The Isles of Scilly Steamship Company, a significant employer in the constituency, state that its biggest issue is attracting skilled staff, including marine crew and aircraft engineers. Other companies say they have to send staff to other parts of the country for training. Goonhilly Satellite Earth Station is having similar problems, and it has to recruit out of county and find means to attract people to Cornwall.
Despite changes to business rates, the charge is having a crippling effect on our town centres. Public transport is not suitable for getting to and from work, and our roads and rail network can no longer meet current demand. There has been a historic lack of investment in west Cornwall. Much will be said in this debate about the need for investment in infrastructure, and that is true of the whole south-west. The Minister will be acutely aware of the various priorities I have raised repeatedly in this place. In addition, we absolutely need to smash the problem of low wages, and we must invest in people. Investment is needed in providing skilled apprenticeships and training schemes to support employment, ambition and the futures of our children and grandchildren. Investment is needed to make Cornwall a more attractive economic hub. Transport infrastructure is central to that.

There is no denying that Cornwall is a wonderful place to live, with beautiful scenery and the best culture in the land, but we must ensure our economy matches the thriving local culture. I was delighted to support the launch of the “Great South West” initiative last year. Cornwall’s future prosperity cannot be addressed in isolation. Cornwall is an enthusiastic partner of the “Great South West” initiative. I echo its calls to promote the south-west’s opportunities, to develop shared propositions to attract investment and boost productivity, to work on areas of common interest, and to drive opportunities through the work of local leaders, businesses, schools and authorities.

In conclusion, one area offers great opportunities, skilled jobs and a sustainable future—Cornwall has a specific tale to share in the area—and that is our response to global warming, and the need to care for our environment and leave to our children a planet that is in better shape than we found it. There is a renewed ambition in Cornwall to reduce harmful emissions and increase renewable energy supplies. Cornwall is working together to set up a clear plan on how that can be delivered by 2030. I would like Government funding to dramatically improve our fuel-poor homes, which are some of the leakiest in Europe; to empower greater development and installation of all forms of renewable energy; and to use the latest smart technology to improve the A30. All that will ensure our houses are warmer and cheaper to keep, our air is cleaner, our energy is cheaper and our harmful imprint on Earth is reduced. That is a sure way to create jobs, increase wages, reduce the cost of living and create prosperity.

3.4 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my fellow Cornish Member, my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives commented on. GVA is 35% below the rest of the country, and our wages reflect that. There is a desperate need to address that productivity gap to grow the Cornish economy and create better paid jobs so that we can start to see the Cornish economy catching up with the rest of the country. Much of that is because our economy is based on traditional sectors that have been low paid, particularly tourism, agriculture and food.

Cornwall has a rich history and heritage of being an industrial heartland. Many of the great advancements in industry and technology started in Cornwall. The invention of the steam engine by Trevithick sparked the industrial revolution. In more recent times, Marconi sent the first transatlantic telegram from Cornwall. My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives mentioned Goonhilly, which received the first transatlantic satellite TV signals. Cornwall has always been at the heart of industrial and technological advancement. My great hope is that Cornwall can once again recover some of that history and put itself on the map as a place for great advancement in technology and industry.

There are some opportunities before us that I want briefly to touch on. It is good to see the chief exec of our Cornwall and Isles of Scilly local enterprise partnership in the Public Gallery. I commend its production of an excellent publication called “10 Opportunities”, which lays out the opportunities before us for Cornwall’s economy. I will touch on three. The first is the space port, which is well known. I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives will be sick to death of me talking about the potential of the space port coming to Newquay, but it would remiss of me not to mention it again. We need to see it delivered. As my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon said in opening the debate, this has to be the year of delivery. If we can get the space port to Cornwall, it will unlock huge potential for investment and new jobs.

The second is lithium. We are all aware of the growth in demand for batteries. Cornwall is rich in lithium deposits. Only yesterday, I met the Cornish company Cornish Lithium and the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington) to see how Government can support the extraction of lithium. Various figures are quoted, but we are talking tens of billions of pounds of precious metal in Cornwall that would revive our mining industry. No longer will it be “Poldark” tin and copper; it will be a new generation of precious metal extracted for battery production.

The third is renewable energy. My focus is particularly on geothermal. The Minister will know, as I have been working with him on this for some time, that we are already digging our first geothermal well in Cornwall, but there is potential for much more. Cornwall has a unique landscape and is the only place in the UK where geothermal energy is possible. It could unlock some great potential for our economy.

We need the Government to support the Cornish economy in the development of those new sectors. Part of that has to be the replacement of the European regional development programme. I am a huge supporter of leaving the EU, but Cornwall has been the biggest beneficiary of economic support through the EU. I never say “from” the EU, because it is UK taxpayers’ money that it recycles and gives back to us with a whole
load of strings attached. The fact is that the programme has failed, because Cornwall is still reliant on it. If the programme had been successful after its three rounds, we would not need it any more. We still need it, therefore I believe we can do better with our own UK-based programme. Will the Minister update us on the shared prosperity fund, which will be absolutely essential for supporting the Cornish economy going forward? I know that there have been delays in the consultation, but perhaps he will use his offices to try to push it forward. Those of us who work in Cornwall on the future of our economy need some certainty about what the programme will be so that we can start to work towards it, and any further delay will hinder progress.

I very much believe that there are great days ahead for the Cornish economy. The opportunities before us are substantial. There is an absolute appetite in Cornwall to unlock potential and see things come to pass, but we need the backing and support of the Government. I acknowledge that in my time in this place we have seen a Government who are hugely supportive of the Cornish economy. We have touched on the investment that we have seen in our infrastructure—our roads and railways and the Government’s support for our air connection from Newquay to London. The recent announcement that that connection will be switched to Heathrow will be hugely welcomed. We need the support to continue, the shared prosperity fund put in place as quickly as possible, and Cornwall’s potential opportunities unlocked. I simply ask the Minister to do all that he can to make progress on the spaceport, support for lithium mining, and the shared prosperity fund as soon as possible.

3.11 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. It is also a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Sir Gary Streeter) for initiating the debate. As we speak here in Westminster Hall, in the main Chamber there is a debate on the police grant report. It is welcome to see the extra grant for the police forces across the country. It is very much needed.

The south-west is a great place to live, work and do business, as my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon has said, but more needs to be done to attract and retain the high-skilled jobs that we need to boost wage growth and offer opportunities for young people. Hinkley Point will play a useful role in that. The availability of labour and skills continues to be a significant challenge to many south-west businesses affected by factors such as transport, housing affordability and an ageing population. It is great that we have several speakers here from Cornwall, but I remind them that they have to go through Devon, Somerset and many other counties before they can get to Cornwall. I remind the Minister that we are debating what has happened in the south-west peninsula. Bristol is a great city, but there is an awful lot of land between Bristol and Penzance. We want our fair share of resources, which we are getting more of, but we need even more.

In areas such as agriculture, hospitality and tourism, we continue to rely on a high proportion of migrant labour. We need a system in which we have control over migrant labour and have enough migrant workers in future. As we leave the EU, not only do we need to ensure that we can still get access to EU migrant labour to fill the jobs but we need to devise a south-west strategy to retain graduates and skilled labour, boost investment in our infrastructure and grow business in our region.

Improve transport in the region and around the south-west is vital. There are two strategic transport corridors for rail and road into the peninsula, which means that the south-west lacks resilience. We welcome the development of the A303, but it will be dualled all the way to Ilminster and then out through the A358 to Taunton. A little bit of the A303 from Ilminster to Honiton needs a little bit more done to it. Much as I welcome and support what is happening to the north Devon link road, we also need that last little bit of road to make sure that we get a second arterial road.

We are improving resilience on the Dawlish railway line. Not only have we got the mainline from Paddington to Penzance but we have a great line from Waterloo to Exeter, which goes through the south of my constituency and runs through the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire). We could do a lot more to invest in loops and other things to make sure that we get more trains through the second route. It is essential to have a second railway link into the south-west. Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), I am interested in the Devon Metro coming through Somerset and creating more resilience on our existing lines so that we can have smaller trains as well as the large commuter trains. That will be a great improvement.

Improving transport will improve education accessibility, so that students can choose whether to do A-levels, apprenticeships or technical education. Not only do we have the great universities of Exeter and Plymouth, and of course Bristol, but we have Petroc, Axe Valley and many other colleges across our region. Apprenticeships are so useful because not everybody wants to go to university, and it is a great bonus to have that provision.

Improving transport will mean that tourists can get around the whole of the south-west, from the Jurassic coast to Exeter Cathedral, and even down to Cornwall, as well as to great towns such as Seaton, Axminster and many others in my constituency.

Broadband and mobile connection is hugely important. As many colleagues have said, it is a huge driver of the economy. Superfast broadband is absolutely essential.

Rebecca Pow: A recent report by the South West Rural Productivity Commission said that improving digital connectivity was a game changer for rural businesses. Also, it is one of the key things in the Somerset Chamber’s report and is its businesses’ most important factor in upping productivity in our region. Will my hon. Friend join me in a campaign to get the Treasury to extend state aid so that Connecting Devon and Somerset can bring about the final rollout of the superfast broadband that we so urgently need in our two constituencies to deliver for our businesses?

Neil Parish: I very much support my hon. Friend, who is a neighbour on the Somerset border. We have worked together not only on delivering in the Blackdowns but across our constituencies. State aid will be essential
to keep the money flowing. Also, I look forward to Gigaclear really getting its act together and getting more investment in, which will help us to deliver broadband overall in a combination of state, council and private sector funding.

With everything online now, from tax returns to farming administration and farm payments, and from online shopping to school homework, it is imperative that we get the improvements to broadband and mobile coverage that we need. In some areas the mobile system will deliver broadband to some of the very hardest-to-reach areas. Mobile and broadband speeds might not be such a problem here in Westminster, but in the south-west they are a constant handicap for many farm families and businesses. In my own farmhouse there is very little connectivity. Sometimes it can be a blessing when the Whips are trying to get hold of me; I can be completely unconnectable and off the page.

Despite the best efforts of colleagues here today, we still have some of the worst mobile coverage of any region apart from Wales. It is getting better, but we need to do more. We have to make sure that the mobile companies do not keep the masts all to themselves; they must share them more. Joining everything together will make the whole work better with the same resource. Delays to broadband in the Devon and Somerset area have been extremely disappointing, mainly because we know how transformational superfast broadband will be to our rural economy and home lives once it is delivered.

We need the Treasury to provide state aid.

Finally, I want to touch on the importance of farming to our rural economy and the south-west economy as a whole. The UK’s food and farming industry generates more than £110 billion and employs one in eight people overall in a combination of state, council and private sector funding.

The LEP does a great job, but there are headwinds. For example, when we leave the European Union we can redirect the shared prosperity fund. I, like others, am keen to hear details of how that will be spent in a way that is tailored to suit the needs of Cornwall, instead of dictated by the European Commission. The most important thing is for funds to be directed to where they can most affect productivity. If productivity in the south-west matched current levels in the south-east, the region would add about £18 billion a year to the UK economy. In that regard I want to mention the farming industry, which I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton will be pleased about. It is one of the most productive sectors in the south-west. Farming brings a lot of money into the region, most of which stays in the local economy. It is vital that farming should be given prominence in the industrial strategy.

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend is making a good case. Does she agree that if we combined agriculture with the food manufacturing and processing industries that would represent the largest economy in the south-west region? We could make a good case for its being a major plank of the industrial strategy. I see that the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) is in the Chamber, so perhaps he and the Minister who is responding to the debate will take notes.

Mrs Murray: I completely concur with my hon. Friend. As hon. Members know, I am passionate about our highly professional fishing industry and determined that our fishermen should reap the benefits of Brexit. I urge the Government to do everything they can to protect fishermen and ensure that British fishermen get the best from our highly productive fishing grounds. We all know that infrastructure investment is key to the region’s success. We have some superb schemes well under way. The Looe flood protection project will protect the fishing industry’s future and stimulate the local economy and tourism in the area surrounding the town.

Improvements to the A38 are vital. Thousands of people use it every day, and 1.2 million vehicle hours are wasted every year due to delays. Think of the environmental impact. We all know about the safety concerns. Finally, a few improvements to the railway line could make a big impact. I, too, am looking forward to next week’s announcement. I would like more frequent services, a move towards clock-face timetables, early adoption of a
free 5G network for travellers and, of course, better integration with local bus services—especially in rural constituencies such as mine.

I could go on with a shopping list of superb investment opportunities, but I will simply reiterate what a fantastic quality of life we have in south-east Cornwall and the rest of the south-west. Let us see what we can do to create the economic growth that is needed to support that quality of life.

3.25 pm

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Sir Gary Streeter) on securing the debate and publicly congratulate him—I think this is the first time I have been able to do so—on his well deserved knighthood.

I know that several organisations in the south-west are watching our debate with keen interest. My hon. Friend the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), who is also a south-west MP, is also with us. I think that he is one of the longest-serving farming Ministers ever, and we are grateful to have him sitting in on these deliberations. I am sure that my hon. Friends will have enjoyed reading the briefings from the National Farmers Union, the Devon chamber of commerce, the Federation of Small Businesses and the Heart of the South West local enterprise partnership, which conveyed a passion for expanding the region’s potential.

The key question is how we can attract high-value, non-seasonally dependent jobs, enhance our productivity and secure clean economic growth for the region. Admittedly, we have perhaps grown too accustomed to using terms such as “productivity”, “growth” and “connectivity”. A notable example is the Government’s flagship industrial strategy. Its four grand challenges put the UK at the forefront of the industries of the future: artificial intelligence and data, ageing society, clean growth, and the future of mobility. As many hon. Members would no doubt agree, its comprehensive scope marks out the Conservatives as the party with the long-term plan for our country. No Government or multinational corporation is free from the risk of descending into obfuscation when talking about economic growth, but let us step out of Whitehall-speak and the lexicon of glossy masterplans. When we talk to our constituents in our email bulletins, meeting halls, surgeries and correspondence, we must tell them how investment will increase the number of jobs and improve living standards.

I recently had the pleasure of another visit to the Exeter science park in my constituency. The science park helps innovative science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine companies in a campus-style setting. It covers sectors such as cyber-security and renewable energy. The site is on track to grow, so that 200 to 700 jobs in 2020 will rise to 2,100 by 2027. The wider region is well connected, with immediate access to the M5, the nearby Exeter international airport and Exeter itself. I represent two wards in Exeter—St Loyes and Topsham—and I am pleased to say it will be one of the UK’s fastest growing cities over the next three years. A practical example of that outstanding growth is Luminous, a start-up that is designing, developing and exporting state-of-the-art special effects hardware for the global entertainment industry. Its rate of jobs growth—from one person to eight people in a mere 12 months—is a trademark of the technology industry. Yet it is not in tech-savvy Shoreditch but in the heart of our region. That is what economic growth looks like on the ground: it is new consumers, new careers, and a better quality of life.

The case for Exeter science park is strong, as it seeks to add more buildings and expand its capacity. I speak not purely as the Member for East Devon but, I am sure, on behalf of my colleagues in the south-west, who would like it to expand and thrive. That is why I urge the Minister and other interested parties who are watching today to get behind Exeter science park so that it can fulfil its potential.

The main impediment to the business growth of Exeter science park is the fact that it has to repay loans on its science park centre. The science park had to take out loans of £6.5 million—mainly from the local enterprise partnership, at a commercial rate—because grants were unavailable during its start-up phase in 2013. Private sector loans were not available because Exeter science park had no assets; they were held in trust by a local authority. Given the vast resources going to the part of the world with which the Minister—he is responsible for the northern powerhouse-deals, he might find that an extraordinary set of circumstances difficult to recognise, but it is yet another example of how we in the south-west feel slightly discriminated against.

My first request—is this the Minister’s road to rehabilitation—is to consider how we can use Government capital infrastructure spending to reduce, or ideally erase, those debts. Secondly, how can the Government assist in encouraging Government-backed technology and projects to locate to the science park? If the Minister were able to assist with both those matters, it would provide a huge endorsement for our often-overlooked region. Why, for instance, would an engineering giant such as Rolls-Royce, or a defence contractor such as Babcock—it is already strong in Plymouth, as we have heard—not expand alongside the innovative tech start-ups that are already located there?

Members often lament how our neglected south-west gets limited airtime compared with other UK regions. Local authorities, LEPs and businesses up and down the land compete vociferously for a pool of Government investment. However, we should talk up areas where our regional economy is doing well, and talk practically about how we can do even better. That is surely the way to sell the benefits of economic growth to the public, and attract new jobs and companies to our south-west.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con) rose—

Alex Chalk rose—

Alber Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): Thank you, Mr Owen, I shall not take up too much time, because I want my hon. Friend from that south-west central city of Cheltenham to get in—
Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): In the three minutes available, may I say that although we rightly talk about economic growth, we need to step back and ask what we mean by that and why it matters? It matters, because it is all very well for us to say that we believe in social mobility—I dare say we all do, across the House—but it is all very well for us to say that we believe in social mobility—I dare say we all do, across the House—but we should also believe that economic growth provides opportunities for people from all walks of life, and allows people who come from deprived communities to go as far as their talents will take them. I therefore think it is incredibly important to focus on that issue, and we have a moral duty to do so.

When I was elected in Cheltenham in 2015, a lot of Members might have assumed that it was an area of great affluence, which to some extent it is. However, we also have pockets of genuine and grinding deprivation. Importantly, when I looked at the growth figures, I saw that Cheltenham’s growth rate was less than the national average. It seems to me that increasing economic growth is an important way to tackle those areas of deprivation, and I feel that very passionately. There are two elements to this. First, we must ensure that we have a supremely well-educated workforce. That is why I welcome the increased emphasis on fair funding. We have not yet completed the task, and although Cheltenham’s secondary schools get £1.2 million more a year than they did before, we need to increase that. We also need great job opportunities for people once they leave school.

I want to focus on Cheltenham’s cyber future. In November 2015, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, came to GCHQ and said that an arc of cyber-prosperity could extend from Cheltenham all the way down through the south-west. That critical sector will generate £20 billion a year for the UK economy and, crucially, we can be part of that by...
leverage some of our state expertise in facilities such as GCHQ to improve our local economy. There is so much more to talk about, including the A417 missing link, and I am delighted that the Government are investing more than £400 million in improving that road, because doing so will unlock that corridor of prosperity. This is a moral duty. If we want to achieve social mobility, economic prosperity and a plan for growth must be at its heart.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman and to all Back-Benchers for their restraint. I will now call the Front Bench spokespeople, who I am sure will leave a few minutes for Mr Streeter to wind up. I call Chi Onwurah.

3.39 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate the hon. Member for South West Devon (Sir Gary Streeter) on leading this important debate.

There is no hiding under a bushel the importance of the south-west. Its economy is bigger than that of Greater Manchester and twice that of Birmingham, contributing £127 billion per year to the UK economy. It is a diverse region, with great cities such as Exeter, Bristol and Plymouth, great agriculture and one of the highest rates of tourism outside London. However, as the hon. Members for St Ives (Derek Thomas) and for Torbay and Devon (Sir Gary Streeter) on leading this important debate.

The south-west evokes cream teas and coastline pleasures. Rodda’s renowned clotted cream, with the jam above or below it, is of course manufactured in Cornwall, along with Ginsters famous pasties. However, we must not forget the industrial heritage that the region shares with the north-east. It was Dartmouth’s Thomas Newcomen who invented the steam engine, perfected by Richard Trevithick, although it took a Geordie, George Stephenson, to bring about the first commercial train journeys. Happily, we can take joint credit for the renowned Peter Higgs, of Higgs boson fame, who was born in Newcastle but went to school in west Bristol.

The bedrock of industry in the south-west lies in food, farming, fisheries and tourism—sectors that are due to be disproportionately affected by Brexit. Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, Torbay and Devon are all in the top 20 areas where people work in tourism for their first or second job. Some 32% of marine fishing occurs in the south-west, meaning that, if a bad Brexit deal affects the Budget promise of £10 million for fisheries, that will be of great significance to the area.

The Government’s strategy on Brexit does nothing to protect small-scale farmers in Devon and Somerset against the massive American agro-industrial machine. May I ask the Minister how the Government expect those small farmers to compete with American wheat farms the size of small counties and pig farms the size of small towns, without ruining the glorious beauty of the south-west countryside?

Bristol is home to the largest aerospace cluster in the UK, with firms such as Airbus and Rolls-Royce having to stockpile parts in the face of Brexit uncertainty. In the last month, Airbus has warned once again of the impact of a no-deal Brexit. Its supply chain crosses the channel several times, meaning that any friction at the border will cause substantial problems for the company, which employs 3,000 people in Filton in high-skilled, high-paid jobs that are key to future economic growth. How does the Minister plan to protect those jobs?

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I apologise for not being present earlier; I have been on a Delegated Legislation Committee—some of us spend a lot of time on those. Does my hon. Friend accept that Airbus is to the south-west, particularly my part of the south-west, what Nissan is to the north-east?

Chi Onwurah: I thank my hon. Friend for emphasising the importance of Airbus to the south-west; I absolutely accept that point. The warnings of industry leaders and companies such as Airbus and Nissan need to be taken seriously by the Government, and listened to.

As the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) emphasised, the south-west has one of the highest skills gaps in the UK, with a third of all small and medium-sized businesses having difficulty hiring people with specialist skills. That will only worsen after Brexit, if the Government press ahead with plans to slash so-called low-skilled immigration. Businesses will be even harder pressed to find and retain labour, as we have heard.

More than that, the south-west has been a major beneficiary of EU funding, receiving the second largest share of regional development funding and social funding. The key economic hubs of Bristol and Swindon are among the largest UK recipients of Horizon 2020 research grants, from which we get more back than we put in. After the UK leaves the EU, that hole will be filled by the Government, but the existing institutions exhibit the kind of south-eastern bias that means that, for example, the south-west receives half the per capita UK Research and Innovation funding that London got in 2016-17. How will the Government ensure that funding is replaced in a way that does not exacerbate regional inequalities?

At the heart of all those challenges is the need for a strong, positive industrial strategy, capable of building and rebuilding the economy to meet the challenges of the future and of Brexit. Unfortunately, we have seen no evidence of one. Labour has the answer. [Laughter.] Hon. Members should listen. We are committed to raising spending on research and development to 3% of GDP by 2030—an additional £1.3 billion in public investment. That will get us part of the way, and will certainly benefit the region’s burgeoning tech industry, which grew 47% from 2014 to 2016.

Much of that additional spend will draw on our industrial strategy, which is about investing in areas such as nuclear power as part of our commitment to low-carbon energy, ensuring that we have the skills for Somerset’s Hinkley Point.

Dr Offord: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Chi Onwurah: I am afraid I will not; I simply do not have time.
We will improve digital infrastructure, as part of our commitment to an innovation nation. That will be complemented by the £250 billion national transformation fund, which will enable the growth of the infrastructure needed to increase productivity and investment.

Successive Tory Governments have refused to invest in transport. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) highlighted that today is the fifth anniversary of the Dawlish railway line being washed away. Labour has only two Members of Parliament in the far south-west and seven in the region as a whole, yet we have committed to fund the Peninsula Rail Task Force’s recommendations. Why can the Minister not match our commitment?

Dr Offord: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Chi Onwurah: I am afraid I will not give way.

Regional disparities and the unique issues facing the south-west are the reason we need the £250 billion national investment bank. [Interruption.] May I just point out that we have heard much more from Government Members than Opposition Members so far?

Many Members mentioned the need for regional investment. Our network of regional development funds will ensure that regional needs are put first and that local decision makers decide what is right for their area. The future of the south-west, and of our country, depends on a real industrial strategy that lays a path for a high-wage, high-skill, high-productivity region. The Government should follow Labour’s example in crafting a visionary, vigorous and viable industrial strategy.

Rebecca Pow rose—

Dr Offord: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Chi Onwurah: If the hon. Gentleman insists, I will give way briefly.

Dr Offord: Labour has obviously announced many spending commitments. Perhaps the hon. Lady could explain to the House where Labour will get an additional £1 billion to invest in water quality in the south-west when it has nationalised South West Water?

Chi Onwurah: I would love to give the hon. Gentleman a basic lesson in economics and explain that the Tory Government’s economics of austerity have failed entirely to produce the productivity and rising wages that can deliver the tax base for such investments. I hope to hear from the Minister how he will address that.

3.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Sir Gary Streeter) on securing this important debate. It is not about Brexit, but if I were channelling a famous son of Devon—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who wrote “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”—I would say that Conservative Members believe that Brexit is full of opportunities, while the Opposition have already shot the albatross and hung it round the neck of every business in this country, because they see Brexit only as a risk.

The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) said that Labour has a real industrial strategy. As Minister for local growth, I must tell her that I visit businesses all over the United Kingdom and they tell me that they have one thing on their risk register at the moment: not Brexit, but a Labour Government. Industrial strategies are not created by political parties that believe in the appropriation and removal of businesses from their owners. It is a Labour Prime Minister, not Brexit, that is the real risk.

Rebecca Pow rose—

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Order. I am sure that this intervention will be on the subject of the debate.

Rebecca Pow: It relates to something that the Minister has just said.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): No, you are not listening. We are debating the motion before the Chamber. It has been a good-hearted debate and you have made several interventions, but they have to relate to the subject matter.

Rebecca Pow: My intervention relates to the south-west. Colleagues have made a strong case for upping the productivity in the south-west region, but under this Government a great deal of funding has come to the south-west—far more than ever before. We simply want to build on that.

Jake Berry: That is why we have heard from 10 Conservative colleagues, but only one Opposition Back Bencher. It is a sign that we are a Government who listen to colleagues in the south-west and ensure that economic growth in the south-west is at the heart of our approach.

We have had an interesting debate that has focused on three areas. The first is infrastructure, which we have to accept is one of the building blocks of any vibrant economy outside the capital. We have described this year as the year of delivery for digital, road and rail infrastructure, so it is important that our debate has addressed how we can ensure that we continue to deliver for everyone living in the south-west of England, particularly after years of under-investment. That is the real similarity between the north of England, where we have the northern powerhouse, and the south-west region: for far too long, under different Governments, the country has focused on infrastructure and industrial growth in London and its surrounding hinterland. It is about time we moved beyond that.

We have heard some good speeches today about human capital, in relation both to education and productivity. It is right to focus on how we can drive opportunity to people young and old across the south-west for a more varied educational picture, whether that is through the brilliant universities that have been mentioned or the great businesses that drive productivity. There are huge opportunities for productivity in cyber-security, spaceports, civil and nuclear developments in Hinkley, tourism, agriculture and our maritime economy.
I applaud the south-west local enterprise partnerships for their creation of the Heart of the South West economic co-operation and growth area. I hope that that combined effort will be reflected in their local industrial strategy, because this year needs to be the year of our regions, not just of our capital city. As Minister for local growth, I firmly believe that our biggest opportunity after leaving the European Union will be regional, and that is what the Government should be measured on.

In the limited time available, I will attempt to deal with the questions raised by hon. Members. First, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon spoke about tourism’s value to the economy. The Government continue to invest in tourism, particularly through the “Great” campaign to attract overseas visitors to this country. I encourage him and his LEP to engage with BEIS to discuss the developing potential of the tourism sector deal and pursue the idea of putting natural capital—the beauty that exists across the whole south-west—at the heart of their local industrial strategy.

Many hon. Members raised transport, particularly the Dawlish line. Colleagues will acknowledge that the Government have already invested £70 million in the line to date. I have heard the calls from Members across the parties to use whatever influence I may have over the Department for Transport to get it to fast-track its announcement about the line and ensure that we complete the Dawlish line. I have heard the calls from Members across the country. I encourage him and his LEP to engage with the south-west local enterprise partnerships.

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Hon. Members also raised the transforming cities fund, which we announced in the Budget. Some of that £2.5 billion fund has already been devolved to areas with Mayors, such as the Bristol city region, and the remaining £1.2 billion in the pot is subject to the competitive bidding process. The results of that process will be announced after the assessment of the bids; the Department for Transport tells me that that announcement will be made shortly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) raised geothermal energy, which the Government recognise as a large opportunity. I encourage her to ensure that clean growth continues to be a priority, not just for the Government but for her area’s local industrial strategy.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who made the only speech from the Opposition Back Benches, spoke with real passion and in a very non-partisan way about the opportunity for a marine park in Plymouth Sound, which takes me back to the point that we need to ensure that local industrial strategies and our national industrial strategy accurately reflect the value of natural capital. When we talk about things like productivity, it is all too easy to ignore what may be on our doorstep.

I hope that in 2018, when the landscapes review undertaken by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs consulted on whether the current network of national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty should extend out to sea, partners in Plymouth and Devonport made a strong case for that marine park. There is no update from DEFRA yet, but I will continue to watch developments with interest because the marine park is an important idea that could be rolled out across the country—not least in your Anglesey constituency of Ynys Môn, Mr Owen. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport is right that we need to be bold and clear about our passion to grow the south-west’s economy; his speech made that point very well.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) spoke well about the UK shared prosperity fund. He will be aware of the Government commitment to ensure that the current round of EU structural funding has the benefit of a Treasury guarantee until March 2021, but our specific aim in introducing the UK shared prosperity fund is to provide a single domestic local growth fund without the bureaucracy of EU funds. As my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) noted, we need to ensure that our UK growth funds concentrate on what we need to grow in this country. That is one of the opportunities that leaving the European Union will bring.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) spoke about the desired growth of the Cornish economy. Of course the spaceport has already received funding of £2 million from the Government, and the Space Industry Act 2018 will enable spaceships—I guess—to take off by 2020.

I want to give my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon an opportunity to wind up, so I do not have time to answer all the questions asked by hon. Members, but I will write to them about any outstanding issues. This has been a wonderful debate. This is the year of regional growth, and the south-west must be at the heart of it.

3.59 pm

Sir Gary Streeter: I thank the Minister for his speech. It is good to know that the Government are listening, that they are supportive and that they are committed to regional growth, especially in the south-west.

I thank all colleagues for taking part in this debate; we have heard some very powerful speeches today. Collectively, we are a good team for our region—we are all committed to working across the parties and to doing the best for our constituents. We already represent a wonderful region. If we can just get our infrastructure right, my firm hope and belief is that our best is yet to come.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered economic growth in the South West.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. Would those who are inexplicably not staying to hear about the Red Arrows please be kind enough to leave quickly and quietly?
Lessons need to be learned from the recent past. I was the MP when they mothballed Scampton the Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on move and re-opened Scampton to house the Red Arrows—uncrowded skies. That is a very important point in terms of avionics and the Red skies of Scampton that had proved so useful. That is a of cars en route. Clearly, it was not just the uncrowded and the duty operations Land R over, damaging a number car park and ended up wedged against the control tower. The fuselage of the Hawk aircraft hurtled across the land with its wheels up, or pancake as the flyers call it. A flight faced a landing gear malfunction and had to idea it was to base the Red Arrows at Cranwell. One day me to point out one incident that proved what a bad and a naval air squadron. One air enthusiast wrote to base for the Red Arrows, which had to share it with the bad one in practice. Cranwell proved far too crowded a What looked a good decision on paper proved a very open? the ever popular Red Arrows, in 1983. It is more than 100 years old; it was founded in 1916 as RAF Scampton and the Red Arrows. It is the A15, to curve in compensation. That was recognised representing the new layout of the old Roman road from London to York, and the arrow had the same north-easterly orientation as the runway. The Central Flying School came to Scampton in the 1980s, as did the ever popular Red Arrows, in 1983. It is not just historical considerations but practicalities that matter. In the 1990s, RAF Scampton was mothballed and the Red Arrows were moved to RAF Cranwell. What looked a good decision on paper proved a very bad one in practice. Cranwell proved far too crowded a base for the Red Arrows, which had to share it with the RAF College, a flying school, several training squadrons and a naval air squadron. One air enthusiast wrote to me to point out one incident that proved what a bad idea it was to base the Red Arrows at Cranwell. One day a flight faced a landing gear malfunction and had to land with its wheels up, or pancake as the flyers call it. The fuselage of the Hawk aircraft hurtled across the apron of the runway at great speed, passed through a car park and ended up wedged against the control tower and the duty operations Land Rover, damaging a number of cars en route. Clearly, it was not just the uncrowded skies of Scampton that had proved so useful. That is a very important point in terms of avionics and the Red Arrows—uncrowded skies.

In early 2000, the RAF realised the foolishness of the move and re-opened Scampton to house the Red Arrows again. The proposal now makes the same mistake twice. Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me. I was the MP when they mothballed Scampton the first time and our arguments were not listened to then. Lessons need to be learned from the recent past.
Talking of the Minister, I thank him personally for the gracious way in which he has tried to keep me informed at all times, including coming to my office two months before the decision was announced in public, with several of his officials, to explain what he was doing. I objected then to the closure, as he knows, and I keep objecting, but at least he has been very gracious in trying to keep us all informed. As we all know, he is a quite excellent Minister.

Of course, it is all very well for Ministers and civil servants to find savings—I encourage it—but I fear that they have made a decision to close RAF Scampton without being in full knowledge of the facts, and the changing facts.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, I was also lucky enough to visit RAF Scampton with the Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme last year and to meet the Red Arrows and to hear of the wonderful work that they do. They also told us of the very specific piece of airspace that they have secured above Scampton, which is very difficult to replicate elsewhere in the UK. It is both high and wide, giving them plenty of room to practise their clever manoeuvres. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is a very important consideration?

Sir Edward Leigh: That is an absolutely essential point. The decision, although signed off by Ministers, is really taken by air marshals, avionics experts and all the rest of it. Scampton is unique in having this very high, wide, clean airspace. This is not just about RAF Scampton. It is about what is good for the Red Arrows and what is good for Lincolnshire. We want to keep them in Lincolnshire, not have them moved to Yorkshire, for very good reasons. This is not about sentiment. There are very good reasons to do with the clear blue skies in Lincolnshire.

It may be less expensive to keep Scampton open for defence purposes than to bear a huge clean-up cost to make it marketable to private sector development. There are four hangars at Scampton in various states of disrepair; the Minister may want to comment on that. At least one is in a relatively bad state of repair. Of course, the one that has the Red Arrows is in a superb state of repair—you could eat your breakfast off it. The others, particularly the one behind Guy Gibson’s office, is not so good. The MOD cannot do what it has done in the past—just clear out and leave these huge hangars there, with a massive clear-up bill. It must make sure before it leaves the site that the hangars are fully repaired. It cannot walk out once again and neglect its responsibilities.

I know that West Lindsey District Council and Lincolnshire County Council are already making preparations with the Ministry of Defence to ensure that any transition is done sensitively and takes on board the needs of the community. Unfortunately, we have seen the Ministry dispose of such sites very badly in the past—particularly at Hemswell and Binbrook in my constituency—and lessons need to be learnt.

Ex-MOD communities in West Lindsey have witnessed a variety of problems. They are often geographically remote or separate from other communities. Housing stock is disposed of in various ways, lessening the chances of developing cohesive, resilient communities who can establish links with other communities. Large structures that are poorly suited for conversion to civilian use are left to fall to pieces, making them more expensive to refurbish or demolish. The closure of MOD assets such as shops and social clubs has a profound effect, leaving communities with few amenities and dependent on travel by car or insufficient bus services. Roads have been poorly maintained, sometimes to the extent that they are deemed unfit for use. Heavy fencing and barriers, which are useless once the MOD assets that they protected are gone, are often left unmoved. Access to utilities such as gas mains has been an issue—not to mention broadband connectivity.

I echo the concerns of West Lindsey District Council and agree that if closure goes ahead, which we oppose, a robust and adequately funded exit strategy will be needed if the MOD is going to do the job properly. Ministers will have to tell us whether the full financial impact has been costed. There is also the superb RAF Scampton Heritage Centre, which provides free admission to the general public. One needs to pre-book in order to visit it, which is understandable because it is on a functioning military base. Can the MOD guarantee that the Heritage Centre will be allowed to continue? West Lindsey District Council and Lincolnshire County Council do not have the funding to take it up.

Can the Minister guarantee that the history of this important site will not be simply destroyed or neglected? The history of Bomber Command is no less important than our maritime history, which is so well funded in, say, Portsmouth. This is not a matter of just handing over control and saying, “Here—it’s your problem now.” We are lucky to have a wonderful group called Aviation Heritage Lincolnshire, which is a partnership between the county council, the military, the commercial sector and volunteer heritage centres and museums, spread across 19 sites. The groups and entities that combine as members of Aviation Heritage Lincolnshire do an amazing job of preserving this important aspect of our county’s history—bomber county—and provide incredible value for money. Ministers should tell us how they can better facilitate the work of these groups, especially the Heritage Centre at Scampton. If the MOD is serious about ensuring a proper, sympathetic and ethical transition for RAF Scampton, this should include a funding formula for preserving the history of the base.

We have to think about the future. A young constituent wrote to me to say that growing up and seeing the Red Arrows at Scampton was “one of the main reasons that I am now studying aerospace engineering at university.”

If the RAF leaves, she suggests that we consider turning Scampton into a large-scale aviation attraction. She writes:

“It is vital that young people are encouraged into Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) careers, and a STEM zone should be incorporated into the museum to help inspire the next generation of pilots and engineers.”

She suggests that the recent announcement that Retford Gamston Airport in nearby Nottinghamshire is to close means that there will be strong demand for an airfield devoted to general aviation. Scampton’s runway is nearly 9,000 feet long and gives a fantastic strategic advantage to air shows and heritage aviation, as we have seen in recent years. By comparison, the Imperial War Museum in Duxford has a runway of only 5,000 feet.
More broadly, we need to know how many jobs will be lost. How many roles will be transferred elsewhere, and what will be the impact on the local secondary economy? The Ministry of Defence does not exist in a bubble; in Lincolnshire, we fund it with taxpayers’ money. If its savings will mean losses to the wider community, the MOD needs to outline realistic plans to compensate for those losses and soften the impact of shutting down Scampton. If the base is to shut, the MOD needs to consult all key stakeholders who know Scampton well and have creative ideas that unleash the full potential of the site.

West Lindsey is under constant pressure from the Government to build more houses. Given the size of our schools, the location of our medical practices and the state of our local road network, that is easier said than done. There is great resistance to any more large-scale housing in the villages north of Lincoln, including places such as Cherry Willingham, Nettleham, Saxby and Welton. Should the base close, which we oppose, there will be an opportunity for relocating projected or desired housing numbers from existing villages to a large, new village in Scampton. In order for that to work, proper facilities will have to be created and the surrounding roads upgraded. The MOD must play its part and pledge—today or soon—to do that.

In addition to the historic, economic and social impact, there is a human consideration. Many people in the Royal Air Force community have made Scampton their home over the past century, and many ex-service personnel continue to live all across Lincolnshire. RAF Scampton is not just a facility; it has been a home and community where people have formed bonds and where memories persist. Lives have been lived at Scampton, and many lives have been lost in serving the nation. I would particularly like to remember Corporal Jonathan Bayliss, whose step-brother contacted me in advance of this debate. Corporal Bayliss was the engineer with the Red Arrows who died tragically last year in an accident. He is memorialised at Scampton just outside the offices of the Red Arrows, alongside the two pilots who died in 2011. The bar has been renamed JB’s Bar in Corporal Bayliss’s memory.

Last year, second world war veteran John “Snogger” Watkins volunteered to grab a rifle and stand guard at RAF Scampton in order to keep the base open. He is 94 years old and was seconded to the Dambusters squadron in 1943, just in time for its famous raid. There is so much to celebrate at RAF Scampton—the services that have been rendered and the sacrifices that have been there. There is a strong case for keeping this base open and in operation. The last review was done only a few years ago and concluded that it was well worth completely resurfacing the runway. It also concluded that Scampton was the best place to keep the Red Arrows. What has changed?

To the bureaucrats, shutting Scampton looks great on paper. Perhaps closure would be an acceptable argument if this was only about reducing costs and saving money, but there is so much more involved. In terms of serving the local community in Scampton and Lincolnshire and maintaining our flexibility in the defence of our realm, the best option is to keep the base open.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 4.30 pm, so the Minister has just over 12 minutes to perform loop-the-loops, barrel rolls or whatever he chooses.

4.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I will do my best to impress, Mr Hollobone. As is normal practice in these debates, I start by thanking my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) for his very kind words in recognising the issues I have to deal with—providing the news and dealing with the real estate—and for his courtesy in our discourse about this very delicate matter.

I also take this opportunity to welcome back the Tornado pilots who have returned from their duties in Iraq and Syria for the last time. The Tornado is an incredible aircraft, which came into service in 1979. It has now returned to RAF Marham and will be replaced by the F35 and the Typhoon. That demonstrates the advancement of our incredible capabilities, which were reflected across the nation in the 100th anniversary last year. I think that was a welcome reminder to the nation of just how important our armed forces are. We as a nation step forward when perhaps other countries do not. That is part of our desire and appetite to help to shape the world around us, as a force for good. The RAF has played, and continues to play, an important role in that.

Before I discuss RAF Scampton in detail, I want to put into context the wider picture of defence real estate optimisation that we face. My right hon. Friend touched on that a number of times in his speech. We must recognise that a base or a garrison is not just an operational locality; it is also a place for families and friends, where children grow up. It is part of a community and forms a bond with the society in which it is embedded.

We must also recognise that because of decades—indeed, centuries—of development of the armed forces real estate, the country is peppered with little localities, from Dud’s Army operations to huge bases. Some 3% of the UK is MOD land. Owing to the reduction in the size of all three services, some of that is surplus to requirement, and that means that we must make tough decisions.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I am sure the Minister will agree that the presence of the Red Arrows makes Scampton more important, because they are such an iconic institution in the United Kingdom. We associate them with the commemoration of important events and anniversaries, and particularly the 100th anniversary of the RAF. We have an important event coming up on 29 March this year. Does the Minister think it might be possible to arrange for the Red Arrows to fly over Parliament so we can properly celebrate that important historic event?

Mr Ellwood: I am tempted to say so many things. My hon. Friend, for whom I have huge respect, knows that we were on different sides of the argument. To be clear, where we are is not where I would want to be. However, I am committed to democracy and I recognise the process that we have undergone, so I respect the fact that, if there is a deal, we will depart from the European Union on 29 March. I hope he will forgive me for saying that although 17 million people may be shouting for joy on that day and may demand that the Red Arrows participate, the nation as a whole—43 million voters—must come together, put aside their polarised views and the gridlock we have faced, and move forward.
My right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough touched on the challenges we face, including what Russia is doing. China is tasking us in another void. We must work with our European partners to meet the threats and challenges we face in a diverse, very complex, changing and threatening world. I hope my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) will understand if I do not jump at the opportunity to stand with him on the point that he made.

I return to the subject of the debate. To conclude my point about the defence real estate optimisation programme, we must reduce the size of the footprint of the estate and drive down the running costs.

Dr Caroline Johnson: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: I will finish this point.

We must invest heavily in the core sites where our personnel will be based. That is the focal point. As we reduce the size of all three services of our armed forces, we are building up super-garrisons where we can invest in the long term to improve the accommodation and training facilities, but that means that we must take difficult decisions to close bases.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Has the MOD had any discussions with other Departments about whether it should be funding the cost of the Red Arrows, given that their great value is not to war fighting and defence, but to UK plc’s influence around the globe? Scampton is now a historic education centre, and that is not the MOD’s core business.

Mr Ellwood: No. We are jumping into discussing one of the assets that is based at RAF Scampton. Given the time, I might as well throw away my speech and just go on, because I will not be able to get through the points. The RAF Red Arrows are critical to our capabilities in a number of ways. They allow our pilots to develop skillsets that they would not get in any other forums. They do much to promote Britain’s activity, soft power and so forth. They do outreach—for example, at Scampton and the Bournemouth air show. They reach out to youngsters and invigorate them to think about potentially serving in the armed forces, or at least to support and have reverence and respect for what our armed forces do.

There is no threat to the Red Arrows, but we must ask two questions. First, where can they be based? The RAF itself must make a judgment call on that operational decision.

Karen Lee: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: I will finish this point, if I may.

Secondly, where do the Red Arrows train? They spend some of their time training, and some of their time doing display work. The training area is not necessarily right on the doorstep of where they are based, but the training must be done with the permission of the Civil Aviation Authority, so there are many factors that must be taken into account when allocating where the Red Arrows will be. The Red Arrows have moved regularly since they were created. They have never been in one place for any huge length of time.
to speak to the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to see what more we can do to invest in that site.

I make it very clear that we do not take these decisions lightly. Through the full scoping of the RAF real estate, we must make tough judgments about where we will invest in the long term. I am very sorry that Scampton was not one of the sites chosen, but we need to work with those who will be based there to ensure that, as the relocation takes place, they and their families are looked after.

Ultimately, this is an operational decision made by the RAF itself. I promise my right hon. Friend that Lincolnshire will continue to play the most significant part in the air contribution to our military capability.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I thank the Minister for meeting me about the future of the assets at RAF Kirton in Lindsey. I hope he will ensure, as he deals with the transfer at Scampton, that there continues to be proper engagement with local people in relation to the assets at Kirton in Lindsey.

Mr Ellwood: In conclusion, I simply say that I understand hon. Members’ passion. It is important that MPs come here to support their communities and recognise the value that RAF personnel and their families bring. I recognise that, and I recognise the difficult decisions that must be made. I stand here as a pilot and as somebody who served in the armed forces. It is important, given the complexities and challenges we face, that the RAF continues to advance. We will continue to invest in the people, the real estate, the training and the airbases.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
More than half of people know someone who has experienced an unpaid work trial or have done one themselves. Does he agree that that shows the scale of the problem and the abuse of workers that is taking place?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Indeed. Although there are no Government or trade union statistics on that, it is a problem that everyone knows exists, because we have either done it ourselves or know somebody who has.

Not only do people work—as in the case that I mentioned—for up to 40 hours without pay when trying out for a job, but we have the vicious situation of people being offered work trials for jobs that do not even exist. That can take the form of a job being advertised so a business can get itself through a busy period such as Christmas, or the wedding season in the spring time if the employer is a hotel. It can also be used to cover staff sicknesses. People are being taken advantage of when they are asked to come in and try out for jobs that there is absolutely no chance of them getting, because all the employer wants to do is cover shortages in their own rota.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing the debate. He talks about some of the more extreme examples. He may be shocked to hear the experience of a constituent of mine. She had a seven-day unpaid work trial, but was also told that if she was subsequently employed and left within the first year of employment, she would have to repay the company for the cost of her training and her Disclosure and Barring Service check.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Rather unusually, I am blown away and have no words. I have never before heard of that kind of thing happening, but it does not surprise me at all. Imagine how dispirited and depressed that kind of situation leaves an applicant feeling, particularly if they have applied for a job after job and have got nowhere, often with no feedback from those from whom they hoped to secure employment.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): The hon. Gentleman has clearly outlined some worrying issues. I do not think anybody present would support somebody not being paid for a one-week work trial if that is how it is badged. There are also legitimate concerns that, as part of the interview process, people may be asked to perform certain work tasks to see whether they are suitable for the role. How would he differentiate between the unethical practices that he outlines and genuine job interview and job selection processes?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: My Bill deals with the very scenarios that the hon. Gentleman mentions. I want to make it clear that I am not against trying people out for a job. The Bill is quite clear on that, too. I am against the use of unpaid trials to exploit people. Later in my speech, I will mention a business that has changed its practices as a result of this debate approaching, which might address the hon. Gentleman’s concerns.

Some employers know that the practice is wrong but are indulging in it. I know that they know it is wrong, because they changed their practices when my Bill was introduced last year. I will give two examples. The first, I believe it or not, is the BBC. I had been told that the BBC was taking advantage of young freelancers; abusing their time, talent and energy; involving them in the production of programmes; and doing so through the guise of an unpaid trial period. I wrote to the BBC about the matter and, as a result, it has stopped that practice. Why? It knows that it is exploitative.

Aldi has changed the way that it interviews and recruits people. It has taken away what might have been thought of as the interview element, whereby someone carried out a work task. Instead, it now has a shorter interview period that involves shadowing someone around the store to see exactly how the business works and, crucially, so that the applicant can determine whether the job is for them. That is a better way to recruit people.

My Bill would also have given some of the cards to the applicant who, it strikes me, holds very few in the entire process. My Bill would have made it clear that employers offering a trial shift had to be doing so for a job that actually existed; that when the trial period started and finished had to be stipulated in black and white; and that applicants knew that, however they got on during the trial, the employer would give them proper feedback as to whether they had got the job. My Bill was all about empowering applicants and making it clear to them that the law is on their side, rather than it being deficient and too often working against them.

When I introduced my Bill, the Government were of the view that the law was not deficient and dealt with these matters as it was. In fairness to the new Minister, she has brought forward guidelines on the use of unpaid work trials. That is welcome—I get that change often happens in small steps—but I am afraid that it is not enough. She is, I am sure, unsurprised to hear me say that. We know that millions of people up and down the UK are crying out for proper legislative change that will back them when they go for a job. At the minute, the law absolutely does not do that. That can be evidenced by the fact that there has never been a single fine—

4.40 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.55 pm

On resuming—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Hon. Members will be glad to know I am bringing my remarks to a close, to allow the debate to begin properly.

It is my understanding that the Government believe the current law is sufficient, presumably with the addition of their recently published guidelines. However, the evidence suggests that it is not: there has not been one fine, prosecution or even public shaming of a company or employer that has used unpaid trial shifts, particularly in the most pernicious and exploitative fashion, in the history of the National Minimum Wage Act.
I am sure many Members will wish to share the experiences of their constituents; I would like to share just one. A mother whose son had gone through an unpaid work trial said:

“My son was asked to do a trial shift in our local restaurant. The manager who was on shift did not even speak to him when he was in! He was left in the bar with no direction and when he tried to help the others he was told to get back behind the bar! He wasn’t paid a penny for his time. The same restaurant had already done the same thing to a friend of mine’s son except it was for a kitchen porter and he did 4 hours, no pay and again at end of his shift he just left, waited over a week with no job offered.”

I cannot expect the Government to legislate against obnoxious behaviour, which surely that example represents, but they can legislate to prevent unpaid trail shifts being used in such an obnoxious fashion.

Some may say that I am being partisan, but I think I make an accurate observation: this Government are utterly out of ideas. I am offering them a free idea at a time when we are asked to believe that the Prime Minister wants to improve and enhance workers’ rights in one fashion or another. Assuming there is no general election between now and the upcoming Queen’s Speech in June, I plead with the Minister to do everything she can to ensure legislation is brought forward in one form or another, either in this Session or in the Queen’s Speech later this year, to ensure that we end the use of unpaid work trials.

When I was lucky enough to be picked in the ballot for private Members’ Bills, inevitably I was bombarded by outside interests saying what they would like a Bill to achieve. Obviously, any Member who finds themselves in that position wants to bring in a Bill that can genuinely make a difference to people’s lives. There are millions of people, particularly young people, up and down this country who have fallen victim to this practice day after day for many years. Even with the new guidelines, millions more will fall victim to it.

Knowing what we know, it would be an utter dereliction of duty for this Parliament and this Government not to act. I do not look to this Parliament to solve many problems—hon. Members understand my political view of it—but it can solve this problem. I ask the Government to get serious and start solving it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I am obliged to call the Front-Bench spokespersons no later than 5.23 pm. The guidelines give five minutes to the SNP, five minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister. Stewart Malcolm McDonald will be allowed a couple of minutes at the end to make concluding remarks. Five Back-Bench Members wish to contribute, so I will impose a four-minute limit on each speaker.

4.49 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) on securing the debate and on the way he introduced the subject.

As we have heard, unpaid work trials are becoming a widespread practice. I, too, have heard about many cases, predominantly from young people desperate to get a foot on the employment ladder, who have been given false hope of employment and been cheated—yes, cheated—out of a day or more’s pay. They are used to provide free labour, to cover staff shortages or to reduce costs, with the final insult of not being hired for the job they applied for in the first place.

Sadly, it does not surprise me that Unite the Union—I declare for the record that I am a member—has heard from many of its members in the hospitality sector, who believe that these trials are in fact a crude ruse that will allow companies to get away with not paying people a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work. It is clear that some companies are offering shifts with no intention of giving somebody a job, and others, who may actually give a job to someone, want to see how many shifts they can squeeze out of them first for no pay at all, or at a lower rate. It is nothing short of scandalous and should concern us all that Unite says that the use of unpaid trial shifts has increased exponentially in recent years.

The sad reality is that we are having this debate today because both the law and culture in this country place little emphasis on workplace protection and do not support or respect it. We give far too little attention in this place to the reality of the world of work. Far too many people experience insecurity, uncertainty and exploitation, and until this place resolves to do something about that, the kind of injustices we have heard about today will continue.

The blunt truth is that unpaid work trials are a scam. They are a means for employers to increase their profits at the expense of the workers, and are part of a wider problem across society whereby workers, especially young people, are seen as a disposable commodity. In an ideal world, all employers would act like the majority of decent and responsible employers out there, who pay their trial workers, and we would not need legislation to tell them to pay people fairly for the work they do. We do not live in an ideal world, and some people need to be told what is unacceptable. We should all stand foursquare behind the principle that if you work, you should be paid for it.

I welcome the publication of the new guidance from the Department, but the proof will be in the pudding. The guidance says that it will ultimately be up to enforcement officers, courts and tribunals to decide whether there has been a breach of minimum wage regulations, but how realistic will that approach be? How many people will resort to litigation, waiting many months with an uncertain outcome, possibly facing experienced lawyers, just for a day’s pay? How much enforcement will actually take place? The International Labour Organisation has a benchmark of one labour market inspector for every 10,000 workers, but in the UK we have only one for every 20,000 workers.

Would it be easier to put a legal presumption in place? If you are working for a minimum wage it should apply, whether it is a trial shift or not. It is open to employers to have a robust interview process and seek references, and thanks to the weak laws of this country, they can sack workers with impunity anyway, if it does not work out in the early stages. If there is any need for trial shifts at all, there is certainly no justification for them without pay.

I am angry at this systematic, cynical and avaricious exploitation, but I am also sad that many young people think that unpaid work trials are just the way things are.
Do they not deserve more respect than that and more protection? Can the Minister set out what more she can do to increase awareness among young people? In 20 years of the minimum wage, there have been only 14 prosecutions. Unless rights are enforced, they will never be truly worthwhile. The Government need to step up to the plate.

5.3 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) on bringing this forward. It is a pertinent issue and one that I firmly believe in.

I am also a firm believer in hard work—that is a fact. I was raised that way and raised my boys in the same way. If people want a new car, they must work hard and save hard, and keep the old banger as long as they can. If they want their own house, they must work hard and save for longer. That has always been the motto in our family. I understand that it is harder now for young people to get into the housing market, no matter how much work they carry out, but that is a debate for a different day.

The debate today is clear. As I said to the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) before the debate started, I can well remember my dad hiring people, watching them for the day and then saying at the end of the day, “Here is your pay; I don’t think you are actually cut out for this job.” By and large, the person understood and accepted that. I can never imagine him getting someone to work for the day and then saying that they did not pass the test. That is for a very simple reason: it is simply not fair to expect someone to work for a day and not pay them—not ever. That is the way it is. If that were true in my dad’s time, it is certainly every bit as true today. The principles of decency and rightness dictate that we treat people how we would like to be treated—with dignity and respect. That is what the hon. Member for Glasgow South referred to in his introductory speech—dignity, respect and fairness.

I fully understand those who wish to trial employees. Do they have the customer skills? Can they think on their feet and use logic? Can they handle the work? And do they have the customer skills? Can they think on their feet and use logic? Can they handle the work? And do they have the customer skills? Can they think on their feet and use logic? Can they handle the work? And do they have the customer skills?

I am all for internships and apprenticeships, and I am also all for ensuring job suitability. If someone cannot do a job then they may lose that job. What I am not for is people being taken advantage of, and unfortunately that is what is happening. It must stop. Minister, we are seeking clarification of the law and assurance. We support the workers in their every attempt to ensure that those who work are paid, no matter how long or short that work is.

5.7 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair and to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), not just on securing this debate but on the legislation he introduced under the private Member’s Bill process. It is an area of deep regret that that legislation has not been pursued. It highlights the absolute folly of the private Member’s Bill system in this place, but that is a debate for another day.

I rise to make similar points to those already made. We need action on this today. I think, “Okay, fine, great, guidelines,” but the reality is that we need this enshrined in law. In the time I have been in this House, I have already seen a number of areas of employment legislation and employment practice that do not do justice to our constituents, quite frankly. Some of it is about unpaid work trials, which I reckon will be even more of a thing after Brexit. The hospitality sector largely relies on EU nationals. When the drawbridge is brought up as a result of the Immigration Bill, the chances are that the hospitality sector is going to rely more on people in the local population working in those jobs. I would be very concerned if hotels and restaurants decided that they were going to deploy unpaid work trials.

Patricia Gibson: The UK Government have said that they are of the view that unpaid work trials are permissible in legitimate recruitment processes. Does he agree with me that the problem is that nobody is monitoring what is permissible and what is legitimate?

David Linden: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point; that is something the Minister should consider. When we say that this place just does not deliver for workers’ rights, we look at the absolute lack of any action on zero-hours contracts. We look at, for example,
the age discrimination in the national living wage, which is not applicable to those under 25. Those are areas where the Government have been told time and time again that Parliament wants action, but they sit back and say, “Oh well, we’ll do guidelines, or we’ll do consultations.” I certainly welcome consultations, but at this stage we need to see legislation.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) has made the point that, even though the National Minimum Wage Act 1998 is on the statute books, only 14 employers have been found in breach of the legislation since it came into force. I do not think that is helpful at all.

The point I would make, which people would expect to come from a Scottish Nationalist Member of Parliament, is that if Westminster is not willing to take action on better employment conditions, then surely it should look at devolving that legislation to the Scottish Parliament, where we have a track record of taking action. Take, for example, the business pledge, whereby companies make commitments to say that they are investing in youth, do not have zero-hours contracts and do not discriminate based on someone’s age. There is clearly action in Scotland that can and will be taken to provide better employment conditions for people.

I regret that a number of parties in this Parliament blocked the devolution of employment legislation. If hon. Members are going to stand up in this Chamber today and say that they want better employment rights for people, that is fine—I would like to see better employment rights for people across the UK—but I do not want to come to another debate and make this point again and be stonewalled by the Government. If the Government are not willing to do it, then the Scottish Government will.

5.11 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) on securing this debate and on his persistent and tenacious work in championing this long-standing issue. It is important, because in many ways his background is reflected in the priorities he brings to this House. I was thinking about the backgrounds of many MPs, and perhaps that is something we need to consider. Is this matter on their radar at all? Do they have even a basic understanding of how this sector operates? Have they ever had exposure to it? Have they ever understood how these exploitative employment practices work?

Like the hon. Gentleman, I share that background of having worked in similar environments. I reflect on my first job when I was at school: I went to work in a pizzeria in Glasgow called La Vita, which hon. Members might have heard of. There is one in George Square, one in Byres Road and one in Bishopbriggs Cross. I was hired on a zero-hours contract, but I also had to do an unpaid trial shift when I started there with my friend Ryan. I remember we were competing against each other for the same job, but they ended up taking us both on.

Often, we would go in during the week and work for maybe an hour, and then be sent home with a free pizza when we were expecting to work five or six hours. It was okay for me, because I was still living at home at the time, so it was pocket money, but I shudder to think about the people I worked alongside, who relied on that as income to live on and often to take care of children. While I was somewhat insulated from the full effects of that exploitative practice, I none the less realised that it was unfair and discriminatory. We also had our tips taken from us—a practice that was subsequently made illegal. That just shows that, even though we are operating at the margins, things that happened then to me and others are actually illegal now.

We are still dealing with the effects of casualised employment, zero-hours contracts and unpaid trial shifts, which remain to be tackled. I wonder why that is not a priority for this Government and why it is not a priority for more Members of this House, who might otherwise have been here. I think it is simply that they are not aware of it.

Patricia Gibson: The hon. Gentleman is correct to say that it does not seem to be a priority for this Government—unless, of course, the Minister is able to enlighten us and tell us what her Government might do. Does he agree, given that we all understand it is not a priority for this Government, that that is a powerful argument for devolving this power to the Scottish Government?

Mr Sweeney: As a Labour Member of Parliament, my analysis is primarily driven by class. I have just as much interest in securing the employment rights of someone who lives in Liverpool as of someone in Glasgow. That is where I operate. I am saying that I want us to have unity of purpose for worker’s rights across the UK, and that is why I believe in the trade union movement and the labour movement. We can have respect for ideological difference on this, but that is my analysis, and it is as simple as that.

I want to increase trade union density, because there has historically been a significant casualisation and a low trade union density in the hospitality sector in this country. That is why the “Better Than Zero” campaign has been particularly effective in mobilising workers and making them aware of their power. I also commend the GMB for the excellent, ground-breaking agreement it achieved with Hermes, the courier firm, just yesterday, which secured holiday pay, guaranteed rates and collective negotiation under the GMB, with full recognition for those workers. That is a lesson for the rest of the gig economy and the hospitality sector that we can really achieve improvements, and a demonstration of a trade union working innovatively. What could we do for workers’ rights across the UK with the real force of law and legislation behind them? I feel that would be a real game-changer for our economy: it would improve average wages and improve the resilience of our economy, and that is the way we ought to proceed.

I have experienced exploitative employment practices, as have other Members of this House. It is time that this House woke up to the reality facing millions of young people and casualised workers across the UK.

5.15 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I, too, start by congratulating the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald)

on both securing this debate and the work he undertook on the Unpaid Trial Work Periods (Prohibition) Bill. When I first arrived at this House after the 2017 general election, I wore my Parcelforce shirt to remind me where I had come from and why I was elected by the people of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill, whom I asked to send a working man to Parliament. They sent me here to fight for justice for workers, and that is why I call on the Government to end not just this scandal of unpaid trial shifts, but all employment practices that fail to treat people with dignity and respect.

I was truly disappointed that the Government chose to talk the Bill out, despite the support from hon. Members of all parties, the trade union movement and the public. The Government have allowed this scandalous situation, in which employers can ask someone to undertake an unpaid trial shift, to continue because of their actions. It is not isolated to one sector of the economy or one type of employer; it is a widespread practice in our economy, ranging from the hospitality sector to the creative industries. The practice is used not only by small, family-run businesses, but by multinational corporations that think it is normal. I am sure we can all agree that it is a practice which must come to an end.

I pay tribute to organisations, such as the Scottish Trades Union Congress and the National Union of Students, that are working tirelessly to highlight the injustices faced by those who are made to work unpaid trial shifts. I particularly commend the “Better Than Zero” campaign for the tremendous work it has done and continues to do to highlight some of the worst employment practices in Scotland and to educate, organise and mobilise young workers to fight for their rights. I have joined with the campaign on many occasions, and it was a pleasure to take action together.

It is time for us in this House to take real action on this question. There should be legal clarity for both workers and employers on what constitutes a trial shift. There should be a requirement for employers to outline the length, the criteria and the outcome of any trial shifts undertaken, and it should be made clear in the National Minimum Wage Act that a failure to pay individuals for working on a trial shift is illegal. It is time that the Government sent out that message.

Of course, unpaid trial shifts are just a symptom of the type of economy that the Government have created. It is an economy where many workers are not paid the living wage—I want to see that living wage, or even the national minimum wage, increased to £10 per hour. It is an economy where many workers find themselves with job insecurity, with the use of zero-hours contracts, but we are told that the unemployment rate has never been lower. It has never been lower because of zero-hours contracts; that is how that figure is justified. This is an economy where basic health and safety requirements such as breaks are viewed as optional or outright ignored by employers. It is an economy where workers find it increasingly difficult to organise and mobilise to defend their rights, terms and conditions, all because of this Government’s sustained attacks on the trade union movement. I say to any workers working in low-paid jobs, “Join a trade union today. You can make a difference.”
the Member for Glasgow South mentioned that some people have worked a 40-hour week in an unpaid work trial. They are then not given the job and another person is taken on to do an unpaid work trial for the same length of time.

The research and case studies provided to us by Unite are also supported by the Association of Independent Professionals and the Self-Employed—IPSE—which has looked at the treatment of freelancers. Unpaid work trials are an issue not only in the hospitality sector, but in the creative sector and others. According to IPSE, this has led to an average loss of £5,000 per year for its members, with 20% of its members saying that that is standard practice within the sector.

There is huge public support for my hon. Friend’s private Member’s Bill. While in the Commons Chamber, several Members of Parliament from Scotland saw an advert on Twitter from Mooboo bubble tea, highlighting its unpaid work trial. We questioned Mooboo about that practice, and we found ourselves blocked on Twitter for having the temerity to question the company and its working practices. That led to a petition that surpassed 13,000 signatures. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South also wrote to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs concerning the practices of Mooboo stores.

Has the Minister been in contact with her friends in the Department for Work and Pensions? We know that individuals who refuse or leave a zero-hours contract job can face universal credit sanctions. If someone refuses the offer of an unpaid work trial, will they be subject to a universal credit sanction?

The fact is that the organisation leading the way on employment law is the European Union. The European Parliament is looking at radical alternatives to employment law, leading the way for workers in the gig economy, in stark contrast to the Government’s good work plan, which nibbles around the edges. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South also wrote to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs concerning the practices of Mooboo stores.

Like him, I highlight the fantastic campaigns by trade unions, particularly the “Better Than Zero” campaign. As several Members have set out, unpaid work trials have become a widespread practice in the hospitality, entertainment and retail sectors, but it is important that we place that development in the wider context of the so-called gig economy, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) did. Characterised by increasingly exploitative working practices and conditions and insecure work, the gig economy affects millions who are struggling to make ends meet, making it harder for someone to say no to unreasonable and exploitative conditions set by employers.

That is the reality for so many, but it is being ignored, and even—dare I say it—encouraged by a Tory Government that represent only the wealthiest few. Everything about the current crisis of work is a consequence of an environment that is designed to reduce the burden on the employer at the expense of millions of workers.

In addition, more than £3 billion is lost in wages every year through unpaid work, with the continuing practice of unpaid work trials a key contributing factor. After a long campaign by the TUC and trade unions, and after attempts by Members—notably the hon. Member for Glasgow South—to introduce legislation have been repeatedly ignored, the Government attempted last December to set out when unpaid trial periods are acceptable. It was about time. As we have heard, a growing number of workers, particularly younger workers and those with learning disabilities, have been asked to work for free in recent years. Research by Unite has shown that, over the past three years, there has been a six-fold increase in complaints about unpaid shifts.

It is not only the trade unions and those who represent workers who say that the current system is not working. The Federation of Small Businesses has expressed concerns that unpaid trial shifts are shifting into exploitation. Far too many employers have made people who are seeking work do a full-day trial shift, and in some cases employers have even demanded a full week of free work. That is not limited to small businesses; it includes large companies, as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

The TUC makes it clear that testing skills and abilities should be part of a structured recruitment process. Having worked in industry for 20 years before I came to Parliament, I support structured recruitment processes, which are far better than the old boys’ networks they often replace. However, there is absolutely no justification for employers demanding a period of free work as the price of entry into a job. In my view, and in the view of the TUC and other campaigners on this issue, employers who require candidates to do any productive work should be made to pay them at least the minimum wage—which, by the way, will be at least £10 an hour under a Labour Government. Why does the Minister think that productive work should go unpaid? Why will she not commit to a £10-per-hour minimum wage?

Chi Onwurah: I realise that this is probably an unpopular point to mention in this place, because the practice is rife, but does the hon. Lady agree that we need to have a conversation about the use of unpaid internships in this building? Often, people will work for an MP for several weeks and there is a possibility that they might get taken on afterwards. It is not quite an unpaid work trial, but there is still a culture, in this building and in other Parliaments across the UK, of unpaid internships.

Chi Onwurah: That is an excellent point, and I would welcome a debate on unpaid internships in this building. I myself offer living-wage paid internships. It also happens in other areas, such as the media, where the BBC and others offer unpaid internships. It is a barrier to entry into certain professions and a form of exploitation.

It is clearly bad employment practice to ask for real work and not pay for it. It also means that employers avoid paying taxes and making a relevant contribution.
That leaves the taxpayer and the entire country out of pocket. Will the Minister commit to ending such tax avoidance by preventing unpaid trial shifts?

As the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) emphasised, without strong enforcement the new guidance is not worth the paper it is written on, but the organisations tasked with enforcement have faced huge cuts since 2010. The employment agency standards inspectorate has lost half its budget. That is why a Labour Government will invest in enforcement through a new Minister of Labour. How will the Minister prevent companies from simply choosing to ignore what are, after all, just guidelines?

Employers who require candidates to do any productive work should be made to pay them the national minimum wage. Will the Minister commit to these basic requirements when it comes to trial periods, and if not, why not? Workers deserve more. Ending exploitive unpaid trial shifts is just one aspect of redressing the balance in favour of workers, and that is why we will set up a new Ministry of Labour. If the Minister cannot match that, she should at least commit to ending unpaid trial shifts.

5.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) on securing this important debate. I am proud to serve as the Minister responsible for the national living wage and workers’ rights, and I am pleased to be responding to the debate. I fully agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is wrong to exploit workers through unpaid work trials at the outset of their employment. Workers have the right to be paid the minimum wage when they are deemed to be working, and this must be upheld.

The Government are committed to building an economy that works for everyone through the national minimum wage and the national living wage. We will continue to ensure that the lowest paid in our society are rewarded fairly for their contribution to the economy. All businesses, irrespective of their size or sector, are responsible for paying the correct minimum wage to their staff. The vast majority of responsible employers ensure that they get it right.

The hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members raised examples of constituents and others who had been disadvantaged. Having heard the details, I can say that it is highly likely that those practices were illegal. An individual’s entitlement to the minimum wage depends on whether they are deemed to be a worker. If they are a worker, their employment must pay at least the relevant national minimum or national living wage. Our legislation is clear on that.

Many individuals participating in work trials would be considered to be workers. Therefore, they are already protected under existing legislation and are eligible to be paid the minimum wage from the start of their employment. An employer may wish to test an individual’s skills using a range of kitchen knives in a restaurant kitchen. That would probably have little or no value in terms of work for the employer, so would not require payment at the relevant minimum wage rate.

Clearly, the circumstances of each particular case would need to be considered to confirm entitlement to the minimum wage. However, the case of the 40-hour unpaid trial is, in the view of my Department, likely to be excessive and, therefore, against the law. Similarly, new recruits who are required by their employers to spend time at the outset of their employment undertaking training are entitled to the minimum wage for that time.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South raised the issue of exploitative unpaid work trials in his private Member’s bill of March last year. The Government recognised that concerns had been expressed in the House and in the media. Therefore, we issued new guidance on unpaid work trials on 3 December last year, to provide further clarity for employers and workers. The guidance aims to ensure that workers, especially young people in the hospitality and retail sectors, are not exploited through unfair and excessive unpaid work trials. The guidance sets out a number of relevant factors that should be taken into account, such as the duration of the trial and whether the employer is deriving economic value from the activity.

The Government have clarified their view that work trials that are reasonable, not excessive and clearly part of a legitimate recruitment exercise do not require payment at the relevant minimum wage rate. For example, an employer may wish to test an individual’s skills in a restaurant kitchen through a short trial before hiring that person. That would probably have little or no economic value for the employer, so would not entitle the applicant, but it may well lead to a job offer for the individual. However, unpaid trials are not permitted if they are part of a genuine recruitment process, if they are excessive in length or if they are simply for the financial benefit of the employer.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I have no quarrel or disagreement with anything that the Minister has just outlined. The guidelines that she has produced are, no doubt, admirable. What is her objection to underpinning them in statute?

Kelly Tolhurst: As I have already said, we have an enforcement system for the national minimum wage, which, with the guidance, is focusing on targeting the employers that we need to target. We need to recognise—I was going to come to this point later—that in 2017-18, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs investigated and took action against more than 1,000 employers, raising £15.6 million, and affecting over 200,000 workers. That shows that the enforcement work is taking place. HMRC will investigate every worker complaint.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am glad that HMRC investigates, but how many of the cases that the Minister has mentioned, in which money has been clawed back by workers who have been deprived of money to which they were entitled, took place in a period that would be considered a work trial, as opposed to when the worker had formally signed a contract and started a new job?

Kelly Tolhurst: As part of HMRC’s involvement and enforcement of the national minimum wage, it investigates a number of breaches, including unpaid trials. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that HMRC is currently actively investigating companies in which there is a suggestion
of unpaid work trials. Obviously, those investigations are currently ongoing, on the back of the legislation and the guidance that we offered.

Several hon. Members rose—

Kelly Tolhurst: I will make some progress. I encourage any worker who has concerns about unpaid work trials to call ACAS for free confidential advice, or to contact HMRC via its online complaints form. ACAS advisors will explain the general position in terms of entitlement to the national minimum wage and advise an individual based on the circumstances of their case. If the caller then feels that they may have been entitled to the minimum wage, the ACAS advisor will explain their options for taking the matter forward, which include contacting HMRC about formal national minimum wage enforcement.

Several hon. Members rose—

Kelly Tolhurst: I will carry on, because I want to give the hon. Member for Glasgow South time to wind up at the end.

HMRC investigators consider work trials on a case-by-case basis. They explore the precise detail of the arrangements, including what the worker is being asked to do and for how long. Where they come to the view that the arrangements constitute work under national minimum wage regulations, they will require the employer to repay any arrears and will impose a fine. HMRC has taken enforcement action where workers were expected to complete an unpaid work trial.

The Government are actively taking steps to tackle non-compliance with the national minimum wage, and to respond robustly to employers who fail to pay their workers correctly. We have doubled our investment in enforcement since 2015-16 and we now spend more than £26 million every year to ensure that employers meet their legal responsibilities. Employers who are found to be underpaying their staff must repay arrears and pay a fine of up to 200% of the underpayment, and may be eligible to be publicly named by the Department.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) mentioned that there had been only 14 prosecutions. As I have already outlined, the figure is actually more than 1,000 businesses in one year. The stat is not 14 but 1,000 in one year.

David Linden: On the issue of enforcement, does the Minister believe that the team in HMRC is adequately resourced?

Kelly Tolhurst: From the feedback I get from business, and from some of the work that I know is going on, I would say absolutely yes. We are enforcing and doubling investment, and we are making sure that HMRC investigates the case of every worker who complains. As the Minister with responsibility for the national minimum wage, that is exactly what I would like to carry on seeing.

I want to answer some of the questions that have been put to me during the debate. I also want to reassure hon. Members that workers’ rights are a big priority for the Government and particularly for me. In the advent of the Taylor review and the good work plan, we have seen a step change in a generation in terms of workers’ rights. We have announced that we will ban tipping, which will come further down the line, and we have laid legislation to firm up workers’ rights.

I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow South for securing the debate. It is essential that workers are paid the minimum wage. The Government have listened to concerns relating to work trials and issued new guidance, which, combined with robust enforcement, will help to ensure that workers are not exploited through unpaid work trials.

5.42 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The more things change, the more things stay the same. We have a new Minister, but that was by and large the same speech we heard when my Bill was talked out last year. I want to address one issue that the Minister mentioned. I have no quarrel with the workers at HMRC—my partner is an employee, so I would know if I had a quarrel with workers there.

I am afraid that all the things the Minister outlined that people can do if they feel they are being exploited go partly to the heart of the problem. Why is the onus always on the person being exploited to run around and try to get somebody to take action, when the Government could do that in statute?

I am always grateful to hear the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). As a DUP Member, he has greater access to the ears of the Government than I have, so as we approach the next Queen’s Speech, I plead with him to take the issue forward.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) questioned whether Ministers had any idea or experience of what we were talking about. Yes, they do; the Minister’s predecessor was guilty of offering unpaid work in his office.

It has been a good debate and there is clearly much that we agree on. There is even much that the Minister and I agree on, but I plead with her to do something meaningful and introduce legislation. Let us stop putting the onus on the person being exploited and, for once, give job applicants some of the cards to hold.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the use of unpaid work trials at the outset of employment.

5.44 pm

Sitting adjourned.
UK as a Financial Services Hub

9.30 am

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the UK as a financial services hub.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I started my professional career in financial services, as did the Exchequer Secretary, as a corporate lawyer in the City of London. I worked at Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer for three years, before working at an American firm called Simpson Thacher & Bartlett for three years. After that, I underwent a bit of a switch, and moved from being a lawyer advising on transactions to working in banking in strategy and restructuring at HSBC. I moved from being an adviser to a principal, or manager.

When I was at HSBC, I started to learn about financial services in their broader sense. As a senior executive, I was deeply involved with several high-profile aspects of the bank’s restructuring, notably on splitting the retail bank from the investment bank, which was necessitated by ring-fencing legislation. I also spent time working across the global bank on the implementation of MiFID II—the markets in financial instruments directive—which required huge changes to the markets desk operated. I also worked on custody systems, payment systems and business design. That took me up to June 2017, when I was elected to this House as Member of Parliament for Hitchin and Harpenden.

Obviously, financial services matter a huge amount to me, but they also matter a lot to my constituents. As a senior executive, I was deeply involved with several high-profile aspects of the bank’s restructuring, notably on splitting the retail bank from the investment bank, which was necessitated by ring-fencing legislation. I also spent time working across the global bank on the implementation of MiFID II—the markets in financial instruments directive—which required huge changes to how the markets desk operated. I also worked on custody systems, payment systems and business design. That took me up to June 2017, when I was elected to this House as Member of Parliament for Hitchin and Harpenden.

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The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): You are really selling it!

Bim Afolami: I am really selling it. In fact, when I was canvassing at the last election, a voter told me that after they had looked me up, they said, “Oh, well this is probably the only seat in which being a lawyer and a banker is an advantage rather than a disadvantage.”

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): My hon. Friend makes some important points about banking. Does he agree that the insurance sector has a massive role to play? It brings in £29.5 billion to the UK economy, including, as I am sure the Minister will appreciate, £12 billion in taxes. The critical point about the insurance industry is that it employs 300,000 people, two-thirds of whom live outside London, so the industry has an impact on all our constituencies.

Bim Afolami: My hon. Friend is completely right. Later in my remarks, I will talk about the regional aspects of our financial services sector. Suffice it to say, I called this debate because I believe that our world-leading position in financial services is at risk. That will have an impact not only on London, but on regions outside London, and on industries such as the insurance industry in my hon. Friend’s constituency and across the country.

We must remember that despite the appalling financial crisis of 10 years ago, in which many institutions and firms were culpable of incompetence and wrongdoing—if not outright illegality—the British financial services sector is a national asset and a public good. It is our most successful sector and export. I will try my hardest not to get trapped in a Brexit rabbit hole during the debate, but I will make this point: in post-Brexit Britain, we will have to adapt our financial services sector to ensure that in the next 20 years, the UK remains the world’s global financial services hub, facilitating business and creating growth from Bangor to Bangalore and from Hitchin to Helsinki.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I am a former partner in Ernst & Young, so mine is a completely different perspective on the sector. Yesterday, I chaired a breakfast meeting to look at the future of digital currencies. Among those present, there was an overwhelming desire to see better regulations in place globally. We have an opportunity to take the lead on that. Does my hon. Friend see that as an opportunity for the UK?

Bim Afolami: I defer to my hon. Friend’s experience as a very senior partner at a major accounting practice. The regulation of financial services has moved from a national to a regional level and now to a global level, for instance through Basel and Solvency II. Let us consider the reasons that Solvency II was brought in for the insurance industry. Britain—not just the Treasury but also the Bank of England—needs to make sure that as we leave the European Union, we do not lose our voice at the global level. If we do, we will have to implement regulations that we will not have taken part in shaping. I will address that further on in my remarks.

John Howell: The Bank of England was not only present at yesterday’s breakfast meeting, but spoke. It took a strong role in looking at whether the digital currency sector needs future regulation.

Bim Afolami: I thank my hon. Friend; I will address that aspect directly in my remarks.

Before I come to that, I think it is worth defining, for people who might read or watch the debate, what financial services actually do. To many, it looks like it is just about shuffling paper around or playing with spreadsheets. Put simply, financial services are partners of business. In 2017, UK banks lent £14 billion per quarter. Almost 1,500 equity finance deals, with an investment value of almost £6 billion, helped smaller businesses grow in 2017.

Another thing to assess and to remember is that financial services create business demand for other goods and services. The financial services industry is the largest buyer of tech services in the UK, for example. A business contributing to what we might call “the real economy” needs financial services to be available, cheap and effective.
In Britain, companies from around the world have access to those services through our financial services sector.

What impact do financial services have on the Treasury's balance sheet? The Minister will be keenly aware of this—I know that the Chancellor is. The financial services sector contributed over £72 billion in taxes last year. To give people a sense of scale, that is half of the NHS budget and about 11% of total UK Government revenue. In addition, the sector provides 1.1 million jobs to the UK-wide workforce. If one includes related professional services in an advisory capacity, such as accounting or legal services, that number rises to 2 million.

We are global leaders. The UK is the leading destination country for foreign direct investment projects in financial services from the United States, Sweden and China. The UK attracts 15% of the US's global projects of that nature, 47% of Sweden's and 15% of China's. I come back to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey); those who believe that financial services affect the City of London only should think again. Two-thirds of financial services jobs in the UK are based outside London. In fact, with regards to the foreign direct investment that I just described, between 2013 and 2017, regions outside London accounted for 49% of the jobs created, 48% of the gross value added in financial services, 36% of the estimated capital investment in the UK and 37% of the total number of jobs. All that went to regions outside London.

Highly paid bankers and insurance brokers or traders who earn millions of pounds do not reflect the reality of 99% of financial services. A major reason that they matter is the cluster effect of the jobs that major financial institutions create around them. Let us take self-employed freelance workers, who often work as consultants for major firms in the industry. The number of self-employed workers in the UK has gone up by roughly 50% since 2001. According to statistics from IPSE, the Association of Independent Professionals and the Self-Employed—I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests—22% of the self-employed work in financial services, and 40% of those freelancers had at least one project based in the EU in the past 12 months. A good Brexit deal really matters to them, and those statistics show the ancillary losses that a poor deal for financial services will bring.

Numerous challenges and changes are on the horizon, which will require our Government to change and develop their approach to the sector. I will focus on three principal areas: first, the digitisation of the economy and the rise of FinTech; secondly, the challenges and tough choices we face as we leave the European Union; and thirdly, the need to increase the penetration of financial services into our most deprived areas. That and thirdly, the need to increase the penetration of financial services into our most deprived areas. That will deepen and improve the relationship between the financial services sector and our most deprived people, to ensure that everyone benefits from the sector, not just the affluent.

On digitisation, we are in a new economy: the internet and social media, as all Members of Parliament know, have completely changed not only how politics operates but how goods and services are produced and sold throughout the world. Anyone who has read Stian Westlake and Jonathan Haskel's book, "Capitalism without Capital: The Rise of the Intangible Economy", will be in no doubt about the profound economic change that we are seeing. These days, anyone can produce almost anything anywhere using 3D printing; anyone can advertise a product worldwide at the click of a mouse; and, as I saw last week, a film producer based in Hitchin in my constituency can work with clients in China in minutes.

Such changes are exciting from a technological perspective, but present a real challenge to the way in which we do things. For the past 15 years or so, companies have invested more in intangibles, such as branding, design and technology, than they have in machinery, hardware or property. Businesses such as Uber do not own cars; they own software and data. Coffee bars and gyms rely on branding to help them stand out from the crowd, and they often lease their premises and physical goods, rather than owning them. That is capitalism without capital.

What does that mean for financial services and, in particular, for banking? The normal model for bank lending is this: when lending to a business, the assessment of the company’s balance sheet—the assets and liabilities—is a critical aspect of assessing credit-worthiness. In the new economy, banks struggle to understand how to value and monitor intangible property. In the old days, if a company went bust, a bank could recover its money by selling physical assets—it would have a mortgage over the buildings and could sell capital assets such as machinery. If a company with intangible assets folds, those assets cannot be sold off easily—in effect, their value will have sunk with the company.

A lot of smaller businesses in the new economy therefore do not have the same access to bank loans. They are much more reliant on venture capital and angel investors, and that is a very different model of financing from traditional bank lending. My first question to the Minister is this: how will our regulatory system have to change in order to catch up with the new economy, which is changing at both a domestic and a global level? Without changing the rules on bank lending, we will be unable to finance small entrepreneurial businesses properly over the longer term.

FinTech is another success story for Britain in financial services. Indeed, we are the world’s FinTech hub. Of the European Union’s $26 billion of FinTech investment, the UK attracted $16 billion, which is a huge chunk of that European market. In the first half of 2018, that helped the UK to overtake US FinTech investment for the first time. If we consider the size of the United Kingdom, for us to overtake the US in terms of total investment is really something.

Those numbers look impressive, and they are, but there are clouds ahead. I suggest that the money is still being raised easily because the successful companies that attract a lot of the equity investment are based in Britain—they were set up here. However, there is much evidence across the FinTech sector that new start-ups increasingly are created in competitor countries, in cities such as Berlin and Paris. Much of the money raised by companies—the money I was just describing—still goes abroad. The companies are expanding their footprints elsewhere due to worries about the short and medium-term outlook for FinTech in Britain. We need to face up to that.

The fundamental point that we need to be honest about is that Brexit has put huge uncertainty at the centre of Britain’s short and medium-term economic...
outlook, which affects financial services and FinTech in particular. There are many reasons for the success of FinTech over the past few years, but the key factor is that London has become the principal magnet for the best software engineers, the best inventors, and the best and most successful investors from all over the world. How will we maintain that while dealing with the challenge of Brexit?

I suggest a twofold approach. First, we need to ensure that we remain one of the best places to raise equity finance, and enable the employees of FinTech start-ups to take equity in the businesses in which they work. Will the Minister undertake to ensure that the Treasury will not seek to change the enterprise investment scheme or entrepreneurs’ relief? Will he also consider abolishing stamp duty on shares? That idea was floated recently by Xavier Rolet, the former head of the London stock exchange. Oxera Consulting calculates that the abolition of stamp duty on shares would cut the cost of raising capital for small and medium-sized enterprises by between 7% and 8.5%. KMPG estimates that that could rise to 13% for some technology companies. Cutting the cost of capital for SMEs would lead to increased growth, profitability and employment, and higher salaries for workers, all of which make revenue for Her Majesty’s Treasury while creating a more dynamic business environment.

The second approach is simple: it is about people. In recent conversations—some took place earlier this week—with major FinTech investors, they were extremely clear that the ability to hire high-quality people, and to keep them in this country away from the clutches of Paris or Berlin, is very important. The £30,000 earnings threshold proposed in the immigration White Paper should not be a huge problem for the sector, because the vast majority of the people brought in by our FinTech companies earn more than that. One consideration, however, might not have been fully appreciated: 42% of our founders in FinTech are from abroad, and when they start their business, they often do not earn much, because they are ploughing what they earn back into their businesses, so they might fall beneath the £30,000 cap.

What are the Government’s plans to ensure that founders—the talented people who are the brains behind FinTech businesses—can move easily to the UK to start their firms? If they cannot, they will go somewhere else, and that innovation and wealth, and those jobs, will go to other countries.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a most powerful speech, and I agree with everything that he is saying. Does he agree that it is important to look at the means of retaining those bright graduates who come here and train? They are precisely the people who might wish to start their businesses in the UK. We need a scheme that makes it possible for them to remain in the UK, without having to leave and go back, so that they can move from graduate employment into the sector, using their skills. We would then get the brightest and best from day one.

Bim Afolami: I completely agree that we need to make it easier for graduates to stay. My understanding is that the Home Secretary has extended the time in which graduates may search for a job in Britain—I think up to 12 months. I would like to see that go up further, and I think the Home Secretary is quite amenable to that. We have to be honest: if we are thinking about immigration caps and the like, we should not turn away graduates, who will often be the brains of new businesses. We should help as many of them as possible to stay here; I agree with my hon. Friend on that point.

Brexit obviously dominates Parliament and Whitehall at the moment. We are in fast-moving times, so I will offer no predictions, largely because by the time anyone sees this debate, they would be completely out of date. As things stand, the political declaration that sits alongside the withdrawal agreement explains that the UK will have access to the EU market, and vice versa, under an equivalence regime. That means that the usual equivalence assessment will need to be undertaken for UK firms in the EU market, and the UK will have a similar equivalence process for the EU. Let me explain the notion of equivalence for those who are not familiar with it, with reference to the European Union. Essentially, the EU may look at a set of regulations that govern a certain area of financial services, such as bank lending, and deem another country’s regulations equivalent to its own, thereby allowing firms based in that other country to sell products to customers—individuals and firms—in the European Union.

Our reliance on an equivalence regime leaves me with three questions. First, to what extent do the Government wish to align themselves with EU regulations at a time when the European Union is pushing ahead in a much more restrictive and onerous direction, in regulatory terms? In recent years we have seen the alternative investment fund managers directive, the cap on bankers’ bonuses, MiFID II and other regulations, which were often well intentioned but have tended to increase costs, reduce Europe’s competitiveness and increase complexity. That has made accessing financial services more expensive, more complicated and not necessarily any safer for the consumer. I believe that onslaught of complicated regulation has led in part to the poor productivity of financial services since 2008. Productivity has slowed by just over 2% in the past 10 years.

Craig Tracey: My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. His point about regulation is critical to ensuring our future success, which will be underpinned by proportional regulation. Does he agree that we need to give the regulator a function as a promoter of the industry? If it had to promote the industry across the world, it would have to understand better what it regulates. The rules that apply to insurance do not necessarily apply to banking; those industries are regulated very differently across the world. The promotion aspect is critical.

Bim Afolami: That is a very interesting and important point. My hon. Friend will correct me if I am wrong, but my understanding is that when the Financial Services Act 2012 came in, there was significant debate about whether it should have included a duty on the regulator to promote financial services, both in the UK and abroad. The decision was taken not to put that in statute at that time. The Government should revisit that decision. Giving the regulator such a duty would not be inimical to ensuring that we regulate the industry properly; it would just ensure a balance, and that the regulator considered the impact on consumers—firms and individuals—as much as other impacts.
Recently, the EU has made many changes to the way it treats all non-EU firms that seek to offer financial services to European customers. Changes to MiFID II and large clearing houses are being considered, and I believe the proposals being discussed include setting the bar higher for granting equivalence for firms classed as systemic. It is proposed that the European Securities and Markets Authority—let us just call it ESMA—to avoid getting tied up—be given greater powers to oversee the activity of those firms, including powers to open investigations, conduct on-site inspections and the like. It is also proposed that ESMA be able temporarily to restrict or prohibit those firms’ activities in the EU.

In recent months, the EU has shown that it wants to be able to give its supervisory agencies, such as ESMA, greater extraterritorial reach, so they behave a bit more like American financial services regulators often do. The EU wants to ensure that ESMA plays a greater role in overseeing when national regulators can allow EU-based asset managers to outsource or delegate portfolio and risk-management activities to entities outside the EU. At the moment, as the Minister will appreciate, many asset management funds based in Luxembourg and Ireland delegate those activities to London. Some fear that the initial review that is under way is the precursor to the EU seeking to ban those outsourcing and delegation models altogether. Although I gather that in recent days an agreement has been reached between British and European regulators—that is what it said in the Financial Times, at least. Perhaps the Minister can enlighten us about that.

Those rather technical points matter, because they show that the equivalence regime—the regime that we are going to rely on under the Brexit deal—is being considerably narrowed. In my judgment, that may make it harder for UK-based firms to sell services directly into the EU in future than it is for, say, Japanese and American firms to do so today. If the Minister’s answer is that the UK will seek in large part to copy the EU’s regulation, does that not make us highly vulnerable to aggressive regulatory behaviour from the EU27, who have already shown that they are very capable of designing restrictions or prohibitions on those firms’ activities in the EU?

I have spoken mostly about regulation—hon. Members are all still awake; I thank them for bearing with me—but tax policy is also a major part of this. The sad truth is that we are no longer internationally competitive on taxes for financial services. A report by UK Finance and PwC published in December 2018 states: “On an overall basis, over half the profits (50.4%) from participant banks are paid in taxes” in the UK. Some 43% of the taxes borne are not dependent on profit. In effect, they represent a fixed cost; the profitability of the bank is irrelevant. If we compare London with our major competitors—Frankfurt, New York, Singapore and Dubai—the overall tax burden for a model bank is highest in the UK, at just over 50% of commercial profit. In Frankfurt, that figure is 43%, in New York it is 34%, and in Singapore and Dubai it is 23%.

Putting all that together, given the regulatory challenges I outlined and the tax challenges I have just set out, are we still sure that the UK is in a position to dominate international financial services for the next 30 years, as it has for the past 30 years? Our financial services sector helps productivity and growth in our real economy across the country. Financial services is one of the most productive sectors in British cities, and while the average output per worker in a British city was £59,000 in 2016, that figure was almost twice as much in financial services. It would be foolish, however, to suggest that our financial services sector fully penetrates into some of our poorest regions, or that it is used by some of the poorest people in our country. I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, because I am a commissioner for the Financial Inclusion Commission, and we have been working on this issue since our landmark report on financial inclusion in 2015. Since then, the Treasury and the Government have taken on board most of the commission’s recommendations, and I commend them for that.

What does financial inclusion actually mean? In simple terms, it means belonging to a modern, mainstream financial system that is fit for purpose for everybody, regardless of their income. It is essential for anyone wanting to participate fairly and fully in everyday life. Without access to appropriate mainstream financial services, people end up paying more for goods and services, and have less choice. The payday lending market grew from £330 million in 2006 to £3.7 billion in 2012, and it is probably now worth more than £4 billion. We
are a country of about 65 million people, and 13 million people in the UK do not have enough savings to support themselves for one month were they to experience a 25% cut in income—one month! We save less as a percentage of our income than any other country in the European Union.

I have talked about banking, insurance, Asia, and the belt and road initiative, but for the UK to be an effective financial services hub internationally, we must ensure that we are No. 1 in the world for financial inclusion. All our people need the chance to create and develop wealth and savings. There is no excuse for us not to use the talent of the world’s finest firms and individuals involved in financial and professional services in the UK, and for us not making true financial inclusion a reality for all our people.

Craig Tracey: I am really interested in this area, and I chair the all-party parliamentary group for insurance and financial services, which is considering that very point. Does my hon. Friend agree that although the internet and digital technology bring a lot of positives, they disproportionately disadvantage vulnerable people, who do not always have access to the face-to-face advice that they used to get on the high street, and who, as people are being driven online, do not always get the best deals?

Bim Afolami: Without wanting to out-APPG my hon. Friend, I am chair of the all-party group on credit unions, and one of the main purposes of credit unions is to provide that face-to-face advice. Credit unions are often active in places that banks left long ago. Providing that personal information that helps people to build up their savings is important.

Credit unions in the 10 most deprived communities in Britain are lending heavily, and they consider loans that few other lenders would consider because of the applicants’ credit scores, while also charging considerably less than any other type of financial service. Credit unions in the UK currently have £860 million out on loan, and that lending is predominately focused on those at the bottom end of the income scale. Evidence shows that once people in deprived communities are given a chance to access credit on affordable terms, they start to see patterns of improvement in their credit profiles. Over time, those people will no longer necessarily need specialist financial advice from credit unions, because they will be able to bank with and access the mainstream financial services sector. Will the Minister agree to work with me on two aspects of credit unions? First, will he consider amending secondary legislation to broaden credit union lending powers, so that they are able to service more people from that vulnerable group? Secondly, will he work with the Bank of England to review capital requirements for credit unions, so that the sector can serve more people more effectively?

In conclusion, I would like the Minister to respond to the following points. First, what is the Government’s approach to adapting bank lending rules to enable more investment in the new economy with more intangible assets? Secondly, what is the Government’s blueprint for investing Britain’s attractiveness to people and firms in FinTech? Thirdly, what is the Government’s current thinking about their regulatory approach as we embark on our negotiations on a future trade agreement with the European Union, bearing in mind our need to be the No. 1 financial services hub for financing Asian investments and investments from the emerging world? Fourthly, how will the Government seek to bring down the tax burden on our financial services sector, given that we need to be more competitive on tax policy in coming years to counteract the uncertainty and destabilisation in the market? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, how will the Government seek to improve the penetration of financial services into our most disadvantaged communities, especially by helping credit unions to professionalise and expand?

Several hon. Members rose—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. I intend to call the Opposition Front-Bench speakers at 10.30 am; hon. Members who wish to speak can do the arithmetic themselves.

10.5 am

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) on securing this debate on an important topic. I am sorry that more hon. Members are not present, but I hope that the quality makes up for the quantity.

I am particularly keen to speak in this debate because I have a personal and constituency interest in this matter, and because it is critical to our country. About 36% of the working population of my constituency is employed in the financial or professional services sector, and that is about the 15th highest proportion in the country. Most of those people commute to London, although the European headquarters of Direct Line insurance—one of our principal insurance companies—is based in Bromley, and is the largest private sector employer in the borough. This issue matters for the prosperity of my communities, as well as impacting on the national picture.

This debate is important, but perhaps the reason why there are not more people here is that we have come to take it for granted that we are world leaders in financial services and the allied professional services that underpin them—of which more shortly. We take it for granted that the City will always be all right. I use the City as a shorthand for the broader financial services sector because, as my hon. Friend pointed out, only about half that shorthand for the broader financial services sector because, as my hon. Friend properly referred to the contribution made by the financial services sector to the UK economy, and it is worth mentioning the report “Total tax contribution of UK financial services”, which was issued by the City
of London Corporation, to which I pay the highest respect for its work to promote the sector nationally and internationally. The report, which was published in December 2018, highlighted the fact that the industry’s contribution to the Exchequer increased over the past year to £75 billion. That is 10.9%—nearly 11%—of the Government’s total tax receipts from all sources. It is 6.6% of the UK’s economic output. The number of jobs has already been referred to. This is a critical national economic and strategic asset, and Government policy must treat it as such.

It is worth saying that access to the European markets remains important, as it should do. My hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden is right to recognise that there are opportunities to be had from growing our contacts and trade with emerging economies. I was in Hong Kong in September at a legal conference looking at the opportunities for British law firms and their financial services clients, in relation to the belt and road initiative. No doubt there is much that can be done there, but at the moment, often, trade with China—particularly in the service sector—comes with strings attached, and perhaps a lack of transparency about access to the relevant sectors that would frankly not be acceptable in UK terms. The same applies with India, where there are great opportunities, but where there has so far been a marked reluctance about liberalisation in the service sector. As to my profession, as a lawyer, there is marked difficulty with India in getting liberalisation in the legal services sector. I hope that the Government will give more attention to that.

I was the sort of lawyer who became involved in the matters in question if regulatory procedures had not always been properly followed, whereas my hon. Friend was someone who made sure they were. What I have pointed out makes good, robust and internationally recognised regulatory frameworks all the more important. I previously had a spell working for Scottish Widows insurance, and as a trainee jobber, when such things existed, with Ackroyd and Smithers, who were then the leading gift jobbers. It is an area of law in which I have always taken an interest, aside from its constituency importance for me.

The benign regulatory environment is something we need to watch, as we leave the EU. My hon. Friend is right to say that sometimes EU regulators have been difficult to deal with, from our perspective. Equally, however, dealing outside the EU, with a proper free trade agreement with third countries, to include financial services, will not be without challenges. I am secretary of the all-party parliamentary group on financial markets and services and have just come from a breakfast meeting with the group to discuss the prospects of a free trade agreement in services with the United States. There are real regulatory obstacles—not least having to deal with not one regulator but, in relation to the insurance sector, for example, 50 state insurance regulators as well as a national regulator. With banks, would one be dealing with the federal regulator, the regulator in New York or the state regulator in Chicago?

There is a multiplicity of issues to be addressed, which is why it is critical that we leave the EU with a deal, and with a transition period in which we could maintain all the good aspects of market access to the EU and have time to sort out arrangements and opportunities with non-EU countries. Let us be honest and not kid ourselves—those complexities will not be sorted out overnight. It will take time, and to benefit we must be patient about how we go about things.

Craig Tracey: My hon. Friend is right that we need to get regulation that works, but an issue put to me by the insurance industry is that a Norway-plus model would not work for the insurance market as a whole, as we would not all be working to the same rules. The insurance rules are set at EU level, rather than on a global scale, so we need to look at the different facets of financial services, to ensure that they work for the whole market.

Robert Neill: That is perfectly true, and the need for the deal and for a time to thrash out our future relationships is all the more important because of it. There is not a simple scenario in which the sector works on a one-size-fits-all basis. The same thing applies to the legal services sector, which is a critical underpinning. It is worth remembering that with respect to financial flows, EU financial services trade with the UK between 2016-17 and the current time increased from £29 billion to £33 billion. That dwarfs the figure for trade with our next largest partner, the United States; it is only half, at £16 billion. The seven largest financial services markets added together—the US, Japan, Switzerland, Canada, China, India and Australia—come to only £26 billion, which is less than our financial services trade with the EU. That is why, at the same time as we look at the opportunities for opening out elsewhere, it is critical to maintain EU access, which has also been important to foreign inward investment into UK financial services as a gateway into EU markets.

It is worth bearing in mind that across measures of competitiveness London ranks as the top city and has the highest volume of financial services foreign direct investment globally. However, that is because of our current advantageous position, which we need to maintain. An important part of that advantageous position is the underpinning that legal services and the legal system give to the financial sector. I am concerned that although the Government have uttered warm words and issued advice to practitioners in the sector, real uncertainties would remain, should we leave the EU without a proper deal.

Some of the areas in question are similar to areas of concern in direct financial services, such as the loss of passporting rights, and the need to operate with a form of equivalence. However, the situation for legal services is even more stark, in some respects, because the establishment directive would go, as would mutual recognition of professional qualifications. That would not enable us to use the fly in, fly out arrangements that are so critical to enabling international law firms to advise their clients in real time while deals are going through. That needs to be dealt with, which is why, again, a transitional arrangement is critical.

The other critical point in that context is that unless we have a deal—if we leave without one—we will lose the existing arrangements for the mutual recognition and enforcement of UK court judgments in EU countries and vice versa. That is vital for continued legal certainty and continuity. A contract is worthless if it cannot be enforced, and if it cannot be enforced through the judgment of a court there are no other means to do so. It is vital to
find means to maintain that. The CityUK has pointed out that losing it would mean profound difficulties in relation, for example, to insurance contracts—which would not be of value if we were to leave without the ability to enforce them in the event of default—and, significantly, uncleared derivatives. The derivatives market is particularly important to the UK. It is an area of expertise where, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden said, financial services are not just about figures, but are relevant to real business. Most business work is now underpinned in one way or another by a form of financial instrument being traded, particularly in any significant commercial deal. That has been described as the plumbing of the business system, so anything that threatens the derivatives trade operating out of the City, and what relies on it, would be extremely dangerous.

There have been some areas of progress. I was pleased when the European Securities and Markets Authority agreed a memorandum of understanding with the Bank of England in relation to central counterparties and the central securities depository, which enables that issue of central clearing to continue. However, that is one part of a much more complex structure. There are other areas on which I hope for assurances that the Government are determined to see the issue as central to our negotiations. Those things are largely part of the future state negotiations, but we have to have a deal to get into those future state negotiations to begin with. That cannot be emphasised too strongly.

I also want to emphasise the fact that financial services and many aspects of legal services depend on the free flow of data to underpin them. At the moment that is available to us, in relation to our EU counterparties. However, unless—at least until a future state agreement is achieved—there is regulatory alignment on data sharing, we risk disruption to those data flows. That will severely disrupt the circumstances in which we could guarantee that trades could be carried out and completed. Again, insurance and uncleared derivatives are particularly vulnerable to disruption of data flows.

The City believes that an EU-level solution is the optimal one, and I hope the Government will reassure us that it is their intention to press for that, for the same reason as we spoke of before—the complexities of dealing with the 27 on bilateral agreements would be daunting to say the least, and would cause more delay, which would deter people from writing contracts while that period of uncertainty persisted. I know that a temporary solution to protect data flows is currently under discussion, relating to a non-enforcement period between regulators under what is known as a “safe harbour” precedent, but that is not guaranteed. I hope the Minister will be able to update us on progress and assure us that this, too, remains a very high priority for the UK Government.

Getting global regulation right and making it business-friendly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden said, is critical. Of course, the City of London Corporation provides the secretariat for the International Regulatory Strategy Group, which is a practitioner-led body comprising the leading UK financial and professional services figures. The key test of global regulation is not necessarily its quantity, but its quality and effectiveness. Thus far, the UK has been a world leader in that, and it is important that we continue to make that central to our policy.

My hon. Friend mentioned FinTech, and I am very pleased that he did, because I have constituents, including one of my councillors, working in the FinTech sector and there are real opportunities there. The ability to retain young talent in the UK is critical here; that applies also to young lawyers and to young professionals right across the board, so it is vital that we have a regime for immigration that not only does that in practice, but sets the right tone.

That is why I am pleased that we have scrapped the £65 fee for the settled status scheme; I rather regret that we ever had it to start with. I have in my constituency many EU-national professionals, working in the City of London, the west end and other sectors. They have been settled with their families in places such as Chislehurst and Bromley—commuter land—for many years, and the suggestion that they were going to have to pay to remain somewhere where they had already put down their roots and that they regarded as home sent the wrong signals. I am pleased that the Government thought twice about that, and I hope that can be reflected in the tone of our approach to our EU friends and neighbours hereafter.

However, we must bear in mind that it goes beyond that. International workers make up 40% of the City’s workforce and 35% of London’s finance and insurance jobs. Many of those are EU nationals; others will come from elsewhere, but having that welcoming and open approach is critical. Successful market economies are only successful if they have that open and broad-minded approach, and it is important that we as the UK Parliament recognise and articulate that as strongly as we can.

Finally, sometimes people think that financial services are purely about profit; they see the City purely in terms of big financial institutions. The City of London does a great deal to encourage responsible business practice as well, and the two do not need to be separate. The financial services sector is one of the most active and engaged in corporate community investment across the country, as I see in some of the firms based in my constituency or where constituents of mine work.

New research that the City of London Corporation has published indicates that financial and professional services firms gave £535 million in cash and in-kind donations to various forms of community investment in 2017. It is worth saying that although a flourishing financial services sector is important to the economy, its leaders and the practitioners I know from my constituency also want to ensure that they pay their fair share not only to the Exchequer, but in kind to the communities that they serve. That is not separate from the day-to-day workings of our economy and our lives, but central to it, and I hope that this debate helps to bring that home.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Just before I call Lee Rowley, I will say that I intend to call the Scottish National party spokesperson at 10.30 am.

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) on securing this debate; in my view, we do not talk enough about financial services in this place.
[Lee Rowley]

Although financial services are unfashionable and often a thing of derision, the blunt reality, as we have heard today, is that even 10 years after the financial crisis, the industry contributes a staggering £70 billion to our Exchequer. Whether or not we like banks, insurance companies and asset managers, the ultimate point is that they pay for a lot of our public services, and we should focus more on what they are doing and how we can ensure that they do more in this country.

This is important for me on a personal level, because before I came to this place, I worked in financial services, both in London and across the country, for the best part of 10 years. I was glad to see the regional nature and significance of financial services brought home in this debate. For most of the past 15 years, I was technically based about 30 minutes north of here, near Euston station, but I spent probably 60% of my time with my teams in Sheffield, Leeds, Bootle, Manchester, Leicester and elsewhere. I was on the road all the time. In places such as Bootle, which are not necessarily associated with financial services, we find a substantial number of people employed in these kinds of industries, which are major anchor employers for many of those communities.

We Brits like to be very cynical about things such as financial services. We like to say that they are not working for us, that they do not deliver for us and that there are huge problems—and to some extent there are. I am absolutely apoplectic with rage about what the Royal Bank of Scotland has done in closing down a bank branch in my major town, Dronfield, a few weeks ago. I understand the economic challenges of a retail network, but people have a right to be angry about the way that RBS did it; there was a lack of conversation and real engagement with constituents.

When we put aside all that, the reality is that the industry has been highly successful, and highly important to our country—though I do not dispute its controversial nature—and we must ensure that it remains so. Those are not just words. This industry gives people in North East Derbyshire the opportunity to set up their own business by giving them access to the financing that my hon. Friend the Member for Chislehurst (Robert Neill) on this. I want a deal, and Chislehurst and significance of financial services brought home in the coming decade; insurance is based on a model in which we pool risk, on the basis that we do not fully understand the customer base we are serving. As we get more and more knowledgeable, from a data perspective, about individuals, the pooling of risk becomes a conceptual challenge that we will have to get through. We have a huge problem with customer services. Often in banking and financial services, people feel done to, rather than done with. We have to work with the industry to understand why that is.

I am conscious that my time is short, but ultimately I agree with my hon. Friends that this is an important area that needs more debate. We need to ensure that we develop our country, so that more banks, insurance companies and asset managers are investing here, and staying here longer, to create the wealth that we all know is vital for our public services.

10.30 am

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Congratulations to the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) for bringing the debate. It is important that we talk about the UK as a financial services hub, the contribution to the economy, and the number of jobs in this area.

At lot of the statistics have already been discussed, and as time is relatively short, I will not go over them. I would like to mention Edinburgh, which is the largest financial services centre in the UK after London. It is also a major European centre for asset management and asset servicing. It has been at the forefront of the life assurance market for more than 200 years, which is pretty impressive. Think about the depth of knowledge that companies have developed over 200 years of providing services to people in the asset management space. In 2017, around 33,000 people were working in Edinburgh’s financial services and insurance sector, which is a significant proportion of the population of not only Edinburgh, but Scotland.

Within Scotland, the financial services sector is not confined to Edinburgh. Large banks have technology hubs in Glasgow, and Aberdeen has financial and
professional services jobs, for example in major accounting firms that are servicing the oil and gas industry. As the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden said, this is not exclusively a London thing. When reading the stats, I was surprised to find that 50% of jobs in financial services are outside London. I had expected the sector to be more London-centric, so it was interesting to read that, and to think about the vast numbers of people in the sector; we know how many people in London work in financial services, but there are a significant number of people doing so outside the City as well.

I will focus on Brexit, as Members would expect, given that the Scottish National party is the party in this place that has consistently and vociferously opposed any Brexit. We have said that if we are to have any Brexit, we need full single market and customs union membership, which would protect our right to access some of the services that we would be able to have post EU exit.

Financial services firms and their money are leaving the UK because of Brexit; they are genuinely voting with their wallets. Since the 2016 referendum, $1 trillion-worth of assets have been moved from the UK to the rest of Europe according to Ernst & Young, which is a significant amount of money. According to Bloomberg, Deutsche Bank AG is repatriating at least €400 billion to Frankfurt; JP Morgan is taking £200 billion there, Goldman Sachs €60 billion, Citigroup €50 billion and Morgan Stanley €40 billion. Those are significant amounts of money.

Bloomberg has said that London could lose 10,000 banking jobs and 20,000 jobs in wider financial services. To put that in context, professional services represent 12% of the contribution to the British economy. Losing those jobs in financial and professional services, losing that investment, and losing the centres of large financial services organisations as they move would be a significant hit to the Treasury.

When we have discussed Brexit in this place, we have not had enough discussion of services. We have had in-depth discussion about tariffs, for example, but if we think about the contribution made to the economy by services, compared with the export or import of goods, services are a huge part of the economy. It surprised me that when the UK Government set out on the path of trying to work out which Brexit would suit, they did not say, “We are going to bat for services. Services are the key thing that we will put front and centre, and we will fight for access to services markets.” That would have been a far more sensible option for the Government than saying, “The most important thing is clamping down on freedom of movement. We are happy to ditch our access to services markets, simply so that we can get rid of our citizens’ right to freedom of movement.” That was an incredibly poor decision, and we will all pay the price.

On the impacts on the single market and our options—I am aware that there is not a huge amount of time, so I will whizz through this—one of the biggest concerns raised is data transfer post Brexit, whether there is a deal or a no-deal Brexit. There are issues to do with compliance with the general data protection regulation. For example, if a motorist crashes their car in Europe and they are insured by a UK firm, it is important that the data can be transferred, so that the claim can be paid. If there are barriers in place because we are outside the single market, or because we are outside the GDPR regime as it is set up in Europe, that is a major issue for ensuring that those claims are paid.

I have tackled the Government about the lack of reciprocity in some of the secondary legislation that has been brought in. They had immediately assumed that we would not have reciprocal arrangements with the EU in a no-deal scenario, whereas I come from the point of view that we should always have reciprocal arrangements with the EU. Once there was regulatory divergence, a further statutory instrument could be laid before Parliament to change the position around reciprocity. It concerns me that the Government have refused to do that.

I will focus briefly on people, as the issue was brought up a lot in the debate. In some sectors of the capital markets, EU27 citizens account for as much as a quarter of all staff in the UK. That is a significant stat. If the UK Government’s settled status scheme makes people feel unwelcome, and they therefore choose to go back to the EU country where they were born, that is a major concern. There is another issue around short-term visas. A lot of large companies have bases in other countries and require people to come over for a short period. The UK Government have suggested that the visa scheme will allow for 12-month visas; somebody might only be here for three months, and then the company might want somebody else for three months. That causes a real problem for companies, with regard to ensuring flexibility in their workforce.

To sum up, everything relating to Brexit that the Government have decided on has been disadvantageous to financial services. Anybody who talks about a low tax, low regulation system causes me major problems; I have real issues with that. For 20 years of my life, Scotland had a Conservative Government for which we did not vote. Conservative Back Benchers are talking about a low tax, low regulation system that we have not voted for. I wonder why people—and the Government—cannot understand why Scotland wants to be an equal partner in the EU, rather than a member of the UK, where we are having these things done to us against our will.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to participate in this debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) on securing it. It has been an interesting debate, particularly when it comes to hearing about how Members’ professional experience has informed their approach to these matters in Parliament.

As many Members have said, financial and related professional services are an important area of the UK economy, and they contribute just over a twentieth of the UK’s overall economic output. There are interesting developments in the sector, which has traditionally not reflected the diversity of UK society. With the Women in Finance charter, changes are being made to reduce the pay gap. In relation to other characteristics, action is being taken to increase the number of people in the sector who have disabilities or are from black and minority ethnic or working class backgrounds.
We have discussed the fact that many people in the sector are not based in London or the south-east. I will add one statistic: there are more than 100,000 people employed in banking and finance in the north-west, which makes it the area with the third-largest number of people working in the sector, outside London and the south-east.

We have had an interesting discussion this morning about the sector’s tax contribution. Reference has been made to research undertaken by PwC that suggested that about 1p in every 10p of Government revenue comes from the sector. Let us be clear that that is counting the tax contributions of everybody who works in the sector, so it is not just looking at corporate taxation. As we all know, the corporation tax rate has been reduced. That has meant that the amount of corporation tax, in relative terms, has reduced. In absolute terms, it has gone up, but that is because these banks and so on have returned to profitability after the financial crash, so actually the burden has gone down in that area. Of course, it has also gone down when it comes to the bank levy, which has been scaled back. A surcharge has been applied as well, but when we look at both of them over time, we see that that burden is also going down.

Reference was made to stamp duty on shares. That stamp duty brings in about £3 billion of Government revenue a year. It is one of the most efficient and least avoided taxes, and for that reason Labour is considering extending it as part of a financial transactions tax. I would be very happy to talk to the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden about how that would work.

As many hon. Members have said, financial services contribute significantly to Britain’s exports. In 2016, they were worth about £61 billion, with a surplus of £51 billion over imports of—you, obviously—£11 billion. Of course, that is very significant in a situation in which other areas that traditionally were important for Britain’s export strength face tremendous headwinds, not least in relation to manufacturing, given the current uncertainty about Brexit.

As the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden rightly mentioned, the UK is increasingly integrated into global markets. I would argue that the UK is already a very important hub when it comes to the Chinese financial markets, for example. About two thirds of renminbi payments outside mainland China and Hong Kong flow through London, so we are already catching quite a lot of that business. In addition, a number of Chinese firms have established themselves here. However, we need to be clear: yes, that activity is increasing, but, as others have said, we have to be sanguine about its current size. The CityUK, in its report entitled “Key Facts about the UK as an international financial centre”, says that only about 0.4% of UK financial services exports currently go to China. That may of course increase in the future, but if we compare that with the 44% of our exports that go to the EU, there is a massive difference. As my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer has intimated many times, it must continue to be possible for our financial services companies to win business across Europe and, reciprocally, for European companies to win business here.

As I have said many times during delegated legislation Committees on no-deal legislation, the UK Government have failed to prioritise sufficiently our financial services. I absolutely agree with the comments in that regard by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman). We appear to have accepted an outcome whereby equivalence, rather than passporting, is the likely eventuating circumstance, and of course that equivalence will operate on virtually exactly the same basis as it currently does for nations such as the US and Japan, which are far less dependent on access to the EU27’s markets than the UK is. On the question of how equivalence would work in the future, the point is that it would work the same for all third countries. If there were to be a stricter regime generally, that would apply to us in just the same way as it would to Japan and the US—the point is that it can also be removed at any point, from the perspective of the EU Commission—rather than there somehow being a more onerous regime for the UK, which I think would not be the case.

I very much associate myself with the remarks by the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) concerning the current legal services conundrums and how they can have some kind of certainty on many regulatory issues.

Only very late in the day did our Government start to stress the shared interest of the UK and the EU27 in maintaining access to UK financial services. That was an enormous shame, because we have a mutual interest both in financial stability and resilience and in ensuring that the EU27 can continue to access the deep pool of capital that is available via our financial services. That recognition came only after a much longer period, sadly, in which a very damaging zero-sum narrative had developed, with the cut in corporation tax suggesting an intention to race to the bottom on tax and regulatory standards. That was immensely frustrating. What the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) described in relation to the insurance industry is actually what I am finding right across the financial services sector. There is no appetite anywhere, from what I can see, for a bonfire of regulations. Actually, the concern is to try to prevent regulatory turbulence and ensure that there is co-ordination into the future, and yet a picture has developed of a zero-sum approach whereby the UK would seek to reduce those regulations. I think that that has been very damaging.

On that issue, although I agreed with much that the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden said, I did not agree with his comments about EU regulation. Actually, one root of the financial crisis was the misalignment of risk with reward. That was targeted by the cap on bankers’ bonuses, and rightly so. A second root of the financial crisis was the lack of transparency in financial markets—dark pool trading and so on. That was targeted by MiFID, which encouraged many other countries to adopt the kind of transparency standards that existed in the UK before. I therefore think that we need to be very careful about mounting any kind of wholesale assault on those regulatory systems. When it comes to having robust regulation of systemic providers of market infrastructure, I think that that is a very sensible approach and, indeed, it is one that has been supported a lot of the time by UK actors.

Co-ordination of regulation will become ever more important with more innovation in delivery models of financial services. I strongly agree with the comments
by the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), who is no longer in his place, about the need for regulations to keep in step with new developments—for example, in relation to digital currencies. I also agree with the comments made about the workforce, who are incredibly important. We need to ensure that we still have access to people from other countries who can contribute so much to our financial services.

I am a little surprised that we have not talked much in this debate about the contribution of financial services to investment, particularly in business. We need to be clear about what has happened over time. In 1988, almost a third of banks’ UK lending went to businesses. It is now less than a tenth, so there has been an incredible change over time. The Labour party thinks that we need to do something to deal with that. We need to learn from what other countries have done in relation to national investment banks—KfW in Germany, in particular. We need to look at the RBS branch network.

I share the anger of the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) about the closure of some of that network.

Of course, we need to focus on vulnerable consumers as well. Although we have seen many positive innovations in that space, that often has not been the case for consumers on low incomes. I will add one statistic to this debate, which is that about one in three families in the UK do not have the financial wherewithal to pay for a new cooker if their current one stops working. That quite extreme lack of financial resilience is now very present in our communities. Consumer credit debt is still far too high, not least for people with overdrafts, credit card debt and/or hire purchase debt. We need to see much more strenuous activity on that. I was very pleased to hear the comments of the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden about credit unions in that regard. Yet again, I urge the Government to focus on better integrating credit unions into the Help to Save programme. I also ask the Government to look again at having a proper tribunal process for the businesses that were dealt with so badly during the RBS Global Restructuring Group scandal, so that there is some redress for small firms that may have been impacted on by banks’ practices.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): May I request that the Minister leaves a small space of time at the end of the debate for the mover of the motion to wind up?

10.48 am

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): I thank all hon. Friends who have spoken in the debate and my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) for raising this important issue. We both enjoyed careers in the City before coming to this place, and it sounds as though those late nights were worth it after all—he has been able to use his experience in this place. I have always thought that there are some similarities between working as a City lawyer and coming here: late nights, with difficult people, spent negotiating the finer details of agreements. We did usually get them over the line, so I hope that that turns out to be true here.

As my hon. Friend said—there has been wide agreement on this across the Chamber today—the UK’s financial services sector is an engine for the economy: it brings prosperity and creates jobs and growth for citizens across the country. My hon. Friend said that it is a national asset. Actually, the argument that we have been making in our negotiations with our EU partners is that it is a European and international asset, which we all want to succeed. In the European context, a loss for London and the UK—with jobs and investment going to the United States, Singapore, Hong Kong or some of the emerging markets that hon. Members have mentioned—is as likely to be a loss for Europe as it is to be a loss merely for the UK.

We do not believe that our strength is ours by right, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) made clear. We are operating in an unprecedentedly competitive global market and we have to ensure the future of the financial services sector. That will require a successful outcome in the EU negotiations. It will also require us to look to the future by embracing new technology and the opportunities that brings, and by embracing new markets.

The incredible contribution of the financial services sector to the economy has been mentioned. It contributed £131 billion in 2017, including £77 billion in exports, and there is room for more on that front. A number of colleagues have made the point well that the tax take was £75 billion last year, which helped fund public services. The sector employs more than 1 million people in all parts of the United Kingdom, two-thirds of whom are outside London—a point made strongly by the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) and others.

London has long been the global capital of finance. We want that to continue. Its strengths are multifaceted. They come from the depth and breadth of experience and talent in the ecosystem here. That stretches, as we have heard, beyond pure financial services to the law, where a number of us worked, and to accountancy, shipping and insurance, which my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) mentioned. We have to view that ecosystem as something special that needs to be preserved.

London is also an attractive destination culturally, socially and in terms of diversity, all of which need to be preserved. I am married to a New Yorker who moved to London and would never leave the UK now, because she thinks that it is such a special country and that London is the world’s greatest capital city. None of those factors should be underplayed and we should not be complacent about how we can keep them going in the future.

We have had a good debate about the importance of financial services in other parts of the country. My own city of Nottingham has a significant financial services presence. For example, it is home to Experian, the credit rating company, which employs thousands of people. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) mentioned the importance of Edinburgh, for example for asset management firms.

We also heard about banking in Birmingham, back office processes in Bournemouth, the insurance industry in cities such as Cardiff and Norwich, and many other examples that we must preserve and give due consideration to in the debates we are having in Parliament at the moment. I agree with hon. Members that this House and the Government need to give more consideration to the fact that our economy is 80% services-based, and
that there need to be more debates about professional services and the contribution they make to the whole economy.

It is important that the UK remains a tax-competitive jurisdiction in many respects, but particularly for financial services. We are committed to the rights that my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden spoke about, such as the seed investment enterprise scheme, the enterprise investment scheme and entrepreneurs' relief, as well as the continued reduction in corporation tax, which we have just legislated for in the Finance Bill, to 17%. Together, those measures are critical to the future success of the UK in paying our way in the world and attracting investors here as an important place to live, work and form businesses.

The hon. Member for Oxford East also alluded to the importance of the financial services sector to the wider economy. Having strong capital markets in the UK is important for our venture capital industry, which is the European leader and is maturing, but there is more that it needs to do to create thriving sectors such as FinTech, the technology sector more generally and life sciences, for example in Oxford. There is also more to do in infrastructure investment, which the hon. Lady also referred to. We will shortly publish a review of how we can continue to be a strong player in financing major infrastructure projects. That will include the proposition of a national infrastructure investment bank, which has been suggested by a number of individuals, as well as by the Labour party.

It is important that the UK’s financial services sector is inclusive. The hon. Lady made an important point about diversity. Most recently, we commissioned Alison Rose to report on how we can improve the level of finance that is available to female entrepreneurs across the country, building on the charter alluded to by the hon. Lady. The Government are also committed to credit unions. The number of individuals who are members of credit unions is rising—it is now over 2 million. There has been some consolidation in the number of credit unions, but the number of members benefiting from them is increasing. I think that they now have assets of £3.3 billion. We are making a number of interventions in that respect, including a FinTech challenge fund to see how FinTech can help with some of the social problems that we have discussed in terms of access to capital.

Given that there is little time available, I am happy to write to my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden and any other hon. Members who are interested about the measures that we have taken and are interested in taking to ensure that credit unions become more widely available, including, of course, by increasing their scope from 2 million to 3 million members and their geographical reach, which helps them to have a larger presence in big cities and different regions of the country.

Brexit has clearly been a major factor in this debate. Like my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), I do not believe it would be responsible to rule out a no-deal scenario, as it is important to maintain that leverage in the negotiations, but we have to accept that this is a sector of the economy that would be significantly harmed by a no-deal exit. It would be problematic for a range of reasons, which we have discussed.

First, if we can secure a deal, it will provide an implementation period, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said, would smooth out those cliff edges and enable firms to prepare as we transition to the future relationship. There is no escaping the fact that while we can take a generous approach to the European Union, there is no obligation on it to reciprocate, and we cannot prepare for that in advance.

Secondly, if we leave with a deal, it will ensure that we have the political declaration and, within it, the enhanced equivalence regime that we want, to ensure that we have a continued close relationship with the European financial system. It is critical for all of us to work together in the weeks ahead to secure a deal that we can support. Of course, it must not be just any deal, but a good deal that we can support for this sector. Ultimately, that is the only way we can give the sector the assurances it needs to continue to invest and protect jobs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden spoke about FinTech, to which I have alluded. There are now 80,000 people working in the FinTech sector in the United Kingdom. None of those jobs existed 10 years ago. We are a world leader. We have published a FinTech strategy. Of course, there is more that we might be able to do in the future. The next great opportunity is in SureTech. We are working with Lloyds of London and other parts of that industry to ensure that the same principles of open data that were taken forward by the Financial Conduct Authority can help to drive a revolution in products in the insurance industry. That is of interest both globally and to consumers in the UK, to ensure that they are protected.

We have heard about the importance of access to capital, on which the industry is reliant. We have taken a number of steps, from the patient capital review to increasing the amount of money available to the venture capital sector in the UK. There is more that we can and will do, such as working with pension funds in the UK so that they back these sorts of investments.

As we have heard, this is an industry that relies on attracting the best and brightest talent to the United Kingdom. We need to ensure that that continues. In March, we will be launching the start-up visa, which was announced last June by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. That will answer the question my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden asked about how talented entrepreneurs in a sector such as FinTech can come to the UK. There will be no limit on the number of individuals who can benefit from that and it should be a major step forward.

We have also accepted the Migration Advisory Committee’s recommendations with respect to students. Those changes will be made in due course, which will make it easier for individuals to stay on in the UK after studying, to make a life here and to join businesses in financial services and elsewhere.

With respect to data sharing, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst raised, we are pursuing a comprehensive relationship with the European Union, but we will be able to deliver that only if we can secure a deal and get on to those negotiations in due course.
I hope that I have answered many of the questions that have been raised today. There were many others, and I will write to the hon. Members who raised them. We are committed to financial services sector, which is a foundation stone of the United Kingdom’s economy and is of benefit to people across the country. The critical step in the days ahead is to secure a deal that gives the sector the assurance that it needs to move forward.

10.59 am

Bim Afolami: I thank the Minister for his response. I would like him to write to me about credit unions, in particular, which he mentioned.

In the remaining 20 seconds, I will take on some points raised by the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds). The issue with regulation is not whether we should have a bonfire of regulations. Nobody on the Government Benches, myself included, wants to see a bonfire of regulations. It is about having the most effective regulations that we can, rather than just accepting everything that has happened before.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation: Telford

11 am

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the progress on the independent inquiry into child sexual exploitation in Telford.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. Almost a year ago, local campaigners in Telford finally succeeded in persuading the local council to hold a Rotherham-style inquiry into child sexual exploitation in the town. The survivor-led campaign began in 2016. The issue was raised in questions and debates in Parliament, but the local authority rejected all requests. Together with all local safeguarding partners, it told the Home Secretary and the Home Office, who sent officials to Telford to see what was going on, that no inquiry was necessary. Ten men in positions of power in safeguarding signed a letter to say that there was nothing to see here.

The campaign for an inquiry was eventually successful, because courageous victims were willing to speak out and come forward. I salute their bravery. They spoke to a determined female journalist, Geraldine McKelvie, who carried out a tireless 18-month investigation. In February 2018, she finally put the shocking scale of the problem in Telford into the public domain.

The purpose of the inquiry was to hold those in authority to account, to give answers to survivors and their families, and to give our community reassurance that lessons have been learned and that everything possible is being done to ensure that our young people are not at risk. Victims and families wanted to understand what had happened and to know that their experiences would not be brushed aside and forgotten. The inquiry was supposed to restore trust in the system, to reassure people that it would be on the side of the victim, to acknowledge the fears and anxieties of our community, and to restore confidence that the authorities would protect vulnerable young people. It is hard to understand how that could not be a matter of urgency.

Child sexual exploitation is not just any crime. It has a lifelong impact on victims and their families and it affects the whole community. It is about control, manipulation and fear, and it creates long-term psychological trauma for victims and families, from which survivors struggle to recover. It is also about the failure of those in authority to act and to recognise what was happening. Let us be clear: the victims in Telford were predominantly young vulnerable women, and those in power, who had responsibility but who so often looked the other way, were predominantly men.

When the media attention moved to other towns with similar problems, I did not want victims to feel let down because, after all their courage in speaking out, nothing had really changed. I have worked with survivors, more recent victims and their families, and I want my community to know that I have an absolute sense of duty to ensure that the inquiry happens and that it delivers accountability and change.

Once the council had agreed that such an inquiry would be held, everyone expected a chair to be appointed to lead it. One senior councillor said that the appointment was to take place before the end of summer 2018. The
council would then step back and let the chairman get on with it, because of course the council’s actions would be subject to scrutiny by the inquiry, hence the need for independence.

I kept a close eye on that to make sure that matters were progressing, but when I looked, I found a shocking lack of urgency. A PR executive has been appointed to position the council more favourably, along with a top firm of solicitors who are experts in dispute resolution. As to the inquiry, however, there is not even a job specification for the chair yet, no advert has been placed and no terms of reference have been drafted.

The experts in dispute resolution say that they are “designing a recruitment process” and “looking to share their thoughts on this at future meetings with the council.” They also say that they are, “mindful to build in sufficient time for each of the steps involved in the recruitment process, and may add in additional steps at a later stage.”

Once the recruitment process has been completed, they will begin “designing terms of reference”.

We are one year on from when the council finally agreed that it would commission an inquiry—one year—and that battle had been fought since 2016. What progress has there been? A partner in that top firm of solicitors now share a logo for the inquiry and is concerning themselves with typeface and colour. In that year, they have also come up with an inquiry name. I mean no disrespect to the solicitors involved, but we have to ask who is taking responsibility for this extraordinary situation.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. She has been almost uniquely at the sharp end of holding those responsible for overseeing the appalling state of affairs in Telford to account. She was quite right to call the chair and get the inquiry under way. I sincerely hope that when the Minister responds, he will reassure her that he will take as keen an interest as she does in Telford to account. She was quite right to call this inquiry. There is not even a job for the council to consider what happened. She was quite right to call this inquiry to account. It is now time for the authorities in Telford to consider their actions and the impact they have had on the residents of Telford. They have a duty to ensure that they hold those in power to account. It is time to see this issue from the outside looking in, the envisaged timescale, the objectives and the possible outcomes, and then we can let local people be the judge. It is time to see this issue from the outside looking in, and I am grateful to the media for doing just that. That can those in authority really not see how the situation looks from the outside? Can they really not see how it appears to the hundreds of survivors and to our wider community?

Lucy Allan: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his kind words, and for his support on this issue and many others that I deal with as the Member of Parliament for Telford.

The inquiry was meant to be for the survivors and our community. It was meant to provide assurances to our young people, and to heal and restore. It was also about accountability for those in authority. Instead, we see a slow-motion gravy train for solicitors—expensive people fussing over logos and letterheads—which sends the message that getting to the bottom of what happened in Telford is not a matter of urgency.

That is set against a history of the men in authority not taking the issue seriously. The chief inspector claimed that the female journalist sensationalised the number of victims. That chair of the safeguarding board stated that the number of victims was made up on the back of a fag packet. A male cabinet member for children’s services attacked the journalist on social media and described her and her sources as “despicable”. Others said that those who raised the issue were doing it for political gain or were responsible for Britain First and the English Defence League protesting in the town.

Those men resisted and struggled and came up with multiple reasons why no inquiry could be held. They used their positions of power to shut it down. “It will cost millions and millions,” they threatened. Well, they seem to be working hard to make that happen. Rather than getting to the bottom of the history of child sexual exploitation in the town, they are creating a tangled bureaucracy that benefits no one. People want fresh air, daylight and transparency on the issue; they do not want the inquiry to be tied up in knots for five years and to cost millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money.

When it has been gently suggested—by far more subtle means than a debate in this place—that the delays must stop, the authority’s reaction has been furious. “This is what survivors want,” it claims, which shows how completely out of touch it is. The survivors do not want multimillion-pound bureaucracy with logos and letterheads that stretches out potentially for five years. They want access to counselling; they want help to rebuild their lives; they want their experience to be acknowledged; they want answers; and they want to know that lessons have been learned, processes are in place and attitudes have changed. Why would any responsible council claim that a long, expensive, bureaucratic inquiry must be better than an efficient inquiry that delivers results?

The council could have copied the style of the Rotherham inquiry. That was what survivors asked for. The inquiry took three months to set up, it took nine months to deliver and it cost £120,000, but most importantly of all from the survivors’ perspective, it delivered real accountability. Those in authority who had failed young people were held to account. The chief executive, the director of children’s services, and the police and crime commissioner all resigned. That is not going to happen in Telford—this inquiry makes quite sure of that.

In the end, this is about accountability. Those in authority are accountable to local people, and it is the job of MPs to ensure that they hold those in power to account. It is now time for the authorities in Telford to be open with the public about the cost of this inquiry, the envisaged timescale, the objectives and the possible outcomes, and then we can let local people be the judge. It is time to see this issue from the outside looking in, and I am grateful to the media for doing just that. Can those in authority really not see how the situation looks from the outside? Can they really not see how it appears to the hundreds of survivors and to our wider community?

Child sexual exploitation is a horrendous crime and of course blame lies with the perpetrators, but we cannot and must not ignore the fact that attitudes towards vulnerable young women in communities up and down the country played their part in allowing this crime to continue unchecked. In every case of child sexual exploitation, there is a system that was just not on the victims’ side; that their experience was minimised; that somehow they were to blame; and that the authorities and those in positions of power just did not work for them.

Although much has changed and we see great improvements in Telford and elsewhere, I urge the Minister, who I hold in the highest regard, to do all he can to
ensure that this inquiry does not become one more example of the way in which authorities so often fail the very people they are meant to serve.

11.11 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Stringer.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) on securing this important debate. I know how much she has campaigned for the victims and survivors of child sexual exploitation in her constituency, and she absolutely must be credited for keeping this important issue front and centre, both in Telford and here in Westminster. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) for being with us today, because of his interest in a neighbouring constituency.

It goes without saying that child sexual exploitation is a heinous crime. It is one of the most difficult things that we as a society have to deal with. As this issue is not my day-to-day policy responsibility, just preparing for this debate and reading through some of the material, it was difficult for me to do. It is therefore right that, at all levels of Government, we work together to provide a strong response to this crime. Together we can ensure that victims find justice, and collectively we can better understand the failings of the past, ensuring that we not only help victims but protect future generations of children.

I will start by setting out what the Government are doing, and have been doing, on this issue. I am pleased to say that the Government’s ambitious “Tackling child sexual exploitation” work has created a step change in the national response to sexual exploitation and violence against children and young people. The Home Office has established a new investigative team in the National Crime Agency. We have invested in new frontline response for victims and services, for example by recruiting an extra 100 specialist rape and child sexual abuse prosecutors.

The Department for Education has funded an independent response unit to boost capacity and expertise in local areas, which has supported over 20,000 professionals. The Home Office has also provided significant extra investment to the law enforcement response, through the police transformation fund. This has led to an increasing number of cases being prosecuted in the courts and heavy sentences being handed down.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary also recognises the grooming threats that our children face online. In September, he announced a £21 million investment to improve how law enforcement agencies reduce the volume of offending and pursue the most prolific offenders. There is much more to be done to help to combat this global threat, including by the digital industry, but I believe that the Home Office continues to galvanise global action, and it presses for a co-ordinated industry-wide response.

The Government want victims to have the confidence to report crimes, knowing that they will get the support they need, and that everything will be done to bring offenders to justice. That why in each of the last three years the Ministry of Justice has provided £7 million of funding for non-statutory organisations that support victims and survivors of sexual abuse, including child sexual abuse.

Finally, inquiries are an important way of shedding light on the causes and circumstances of events that have given rise to public concern. That is why in 2015 the Home Office launched the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse to get to the truth, expose what has gone wrong and learn lessons for the future.

I turn to Telford specifically. First of all, I am glad that both Telford and Wrekin Council and West Mercia police are committed to tackling child sexual exploitation in their area. Of course, that must be their priority. I have seen that over the last decade they have forged a model of partnership working, established a taskforce to tackle this issue together, and have been noted by Ofsted for their work. In 2012, they brought seven perpetrators to justice, making their area the second place in the country to do so.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Telford mentioned, counselling and support are of course of paramount importance for survivors—in her words, they need such support to help them to rebuild their lives—so I was glad to see that the council is focused on that. It is responsible for commissioning services. I understand that very soon, a new support contract will start. It has the approval of the Telford Survivors Committee and was rightly conceived by a partnership of the local council, the police and the clinical commissioning group. I hope that all involved focus on what my hon. Friend has said and work together constructively to help all victims and survivors to rebuild their lives.

I am also glad that the council finally agreed to hold an independent inquiry into child sexual exploitation, which many people, including my hon. Friend, had called for. Ultimately, that was the council’s decision; it is the council’s inquiry. I welcome its openness to additional scrutiny through this process.

It is in the interests of all concerned in Telford that the inquiry be set up in a transparent manner that meets the needs of survivors. The council has rightly commissioned an independent body to oversee this process. Appointing the right chair will be key to the inquiry’s success; I agree with my hon. Friend that that should now be prioritised. I also understand her concern that costs associated with the inquiry appear to be rising, and the council should be held to account for that, as is appropriate. The final thing to say is that the council has committed to this independent inquiry, so it must deliver on it, properly and expeditiously, to provide answers and justice for the survivors.

In conclusion, as I said at the outset, we must all learn from mistakes. I again thank my hon. Friend for her tireless commitment to this cause. Only by learning from and tackling the failings of the past, both locally and nationally, can we ensure that we not only help victims and survivors in a better way but, vitally, protect future generations of children from this insidious crime.

Question put and agreed to.

11.19 am

Sitting suspended.
Offshore Helicopter Safety

[Sir Henry Bellingham in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered offshore helicopter safety.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. As many of us are aware, the oil and gas industry remains very significant to our economy. Tens of millions of barrels are produced every year and hundreds of billions of pounds have found their way to the public purse in taxes over the years. The industry employs huge numbers of people, and I think we can be proud of what has been achieved, although many of us would have preferred to see Governments through the '80s create some form of sovereign wealth fund to support our country in the leaner years, rather than squandering much of that money on tax cuts for the rich.

I am here to make the case for an independent public inquiry into the discredited offshore helicopter system and for much-needed reforms to the regulatory framework.

Helicopter transport is the lifeblood of the offshore oil and gas industry, transporting some 50,000 workers to their workplace. The remoteness and number of North sea installations make helicopters the only viable mode of transport. Some of the issues I will raise about the maximising economic recovery policy and about commerciality might have been more appropriately addressed to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, but I trust that if the Minister cannot address them today, he will work with fellow Ministers to do so in writing.

It is important to recall the tragic statistics of recent times. Thirty-three offshore workers and helicopter crew have died as a result of accidents across the North sea in the past 10 years, and 65 workers and crew have been rescued in that time. In the UK sector, there have been five helicopter accidents, two of which were fatal, taking the lives of 20 workers and crew. All the incidents have involved the Super Puma models H225 or AS332L2.

Three of the incidents, including the one that killed 16 workers and crew on 1 April 2009, were attributable to technical failures of the main rotor gearbox. The Super Puma fleet was grounded in October 2012 and had just returned to UK continental shelf operations when an AS332L2 ditched in the sea off Sumburgh on 23 August 2013, with the loss of four lives. A month after the August 2013 incident, the Civil Aviation Authority launched a strategic review of offshore helicopter operations, resulting in the publication of CAP 1145 on 20 February 2014. That is the regulator's sole official response to date to the series of tragic incidents and close calls involving Super Pumas between 2009 and 2013.

Super Pumas returned in the North sea in 2015, but have been grounded since May 2016, following a fatal accident in Norway on 29 April 2016 that caused the deaths of all 13 crew and passengers on board. The helicopter involved was an H225 Super Puma. The final Accident Investigation Board Norway report in July could not establish the cause of the fatigue fracture in the gearbox-operated rotor that led to catastrophic mechanical failure, but it still managed to publish 12 recommendations. They included criticism of Airbus and the European Aviation Safety Agency for failures to act effectively on recommendations on fault detection systems from the April 2009 incident in the UK sector.

The overall impression for the North sea workforce was that once again the Super Puma had failed, with deadly consequences. The trade unions, particularly the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers and Unite, sit on the committees and bodies established to promote higher safety standards in the industry, including helicopter operations. They share my concerns about this area of aviation regulation and are fully supportive of an independent public inquiry. That is not only a priority for those offshore workers on oil and gas installations that are still in production. The emergence of offshore wind as a growing element of the energy mix and the decommissioning of 1970s and 1980s-era infrastructure will require helicopter transport to deliver the workforce safely to the job and back home again for the next 10 years or more. Those workers are very much affected, too.

As an aside, I am told by the Prospect union that the withdrawal of helicopters has other impacts, with pilots and engineers losing out on personal licence payments when a helicopter is withdrawn for safety reasons. Will the Minister tell me how the pay of those workers can be protected?

We know that the manufacturer of the Super Puma, Airbus, has ceased production of the AS332L2. The Super Puma family, however, contributed to Airbus’s successful sales in 2018, with orders received for 17 Super Pumas, including the H225. Once known as the workhorse of the North sea, there is next to no prospect of it returning in either the UK or Norwegian sectors, yet that extraordinary collapse in confidence in one section of the offshore industry has merited little if any comment from the Government.

I met the Civil Aviation Authority last September and outlined my concerns regarding the Super Puma and the need for the CAA to be much clearer on its position. Due to the requirements it says it has in place, it told me that no one can see the Super Pumas re-entering service in the foreseeable future, even though the CAA had cleared them for use. What model will replace the Super Pumas and the S-92s in the long run? The Bell 525 is thought to be the only heavy model capable of operating in the North sea. Industry figures are being invited to Texas to view the new model, but it is still to be licensed for commercial sale by the Federal Aviation Agency in the United States. No other heavy model is at such an advanced stage of development. The RMT estimates that it will take nearly two years to complete, so there is no prospect of new helicopters in the North sea until late 2020.

What assessment have the Government made of the new helicopter models for the North sea market? Is there sufficient capacity in the market? Is the existing fleet in the North sea being stretched to the limit, resulting in more and more downtime, as appears to be the case? We know from worker testimonials that there are problems with resource and downtime. One group gave an example. They checked in at 6.45 am, but due to technical issues, the workers ended up spending 12 hours in the heliport. The following day, that happened again. Workers had been there for a total of 22 hours. There is
a long way to go before we can reasonably expect workers to be confident in the equipment—in this case, the helicopters—that is provided for them to be able to carry out their work.

While the CAA's CAP 1145 document improved breathing apparatus, seating configuration and window design—I believe the windows are made bigger so that people can escape more easily—the perception among many offshore workers is that CAP 1145 is too heavily weighted towards survivability in a crash, rather than crash prevention.

In correspondence with the Government on the matter, I have received a series of broad-brush replies that have done nothing to address my core concerns or those of offshore workers in my Stockton North constituency—many people in my constituency work in the North sea—and elsewhere. The Minister said in an answer to my written question on commercial pressures:

“Offshore helicopter services provide a vital link to ensure the viability of the UK’s oil and gas industry. High standards of air safety are a fundamental concern in ensuring these services are commercially viable.”

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. I am interested that he has referred to the large number of oil and gas rig workers in my constituency—many people in my constituency work in the North sea—and elsewhere. The Minister said in an answer to my written question on commercial pressures:

“The Government must convene a full independent public inquiry to investigate commercial pressures on helicopter safety in sufficient depth.”

Alex Cunningham: We should look at all the evidence relating to helicopters. That is why I am seeking a public inquiry to examine all the issues, to ensure that we come to the right conclusions and plan a way forward. I have flown in offshore helicopters—I was not an offshore worker; I worked in public relations for the gas industry. I admire anybody and everybody who steps on to a helicopter, because it can be an uncomfortable time.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The detail of the hon. Gentleman’s speech is fascinating and very important. Does he agree that any worker going offshore must have confidence in their colleagues and their company that the helicopter in which they are travelling will keep them safe, and that they should not be put in a position where their health and safety is put below company profits?

Alex Cunningham: There is no doubt that that must be the case. As I said, I have flown on these machines myself. I wanted to be assured that everything was good. When I went, there was a group of us, and because we were inexperienced—we had never been offshore before—we had a safety man sitting next to each and every one of us to reassure us and to help us through the journey. It is critical that people have that confidence. However, people are turning up time and again to fly offshore only to be told, “Sorry, you can’t go now. There are technical issues.”

Four hours later, they are given a lunch voucher, and told, “Sorry, there are still technical issues.” That does not build confidence among those who have to work offshore.

The Government rejected the Select Committee’s recommendation, and claimed that there was no evidence to support the assertions about commercial pressure and offshore helicopter safety that had persuaded the Committee to make the recommendation. Yet trade unions on the offshore helicopter safety leadership group tell me that discussion of the CAP 1145 recommendation has gone nowhere because the contractors will not jeopardise their commercial relationship with the oil and gas companies.

I am told that the CAA sits on the offshore helicopter safety leadership group—quite a mouthful—but does not take a proactive role in trying to move that issue along and to tackle the core confidence issues affecting the workforce. To my knowledge, the OHSLG has yet to take concrete action to rein the oil companies in, although I am advised that the industry is looking at a draft principle in Oil & Gas UK’s supply chain code of practice that would state:

“Contract cancellations should not be without good reason or cause. If an operator or contractor must have the ability to terminate a contract then the circumstance or risk should be explained, understood—not hidden.”

To me, that smacks of self-regulation, and is simply not good enough in such an unbalanced customer-contractor relationship. The helicopter operators are not even signatories to the existing supply chain code of practice, so they are not even within scope of the industry’s self-regulatory framework. I would be grateful for the Minister’s response to that problem, and to know what he plans to do to give teeth to some parts of the regulatory chain.

Successive surveys of offshore workers have found helicopter safety to be their No. 1 concern. Even an Airbus survey in 2017 found that 63% of offshore constituents have written to me saying that 49 of the 62 deaths caused by helicopter crashes were caused by pilot error. Does he agree that we should look at that evidence presented by the ICAO?
workers would not travel in a Super Puma again if they had the choice. That fundamental lack of choice is all the more reason for the UK Government to commission an independent inquiry into offshore helicopter safety, covering the up-to-date safety record of all offshore helicopter models; international comparisons; workforce engagement; the overall North sea helicopter market; contractual relationships, including commercial pressures; and the regulatory framework.

What is happening to bolster confidence among the workforce? Step Change in Safety has relaunched its helicopter safety awareness courses for offshore workers to attend, but they are via webinars with helicopter pilots from the main operators. Helpful though that is, it is a relaunch of existing courses and does not chime with the industry and regulatory mantra of “safety is our No. 1 priority”. In fact, it suggests a hierarchy of safety issues, with helicopter safety a secondary concern that is best dealt with by communications between pilots and their passengers.

Such an approach to passenger safety could never be contemplated in any other area of the aviation industry, and for good reason. The RMT, Unite, GMB, the British Airline Pilots Association and Nautilus formed the offshore co-ordinating group in 2015 to streamline demands and activities in the offshore oil and gas industry and the associated supply chain to work for positive change. We have to welcome that sort of work.

The ongoing financial viability of the UK continental shelf’s remaining 10 billion to 20 billion barrels of oil reserves—a core aim of Government policy—is intrinsically linked to the commercial fortunes and safety of helicopter operations in the North sea. Yet there is little evidence to suggest that that link is included in the high-level discussions in industry to set standards for commercial contracts in the sector, especially in helicopter transport. I remain very concerned about workers’ lack of confidence in the CAA and others who are responsible for their safety. In fact, workers’ confidence in offshore safety has been declining over the last decade, demonstrating that the measures of the regulator and the Government have not been successful in allaying workers’ fears and concerns.

After the Turow tragedy—I hope I pronounced that correctly—the CAA, along with its Norwegian counterpart, grounded the aircraft type, in a move that was supported by the European Aviation Safety Agency and trade unions across the North sea. The Accident Investigation Board Norway began its investigation shortly afterwards, but before it could produce a detailed report, the EASA summarily lifted the restrictions on the Super Pumas in October 2016, with next to no explanation to the workforce or their trade unions. The UK and Norway’s respective civil aviation authorities did the right thing and opted to keep the restrictions in place, despite the EASA’s incredibly hasty decision.

By 2017, there were threats of lawsuits in the US against Airbus by helicopter companies because of the differing regulatory approach to the Super Pumas in the North sea. In July 2017, an extraordinary meeting of the OHSILG was announced, albeit at short notice. That was quickly followed by a briefing note explaining that the meeting was being called to discuss a decision on the Super Puma and a CAA-embargoed press release announcing that restrictions on the H225 and the AS332L2 aircraft were being lifted. That action was taken despite the fact that the AIBN was still conducting its investigations and would not produce its final report for another year.

Some suspect that commercial pressures affected the decision to reissue airworthiness certificates. Whether such pressures took the form of the Super Puma manufacturer Airbus lobbying at European level or the threat of legal action from the European Free Trade Association against the UK and Norwegian Governments, I cannot say, but the Minister must look into the matter because it is bringing the regulatory framework into disrepute.

Airbus appears to have completely washed its hands of the North sea Super Puma issue. In February 2018, it told a meeting of the British offshore oil and gas industry all-party parliamentary group that it was preparing to hold town hall-style meetings with offshore workers in spring and summer 2018 to address the core confidence issues. Those meetings with the workforce did not take place.

After many years of working on this policy area—during which time the oil and gas industry, the Government and the regulators have all repeatedly testified to their commitment to high safety standards for offshore workers and offshore helicopter fleet crew—I can see limited effective work going on to tackle the core confidence issues. I hope that the Minister will reassure us that he will take action and seriously consider a public inquiry, so that the confidence of the people who do the jobs that drive a large slice of our nation’s wealth will be restored.

2.50 pm

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on securing such an important debate.

Oil and gas is of enormous importance to Gordon, to the constituencies of the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), and to several other constituencies in the north-east of Scotland. Aberdeen International airport is the transit hub of the UK continental shelf oil and gas industry, with the busiest heliport in the Western world, if not the entire world, and I am very proud to say that it is in my constituency.

As the hon. Member for Stockton North recognises, the oil and gas industry supports 280,000 jobs in the UK. Along with the Norwegian sector, the UK continental shelf is considered the most safety-conscious offshore industry in the world. Industry and regulators recognise that helicopters are the only practical means of transporting the workforce to and from the rigs; as he well knows, it takes up to an hour and a half in a helicopter to get to the rigs, let alone to the operations in Orkney and Shetland.

There are many areas that we can agree on. I have visited dozens of oil and gas businesses and all the helicopter operators, and as the hon. Gentleman says, they all live by the same motto: “The safety of our workforce comes first. If there are safety concerns, helicopters do not fly.” We all recognise that the North sea is a hostile environment and that hydrocarbons pose serious hazards, but what is important is how we manage the risks. Helicopters are essential to the North sea—
without them there would be no industry—so we all want a safe means of transport to and from the rigs. It is important that public confidence be maintained, particularly among those who work offshore, many of whom live in the north-east.

There is excellent workforce engagement. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, Step Change in Safety has various safety initiatives that have brought the various parties on board. Workforce engagement has come a long way in the past 20 or 30 years: operators, oil and gas producers, the supply sector, the trade unions and offshore workers meet regularly, and Step Change has been instrumental in giving everyone an equal voice. It is worth mentioning that trade unions represent only 10% of the North sea offshore workforce.

The industry has an excellent track record of engaging with the entire workforce. It has very high salaries, is technologically very advanced, is important to the economy of Scotland and the entire UK, and has inclusive umbrella representation. The Oil and Gas Authority, which looks after deals in the sector, tries to encourage organisations to work together—that is a big part of the extension of oil and gas in the North sea well into the middle of this century. There is a new national decommissioning centre in Newburgh, which is also in my constituency, and a planned national subsea centre. Oil and gas is an industry in which the companies and the workforce are encouraged to co-operate; it may be unusual among sectors, but commercially it is very co-operative. It is also progressive and driven by technology—one might say that it is the space industry of the United Kingdom economy. It has made enormous leaps.

Obviously there are commercial pressures, because the price of oil and gas goes up and down, but the main thing I get from people I visit in the industry is that nobody is complacent about safety. No one can visit the headquarters of an oil and gas company without being forced to hang on to a railing. [ Interruption. ] The hon. Member for Aberdeen North and my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan, my colleagues from the north-east, are both nodding at that. We would quite literally have a stop order served on us if we went into the headquarters of BP or Shell and did not use the railing. I do not know what anyone there would make of health and safety in the Houses of Parliament—I imagine that they would have cleared us all out a long time ago.

As I said, oil and gas is a progressive industry. Some may suggest that the slump in oil prices has led to safety being downplayed, but that is simply not borne out by the evidence from everyone I have spoken to in the industry, in Step Change in Safety and in Oil & Gas UK. None of them has suggested to me that there has been a deterioration in health and safety.

The Sikorsky S-92 is now the main heavy lift helicopter; 20 Leonardo AW139s also operate in the North sea, and the Airbus H175 is the new medium lift. The number of people who fly in helicopters is reducing, because there are more trips but with fewer crew on board. The Super Puma 225 no longer moves offshore workers in the North sea—it is to the industry’s credit that it has recognised the unwillingness to use that helicopter.

Alex Cunningham: As I understand it, the Super Pumas are no longer in use because the CAA has put such stringent conditions on them that they are not commercially viable to run. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that although the industry as a whole may continue to consult, the consultation activity directly related to helicopter safety has reduced? Airbus did not bother holding the town hall meetings that it promised, while meetings of the OHSLG have been few and far between.

Colin Clark: I recognise what the hon. Gentleman says, but I think Airbus did not hold the town hall meetings because it realised that that approach was not constructive. The workforce have told the commercial part of the organisation that they no longer want to board the Super Puma. The industry has well and truly recognised that, and has not tried to force the Super Pumas back in.

Let me move on to resilience. There are three main airframes that operate in the North sea. The other day I had a meeting with Oil & Gas UK, which is doing a review of resilience. There is no pressure to bring the 225 back in, because if there is a fault and one of the three helicopters ends up grounded for a week or two, there will still be absolute resilience in the system—obviously at any one time there are crews on the rigs, but they can be operated with fewer crew. I understand that if one of the main helicopters has to be grounded, the Super Puma 225 will not have to be brought in, because it will be easier to bring in helicopters from elsewhere.

I am trying not to discuss Brexit at every opportunity, but the plan is for us to have associate membership of EASA, and the CAA has a contingency arrangement of recognising EASA licences. People I have met in the helicopter companies are reasonably comfortable that there are contingency arrangements that will not jeopardise resilience with respect to the crew or helicopters that are operating, or other helicopters being brought in.

As the hon. Gentleman says, aviation in the oil and gas industry is regulated independently of other organisations. Following research projects and learning from tragedies, the Civil Aviation Authority has drawn up a list of improvements, including prohibiting flights in severe weather in case of ditching, ensuring that there are emergency breathing systems, and managing the largest passengers in case of escape—it is a fact of modern society that passengers are getting bigger, so escape hatches have had to be made bigger.

The air accidents investigation branch is well respected. The Transport Committee’s 2014 report, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned, included a request that the AAIB stay in far closer contact with victims’ families. We recognise that those families’ experiences are enormously traumatic, so it is important that the AAIB stay much more closely in touch with them while it goes through its process. The Committee’s thorough findings highlighted several issues that have been acted on—it is all in the public domain. What I am trying to say is that oil and gas is not an industry that is in hiding; it is a very public industry with several very effective regulators. It is being open and is working closely with its workforce—not just the 10% in the trade unions, but also the workforce.

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[Colin Clark]

It is a very open industry. It is open to regulators and to public scrutiny. It is not trying to hide anything, and is questioned and held to account by legislators and regulators. Despite all that, there is no complacency. The industry is driven by the recognition that it has to be constantly on its guard, because that is so important, not just for the helicopters, but for the whole offshore and onshore industry.

Suggestions of a public inquiry are not necessarily constructive at this point, because of the work and the workforce engagement that has gone on. I absolutely agree with the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), who said that we all expect to go to work in a safe environment, although she might reflect on the fact that we work in a building that is probably not safe, and we should perhaps be having a word with the authorities of this building.

There is one anomaly in the 2014 report that I am not comfortable with. We still have not seen a fatal accident inquiry on the 2013 Shetland accident, which would be heard by a sheriff court in Scotland. That inquiry may have a view on a public inquiry, and I would respect that, when the fatal accident inquiry eventually happens, which I hope it does.

The hon. Member for Stockton North mentioned Step Change in Safety, which is running awareness courses on helicopters. That is very positive. This is a safety-culture industry, which is working with the trade unions and the rest of the workforce. No one is complacent about safety in the oil and gas industry.

I have written to the Department and discussed an independent review that would bring together stakeholders and engage all parties in looking at resilience on the commercial and the contractual side, and would be an open forum. It would be industry and workforce engagement, rather than a room full of lawyers, discussing evidence that we believe is already 100% out there. A public inquiry could undermine a lot of the hard work that has been done to date.

The public bodies and industry groups are all still working in the same direction. This is not an industry that is delivering its swan song, or that is going backwards. It is an industry driven by safety and, equally, by the commercial realities of modern business. It is a reflection on the engagement with the workforce that the 225 is not in operation and that there is no contingency plan to bring it back into operation on the UK continental shelf or in Norway, even though it operates elsewhere in the world and with our own military.

All loss of life is an absolute tragedy and is devastating for families. I think particularly of those in the north-east of Scotland. My good colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan, worked in the industry and lives with the history and the memory of the tragedies that have happened in the North sea. I finish where I started. The safety of our workforce comes first. If there are safety concerns, helicopters do not fly.

3.3 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) very warmly on obtaining this debate.
and prosecution of crime, and the investigation of deaths in the course of employment. Surely there is a better way than having one public body take another public body to court to get access to relevant evidence.

**Hannah Bardell:** Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is outrageous that families are left having to wait so long? I appreciate that there are many reasons for that, but the work of the AAIB must be done in conjunction and collaboration with other bodies, and it should not thwart any proceedings by the Crown. Families who have suffered deserve better.

**Mr Carmichael:** I agree with the hon. Lady up to a point. There will be occasions when it is absolutely crucial that the AAIB should proceed in the way that it is doing. It should not insist on proceeding in that way on every occasion, instead of exercising a measure of judgment and discretion about the information that can be shared at any stage with the police, the Procurator Fiscal Service and Crown counsel; that would indicate that we had two public bodies that were focusing solely on their work, rather than on the interests of the families.

The only people not given proper consideration in this process are the families. It is unacceptable that those families still do not know whether there are to be criminal proceedings or a fatal accident inquiry, five and a half years after the deaths of their loved ones. That does not allow them the closure that they absolutely deserve and need. That goes to the point made by the hon. Member for Stockton North about a public inquiry. When the sheriff has made his or her determination, there almost certainly will be a fatal accident inquiry, which will have the opportunity to make recommendations, and which might involve issues that would be appropriate for a public inquiry, but unless and until we get to the stage of having the FAI, we simply do not know that.

I hope that the Minister has heard what I have said about the work of the AAIB, and I hope that the Lord Advocate and those in the Crown Office in Edinburgh have heard. Even though they did not get to the starting line until March 2016, the fact that in February 2019 we still have no final determination from Crown counsel suggests to me that the Crown Office is also not beyond a measure of criticism. I know about fatal accident inquiries—I worked for three years in the Procurator Fiscal Service many years ago—and I know they are technical and difficult cases that require thorough preparation, but it is getting on for three years now; surely to goodness there is enough to bring a case to court, or at the very least for a decision about which course of action will be pursued.

We are at the point when all those charged with investigation and prosecution in the system need to take a long, hard look at what they do and how they do it. They should give more consideration to the families of those who have suffered in these tragedies.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair):** Three hon. Members are trying to catch my eye. I want to start the wind-ups at half-past, so Members have about five and a half minutes each; if they could observe that limit, I would be grateful.

**Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP):** At the outset of my comments, Sir Henry, I want to declare an interest. On the evening of Friday 23 August 2013, I was employed by Stork Technical Services and was part of the emergency response team that responded to the accident off the coast of Shetland. My colleague Gary McCrossan from Inverness was one of those who died in the accident, along with Duncan Munro from Bishop Auckland, Sarah Darnley from Elgin, and George Allison from Winchester. I have not spoken about this publicly since then, other than a few times briefly, but that evening is etched in my memory and I will never forget the events of the days after. The response by the emergency services and by the company I worked for was absolutely exemplary. When dealing with such an incident, it is important to reflect on the experience inside a company and what it can be like.

In the three years that I worked in the oil and gas sector before I came to this place, I had on many occasions been through emergency response drills. In the previous company I had worked for, Subsea 7, I had had the opportunity to work in one of the best emergency response facilities, so in many respects I was well prepared. I also spent three years in the constituency of the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark), working for his predecessor. I had dealt with many distressed families in many difficult emergency situations, but I do not think anything prepared me for the experiences of that evening.

I pay tribute to the emergency response teams who responded that evening, and to Gordon Craig, who is still the chaplain for the offshore industry; he gave a huge amount of support to the families affected, and also to the staff who responded. Sadly, because of previous accidents in the North sea, there was a huge amount of experience and support from within the industry on the day following the accident. Today we are looking at whether there needs to be a public inquiry, I say to all the policy makers here and in Scotland that we need a balance, and to consider all aspects of what companies do for profit and how they treat their staff, as the hon. Member for Gordon highlighted.

I was getting into the bath that evening with a glass of wine. Before I had put the wine to my mouth, my phone rang. I got out of the bath, and I was asked to come to work. There were about 15 of us around the table. We were largely sitting and waiting for information and pulling together responses. We were taking calls from family members who had seen the news about a helicopter ditching, but did not know which platform their loved one was on. Because of the nature of social media and the speed at which news now moves, it became a process of elimination; we did not know the names of those who had been killed even when those who had survived were getting off the helicopter. I remember sitting with another colleague, with a picture of Gary, and trying to identify whether he was among those getting off the helicopter who had survived.

Eventually the call came from Total. It was the Borgsten Dolphin platform operated by CHC that the workers had been working on. The response and support was exceptional. Total did an excellent job of including colleagues from the company that I worked for, and made sure we had the relevant support available. A decision was made that evening that I and a colleague from the human resources team would drive overnight
to stay in the highlands and meet Gary’s family the next

day. They were an incredible group of people. Although
I do not have personal contact with them anymore, I
want to pay tribute to the McCrossan family, and to the
families of all those who have lost loved ones in not
only this accident, but other accidents. The right hon.
Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael)
rightly pointed out that they are still waiting for answers.
It is a matter of deep regret that they are five and a half
years on and still no further forward in finding out what
happened.

We now have an industry that is incredibly resilient
and has done a huge amount of work to engage with
the workforce, yet it still does not have confidence in
Super Puma helicopters. We have to consider carefully
how the engagement happens. In the days and months
after that tragic accident, I worked with many staff who
worked both onshore and offshore. I saw the challenges
of teams trying to resource jobs offshore with big
operators; there were significant pressures. Safety is
absolutely everyone’s No. 1 priority. As the right hon.
Member for Orkney and Shetland said, the further
away we get from the Piper Alpha accident of 1988, the
further away we get from remembering how devastating
some of these accidents can be. Just as that was a
turning point for health and safety offshore, so was the
accident on 23 August in terms of helicopter safety.

When the Government consider this issue—I know
that the Scottish National party Government in Scotland
are also considering this issue—I hope that they consult
families. What consultation has the Minister had with
families and the workforce? There is no better way to
understand an issue than to speak to those who work in
companies and organisations. In the aftermath of that
accident, there was a huge amount of regulation and
many changes, from the size of escape routes to a
reduced number of passengers. I spoke to some guys
who worked offshore who told me about their experiences
of flying. Perhaps they would be seated next to someone
at a window who was a lot bigger than them. They
would literally fear for their life; they had fears not only
around mechanical failures, but around whether they
would be able to escape from the helicopter.

We have to remember that helicopter is the only way
to get to most offshore installations. At the time, many
other options were looked at. Boats were considered,
but fixed-wing planes are obviously not an option;
helicopters were clearly the only one. It was not the way
it is for the rest of us, who get on a plane, bus or train to
come to London. Helicopters are literally the only way
for offshore workers to get to their place of employment.

The Step Change in Safety helicopter safety leadership
group, led by Les Linklater, continues to do an incredible
power of work, and although in the past few years,
since being elected, I have got further away from that
work—and there is obviously limited interest in the oil
and gas sector in Livingston—I have kept in touch with
many of those I was involved with, who did such
incredible work. That is why I take a particular interest
in today’s debate and what happens next. I hope that
the Minister will look carefully at the scope for a public
inquiry, and at whether that is possible and would be
the right thing. I take the point that there are strong
views on both sides, and that my Scottish Government

colleagues will also have engaged extensively with the
workforce. However, the bottom line is that families
have lost loved ones, and many still do not understand
why. There is a list in the Library briefing of the many
accidents.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): Order. I am
sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady, but I am keen to call
two more Back-Bench Members to speak, so if she
could wrap up her remarks, I should be grateful.

Hannah Bardell: Absolutely, Sir Henry. I hope that
the Minister will consider my request, and engage with
the families.

3.21 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill)

(Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship,
Sir Henry. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for
Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) for securing this
debate and bringing this important issue to the attention
of the House.

I am speaking in the debate because not only is the
issue important for the safety of offshore workers, but it
has affected my family. My brother-in-law Peter Ross
was killed in the Cormorant Alpha helicopter crash on
14 March 1992. Since then, this is a subject I have been
watching. I am of the view that the flight—the pilot
took the blame—should never have been attempted.
The weather conditions were appalling and dangerous;
yet the flight was attempted and 11 men including Peter
lost their lives, and families were broken. My sister was
left without her husband and my nieces lost their father.
They were robbed of years together with a loving husband
and father. Peter was 34, with so much of his life left
ahead of him, but it was a life he was never able to
experience. The tragedy continues to hurt my family to
this day, and it hurts me every day. Whenever I look at
the sea, I think of Peter and all those who have lost their
lives in similar offshore helicopter tragedies, and I ask
why they had to lose their lives and why more action is
not being taken to ensure the safety of workers currently
offshore.

I raised the issue of offshore helicopter safety recently
as part of the inquiry by the Select Committee on
Scottish Affairs into the oil and gas sector. I asked the
Minister what action was being taken to improve safety,
and the answer could not have been more disappointing.
The written response stated that the Government work
with the Civil Aviation Authority and the oil and gas
sector to consider any issues regarding health and safety
when they arise. That is not good enough. The Government
are passing the buck on their responsibility to protect
offshore workers and ensure they return home safely,
despite the fact that 33 offshore workers and crew have
lost their lives through Super Puma helicopter accidents
in the North Sea in the past decade alone. There have
been many others, and some have been saved when
mistakes have been learned from. Sixty-five workers
and crew were rescued in the North sea in the period in
question. I am glad for every one of them and their
families, and the people they know and love.

Those events have been happening despite a continuing
decline in the confidence that offshore workers have in
the safety of offshore helicopter transport. An Airbus
survey of more than 5,000 offshore staff in 2017 found

[ Hannah Bardell]
3.26 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate and I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on obtaining it. I have an interest in it because some of my constituents work on the oil rigs. I had the privilege of travelling in a helicopter a number of times during my service in the Ulster Defence Regiment, and indeed in the Army, as well as on a couple of occasions in Afghanistan through the armed forces parliamentary scheme. It both thrilled me and frightened the life out of me—I was between the two extremes of enjoying it and hanging on like grim death, especially when the helicopter turned so I was looking down at a guy, and then it went the other way and he was looking at me.

It might be an alien experience for us; nevertheless, I speak as a fan of the war film genre, and we have all seen the films where the helicopters are the first to be hit—and once they are hit, they are down. I know that war films are not a credible source—nor are war statistics, as the safety of nothing is guaranteed during war—but something that is credible is the fact that since 1997 four fatal accidents have claimed the lives of 38 offshore workers and flight crew, and there have been 16 non-fatal accidents. I am grateful to hon. Members who have recounted personal experiences of losing family members or working in the sector.

Offshore helicopters in the UK are primarily operated within the offshore oil and gas industry on the UK continental shelf in the North Sea. In 2018, there were 70 active aircraft, of six airframe types, in the UKCS helicopter fleet. I mentioned earlier that constituents of mine work on oil rigs. They tell me their experiences, including expressing concerns about travel. Some 820,158 passengers were flown offshore in 2017, which gives an idea of the magnitude of the operation. Some of them were my constituents. The hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) pointed out that many Members have constituents who work on the oil rigs. The flights I mentioned represent 69,005 flight hours, and I believe that when journeys are made at such a level, it demands attention. Given the fact that the offshore industry is already so heavily regulated for health and safety, it is shocking that the preferred method of transport is not more carefully monitored. Members have spoken about requests for more Government intervention and regulation.

Something to take into consideration is the fact that Airbus recently stated that it was looking to take advantage of new opportunities presented by the spread of offshore wind farms around the world. There is going to be expansion, and Airbus is saying it expects worldwide demand for up to 1,000 helicopters from the sector over the coming two decades. That equates to revenue of about £8 billion. So, the sector is going to grow and get busier—and the impact will be great.

Once a storm has begun, no amount of health and safety regulations can make a difference—only the voice of God can calm a storm, and helicopters and storms do not mix. Helicopters are not without their limitations. Conditions that hinder their operation include visibility that falls below 3 km, a cloud base of less than 600 feet, or wind above 60 knots, which perfectly describes conditions in the North sea.

Flying a helicopter in extreme conditions is never easy, and it is time to do the right thing by the workforce, and act wherever possible to regulate and enhance safety during transportation to and from offshore operations.

As with many issues, there is a cameo from Brexit—has there ever been a debate that has not contained that word?—because we need to determine whether we will remain in the European Aviation Safety Agency post March, or whether to establish our own body or adopt a Norwegian/Swiss position. Again, I look to the Minister for an answer to that. There is also a question that the Health and Safety Executive must answer. It has a major role to play, and I am unsure whether that question is receiving a satisfactory answer. We must push for movement in this area—again, I hope the Minister will give us some indication about that.

The industry has a key role to play. We must clarify what is expected from this debate and from the Minister, and every available piece of information should be used to determine safety on any individual flight. We in this House have a duty to ensure that those who bring the precious oil to land for this great nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland are safe in their helicopters. I understand that helicopters are necessary, but we need to step up the safety measures, and I support the hon. Member for Stockton North, and all hon. Members who have spoken, in their call for that today.

3.31 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair in Westminster Hall, Sir Henry, and I commend the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) for securing this debate.

This is a difficult debate to have, and those hon. Members who have spoken about their families and about personal incidents have been incredibly brave. The numbers are staggering: 38 workers and flight crew have been killed since 1997. Their families and friends...
have lost somebody they loved—people have lost colleagues, friends and family members. The hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) spoke about the importance to our constituencies of the oil and gas industry and those who fly in helicopters, and everybody in and around Aberdeen knows someone who has been affected by this issue. Our thoughts are with those who have been affected, particularly if this debate raises issues that perhaps they were trying not to think about at this moment in time.

In addition to fatal incidents, there have been 16 non-fatal incidents, and it is important to take those seriously as well and to consider what caused them. The difference between a fatal and a non-fatal incident can be small and involve just a slightly different thing happening, and it is important that any assessment considers what happened during an incident, why it happened in the first place, and why it did not lead to fatalities.

I was a city councillor in Aberdeen when the events of April 2009 unfolded. Social media was already a thing, although it was not quite as widely used as it is now, and we began to see events unfolding. I remember watching in absolute horror during those events, and again in 2013. Everybody was terrified that any future incident would be a repeat of what happened in 2009, and in 2013 we saw that those fears were well-founded.

Mr Carmichael: May I add one further reminiscence? I was pulled back to this by the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) because as a student I assisted the senior depute who conducted the fatal accident inquiry into the Cormorant Alpha crash. That happened in March 1992, and the fatal accident inquiry was held in April 1993. Does that not show how we have lost our way in relation to the investigation of these incidents?

Kirsty Blackman: I agree that there has been a significant change in the length of time required for an inquiry. In order to learn lessons from these incidents, we must ensure that investigations take place much more quickly than they currently do, so that any required changes or safety improvements are made as quickly as possible to ensure that our industry is as safe as it can be. We are asking people to do a difficult and dangerous job, and to get into helicopters to travel to work. The least we can do is to come out here today and support our constituents and ensure that we have the best safety record and best safety measures for the future. The SNP wants to maximise economic recovery from the North sea, but we will do that only if the workforce are on board, are supported and protected, and have the workers’ rights that enable them to go out and do their job.

I am aware that I do not have much time, so I will speed through a couple of points. The Scottish Government are reviewing whether to back calls for a full public inquiry into this issue, and the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity and the Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands met union representatives and agreed to raise the issues that were discussed with the Civil Aviation Authority and the Oil and Gas Authority. Aviation safety, including offshore safety, is wholly reserved, but the Scottish Government are asking for a collaborative approach to be taken on safety measures and anything that relates to an inquiry.

For us, the most important thing is that the concerns of offshore workers are heard. I spoke to Airbus about what happened with the Super Puma, and at every opportunity I said that we needed to consult the workforce because for anything that it wants to do in future with the Super Puma, or any other helicopter, the workforce need to be involved. Airbus needs to hear people’s concerns and not just talk at them, and I made that case in those meetings and will continue to do so.

To add to the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), it is vital that any reduction in spend by companies who have had a lower oil price in recent times compared with previous years does not reduce the frequency of safety inspections or safety indicated repairs, and does not put safety at risk. As the hon. Member for Gordon said, safety is embedded in the culture, but we must ensure that when belts are tightened, safety continues to be the No. 1 concern of those in charge of such matters. Whether that involves the Oil and Gas Authority, the CAA, the UK Government, or the oil and gas companies, safety must continue to be at the forefront to protect our workers.

3.37 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Henry, and a privilege to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on securing this important debate, and I pay tribute to Members across the Chamber who have contributed with great knowledge and their own personal experiences.

Offshore helicopter transport, like maritime transport, is an area of transport with a low public profile but a huge economic impact. Unfortunately, the safety record in the North sea helicopter industry over the last decade includes 33 tragic deaths, alongside non-fatal setbacks that have caused significant damage to workers’ confidence in the mode of transport that they are obliged to use to work in that industry.

Following the tragic incident at Sumburgh in August 2013, the Civil Aviation Authority, along with the Norwegian air authority and EASA, carried out a comprehensive review into helicopter safety. The review set out 32 interventions including—to name a few—the establishment of the offshore helicopter safety action group, the prohibition of helicopter flights in the most severe sea conditions, and changes to the way pilots are trained and checked. That was followed up by progress reviews in 2015 and 2016. The review was carried out alongside EASA, as well as the Norwegian aviation authority. Is it still the Government’s aim to remain a member of EASA when we leave the EU? I have raised that issue with the Minister on a number of occasions, but he has yet to confirm the Government’s position. What impact will a no-deal Brexit have on our ability to carry out such reviews?

Even with the improvements to safety since 2013, the core issue of workforce confidence still needs to be tackled. Offshore workers’ perception of an industry governed by commercial pressure will not have been helped by the fact that thousands of jobs have been lost since 2014, pay has been cut or frozen, and longer shifts have been imposed. The Transport Committee highlighted
this issue in its inquiry following the tragic incident at Sumburgh. Trade unions across the sector have campaigned on this, and I pay tribute to them for the work they have done on behalf of their members, particularly the RMT and Unite the Union. One of the Transport Committee’s recommendations was for an independent public inquiry to investigate commercial pressures on the operating environment of helicopter safety in the North sea, which has been supported by trade unions. I would be interested in the Minister’s thoughts on that.

Following the fatal incident in the Norwegian sector, where 13 passengers and crew lost their lives, the Opposition welcome the grounding of North Sea Puma fleets, despite the regulator issuing airworthiness certificates. That is testimony to the work of trade unions on behalf of their offshore members. However, the Super Puma continues to work in other parts of the international offshore oil and gas industry—for example, in Brazil and parts of Asia. Does the Minister agree that the Super Pumas should not return to the North sea without the prior agreement of a majority of offshore workers? If, as expected, the Super Puma continues to be grounded, what model will replace it?

In September 2018, Airbus announced that it expected the offshore wind transport market to add £8 billion to its balance sheet over the next 20 years, which includes demand for up to 1,000 helicopters over the next two decades. They will carry out tasks such as crew transport to offshore wind farms. Given the expected growth in this area, it is important that workers have confidence in the Government, the Civil Aviation Authority and others who are responsible for safety. Will the Minister work with unions to help repair workers’ lack of confidence?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North highlighted, it is quite frankly staggering that there is no mention of offshore helicopter transport in the Government’s aviation strategy. Will the Minister tell us why it is not in the strategy? Given the expected growth in this sector, does he agree that it would be a good idea to put in place a long-term strategy? I look forward to his reply.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his extremely knowledgeable and succinct winding-up speech. I now call the Minister, but bear in mind that the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) would like to have two minutes at the end to wind up.

3.43 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): Thank you very much, Sir Henry, and it is a pleasure to serve under your distinguished and esteemed chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on securing this very important debate, and I thank everyone who has had a chance to make interventions or speeches. Not only have representatives of different parties brought a great deal of knowledge and expertise to the table, but we have heard very affecting personal stories from the hon. Members for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) and for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney). I know I speak for everyone when I say that we are enormously grateful to those who have shared their personal experience, and we are enormously sympathetic to the tragedies of the families with whom they have come into contact; I absolutely recognise that.

Hon. Members have rightly said that the oil and gas sector is enormously important to this country. It is important not only economically, but socially and culturally to distinct communities in the country, especially around Aberdeen and the UK continental shelf. Overall, the sector supports something like 280,000 jobs and meets around half of the country’s primary energy needs, but that statement does not cover the human aspects of its local and national impact. Offshore helicopter services provide a vital link—in fact, the only possible link—to ensure the viability of the oil and gas industry in what is widely understood to be one of the most challenging and operationally testing environments. As hon. Members have said, that is the context in which we should see the fatal accidents that have occurred in recent years.

As well as recognising the specific experiences of the Members present, I pay tribute to the families of the victims of those accidents and acknowledge their suffering. They include the 16 workers and crew members who lost their lives north-east of Peterhead in 2009, the four oil workers killed off the coast of Sumburgh in 2013 and, most recently, the 11 passengers and two crew members killed in Norway, one of whom was a British citizen.

As hon. Members have noted, the state safety programme for aviation in this country defines the acceptable level of safety for commercial aviation as one that results in zero fatalities—not a small number or a few, but zero. There will always be risks and hazards associated with operating in the North sea, but we are clear—just as previous Governments were—that the safety of those who rely on offshore helicopters is paramount. As noted by my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) and by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), that is widely recognised as being culturally central to the industry.

The UK is recognised as a world leader in aviation safety, but we cannot be complacent. I absolutely share the view of the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland: it was the Piper Alpha disaster that engineered this change. We must face the appalling fact that an accident could occur tomorrow in the North sea, whether through pilot error or equipment failure in helicopters or other forms of transportation. We must be responsible and aware of that fact. I think it raises the bar and reminds us of the consistent pressure to maintain safety at the highest possible level. With that goes the suggestion that regulators and Government must learn lessons from tragic incidents, whether they are caused by equipment failure or pilot error, to ensure that they do not happen again. I am a private pilot, and we know that pilot error is largely responsible for fatalities and injuries in this sector. We owe it to those who now use the service as well as to those who have lost their lives.

The CAA has rightly been discussed in this debate, and it is important to recognise the work that has already been done in this area. In 2014 the CAA published a review of the safety of offshore helicopter operations. It is important to note that that is a comprehensive piece of work—it is nearly 300 pages long and contains almost three dozen recommendations. It considered all aspects of offshore helicopter operations, including the design and certification of helicopters, continuing airworthiness, operational procedures, organisational matters, pilot training, passenger safety, and survivability and resilience in the event of an accident. It was conducted in conjunction with the Norwegian Civil Aviation Authority and the European Aviation Safety Agency.
The review put forward 32 actions and 29 recommendations to helicopter operators in the oil and gas industry. It resulted in the introduction of a number of significant measures to increase safety standards for offshore helicopter flights, including flight restrictions during certain—especially adverse—sea conditions, improved emergency exit access, better emergency breathing equipment and changes to pilot training. Every aspect, including helipads and the like, was reviewed. During the review, the CAA engaged closely with pilot and offshore workforce unions, the oil and gas industry, helicopter operators, manufacturers, Government and regulatory bodies, and other experts in the field. It is right that it engaged with the appointed representatives of workers and—if my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon is right, and I am sure he is—the larger number of workers who were not members of unions but nevertheless wished their interests to be heard, understood and reflected upon. An independent challenge team, chaired by Rear Admiral Simon Charlier and assisted by experts including representatives from Transport Scotland and the British Helicopter Association, scrutinised the review and its recommendations, often robustly, and endorsed the 300-page report. That level of independent challenge was designed to ensure confidence that the process was robust, comprehensive and thorough.

I remind hon. Members that the CAA is a blue-ribbon regulator, and it is rightly admired across the world for its quality in all aspects of aircraft, airframe and air management certification and review. One of the outcomes of its review was the formation of the offshore helicopter safety action group, which brought together helicopter operators, offshore industries, regulators, unions and pilot representatives to enhance standards still further.

Alex Cunningham: Will the Minister give way?

Jesse Norman: I have got an awful lot to get through, but I would be delighted to give way.

Alex Cunningham: That body meets extremely infrequently, and often at short notice. Somebody needs to give it a good kicking to encourage it to do more. Does the Minister agree?

Jesse Norman: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue. I cannot speak about the frequency of the group’s meetings, but anyone who is scrutinising this debate with the proper level of attention, as I am sure the group will be doing, will take his remarks alone as a good kick in the pants. If those meetings have been insufficiently frequent, I encourage the group to have more; I support what he has said.

Let me say a few more things, and then I will come to hon. Members’ interventions. A number of hon. Members referred to the Super Puma helicopter, and I absolutely recognise the concerns of workers who have seen colleagues perish in that aircraft. It is important to recall that after the Norwegian accident, both EASA and the CAA placed operating restrictions on the Super Puma. When EASA cleared the helicopters to serve in October 2016, the UK and Norwegian CAAs maintained their operating restrictions to make certain the aircraft were safe to fly. They did not operate in a herd-like way. They played off each other, scrutinised each other and interrogated each other, and they did not reach the same conclusion. In doing so, they worked with, among others, representatives from Unite, the RMT and the British Airline Pilots Association. They lifted operating restrictions in July 2017 only after significant modifications were made to the aircraft and training was undertaken.

The regulators clearly did not take that decision lightly; they did so only after they were confident that the aircraft could meet stringent standards and were fit to fly. Of course, the CAA continues to work with a range of stakeholders, including unions, to provide the assurances that are publicly needed. The regulators are content, subject to the additional checks that I have described, for the aircraft to re-enter service, but the decision rests with operators and their customers. To date, none has come forward.

I absolutely respect the initiative and the viewpoint of the hon. Member for Stockton North, who seeks a public inquiry. He has made similar representations to the aviation Minister. We take these matters extremely seriously and we have given the question careful consideration, but we are not yet persuaded that that is the right thing to do. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland was very wise in pointing to the potential conflicts of jurisdiction that already exist, and he said that he was concerned about the delays and lack of closure for the families.

Mr Carmichael: On that point, may I bring the Minister to the interaction between the air accidents investigation branch and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service? Surely, without compromising the integrity of either, it would be possible to have a better information-sharing regime that would minimise delays for the families. Would the Minister take that away and look at it?

Jesse Norman: That is a very interesting idea. I feel slightly as though I should withhold my own judgment, because I am not the aviation lead; Baroness Sugg is. I will absolutely take that issue up with her, because I recognise the concerns that the right hon. Gentleman describes.

It is clear that more needs to be done to provide reassurance about the safety of the helicopter fleet. As has been mentioned, after every accident the air accidents investigation branch conducts an independent and transparent investigation and publishes a very detailed report with a set of safety recommendations to the industry and the regulators.

Let me turn to some of the points that have been made, many of which are very important. My hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) rightly reminded us that pilot error is the leading cause of death and injury in civil and commercial aviation. I echo the emphasis of my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon on embedding a safety culture.

To come back to a point made by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), it is not quite right that commercial activity is antithetical to safety. I have lived and worked in communist countries, and I can tell him that the safety records in those places, which were notionally devoted to the wellbeing of workers, was absolutely lamentable. There can be commercial pressures in any safety-oriented situation, and they must be offset by a rigorous internal culture. That is why the emphasis that we and the oil and gas industry place on that is of such importance.
A point was made about the role of the CAA. The CAA not only goes beyond the EASA recommendations, but is itself audited by EASA. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East asked whether the Government wish to stay in EASA following Brexit. As I have repeatedly assured him—of course, this is a matter still for discussion—EASA is in many ways an offshoot of the CAA, and we would like nothing better than to have a comprehensive agreement that includes an appropriate relationship with EASA, whatever the legalities are, because we recognise what it does.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether offshore voters should have a majority vote on the introduction of new helicopter airframes. I cannot comment on the practicality of that. I would say, however, that offshore workers have, in effect, already spoken: they have made it clear that they do not have confidence at the moment. I think that is right.

I have very little time, and I want to allow the hon. Member for Stockton North a chance to give a final response. I thank him for securing this important debate, and I thank everyone who has made contributions—especially those who have brought their personal experiences to the table. The entire framework of the British Government recognises that those who rely on offshore helicopter operations must have their safety preserved. That is of the utmost importance. We also believe that all parties must continue to take whatever steps they can to minimise the risks in those operations and ensure confidence among those who travel in these aircraft.

3.57 pm

Alex Cunningham: I am grateful to the Minister for his response, and I thank everybody else who has taken part in the debate.

I know people think that I put a lot of emphasis on what the trade unions say, and I will certainly continue to do so, but I am told that there is less engagement on safety these days. The role of safety officers—particularly offshore—has been diminished. I therefore welcome the support of the Minister, who has said that he will put the boot in at an appropriate place and try to encourage greater engagement through the offshore helicopter safety leadership group.

I was touched by what the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said about the fact that the families have not had closure. The fact that this is ongoing contributes to workers’ lack of confidence. They want closure as much as the families do so they can understand what happened and get their heads around it.

I am grateful for the personal stories. My hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) talked about his family involvement, and that emphasises that we are talking about people’s lives. The hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) talked about her experience of serving on crisis teams, when people were dying in terrible accidents. I understand her role, and I commend anybody and everybody who is involved in that sort of work when such tragedies happen.

I am grateful for the supportive comments—on behalf of the Scottish Government, perhaps—about a public inquiry. Perhaps a fatal accident inquiry is the way forward. We still need answers about the future of helicopter safety and helicopter travel as new models come into the new industries, such as the wind turbine industry, as well as the old. I appeal to everybody to continue their work to ensure that safety is paramount and that workers get the answers they need.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered offshore helicopter safety.
I commend to Members a blog from the Save the Royal Navy website, which makes clear its support for the letter from Chair of the Defence Committee to the Minister, who may wish to remark on that. My view, which is well known, as I am sure he will agree, is that the fleet solid support ships should be built in the UK. There are enough shipyards across the UK, including in Scotland, that could block-build those ships. If the Aircraft Carrier Alliance can block-build, the fleet solid support ships should be block-built using the same model.

I have many family ties to the defence industry. One of the employers that I will mention today is Thales, which used to trade as Barr and Stroud. Today is the anniversary of my grandfather’s death; he was employed by Barr and Stroud, where he met my grandmother, and they were married for 61 and a half years, so there are clear family ties to that employer. It was based in Anniesland in the city, but has moved to Govan, the former site of the Scottish shipyard—that is a different spelling and no relation—which is famous because Billy Connolly is a former employee. I have family ties and a real connection to the defence industry in Glasgow.

It is important, as the hon. Member for Moray outlined, that Government spending helps to support and promote prosperity across these islands. Ministry of Defence spending has the potential both to have a positive impact on Scotland’s economy and employment, and to help to balance the export deficit. I want to see the Government give a vote of confidence to manufacturing and engineering skills in Scotland by investing the defence pound in Scotland, and by encouraging foreign companies that are looking to maximise UK content to do the same.

At present, the lion’s share of MOD industry spending on Scottish industry goes, quite rightly, to shipbuilding and repairs. As one of the vice-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on shipbuilding and ship repair, I have no particular problem with that, although I hope that in future, the Ministry of Defence will look at how it can help the shipyards become more efficient. When BBC journalists looked for a frigate factory that a former Secretary of State for Defence insisted was on the Clyde, they found only rubble and ash.

While the shipbuilding industry must be supported—far be it from me to argue against that—I want to look at defence spending elsewhere. As the Minister knows, the Ministry of Defence is currently procuring key new land platforms, including the multi-role vehicle protected—MRVP—and the mechanised infantry vehicle, the MIV. That will be a significant spend, and the platforms will be vital to delivering the Army’s strike brigades, which are part of the backbone of its new structure.

The latest available figures on Ministry of Defence spending in Scotland show that in 2017-18, MOD expenditure in Scotland was £300 per capita. Scotland has had an increase in expenditure within UK industry, but of all the nations and regions of the UK, Scotland finds itself with the fourth-highest spend. As someone who watches Scottish football—the hon. Member for Moray will appreciate these comments—I know that a team who finish fourth are not currently guaranteed a UEFA place. I hope that the Minister will reflect on that figure.

In fact, spending in Scotland was less than half of the spending in the south-east and south-west of England—two regions that account for over half of MOD expenditure
within UK industry. Approximately 10,000 jobs in Scotland were supported through MOD expenditure in 2017-18. A recent parliamentary question revealed that of the £1.59 billion that the MOD spent within Scottish industry, over £900 million was spent on shipbuilding and repair. It is important that no area becomes too reliant on a single industry.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Stephens: Before I mention Thales in my constituency, I will give way to the hon. Lady.

Kirstene Hair: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is talking about spending in Scotland. As he will be well aware, the MOD recently confirmed its commitment to RM Condor in my constituency. Can he confirm to my constituents and to me that in an independent Scotland, the Royal Marines at RM Condor would be 100% safe, and that the Scottish National party would spend exactly the same amount that the UK Government have committed to the base’s long-term future?

Chris Stephens: I am more than happy to support the hon. Lady’s constituents and the Royal Marines in Angus and elsewhere. As she knows, her predecessor in Angus, Mike Weir, was supportive, too.

Thales has more than 700 employees in Scotland, the vast majority of whom are at our site in Govan, in Glasgow. Thales’s Glasgow links date back to 1888, which makes the Glasgow part of the company the oldest part in the United Kingdom. As the procurement Minister knows, an early-day motion recently celebrated the centenary of Thales providing optronic systems to submarines—indeed, optronic systems for land, sea and air—and I want to thank Thales engineers and manufacturing employees’ decades of experience in complex military vehicle integration. Thales Glasgow has the capacity and capabilities to support Scotland’s growth in the defence sector outside its traditional maritime contribution.

Combined, the two vehicles that have been contracted for so far could create and sustain 100 jobs in Thales UK, 180 jobs through the supply chain and up to 200 jobs indirectly throughout the UK. Thales’ offering to the MOD’s MRVP programme is the Bushmaster MR6—a military off-the-shelf product with reduced development costs that offers value for money and lower through-life costs. The fact that there are production lines in Australia for vehicle assembly, and in Glasgow for equipment and system integration, reinforce Thales’s ability to achieve cost and risk reduction. The Bushmaster would support 50 highly skilled engineering, design and manufacturing jobs in Glasgow, and there is the potential to create an additional 50 jobs over the lifetime of a programme. It could also support up to 100 jobs in the supply chain across the UK, as I say.

In the context of Brexit, the Government, we hope, are looking to strengthen trade ties with countries outside the EU. I would argue that Thales does that, particularly through its work in Australia. The MRVP programme offers the chance to help combat the trade imbalance with Australia, and supports the development of closer trade and defence equipment ties with that important ally.

On the MIV programme, Thales has supported the prime contractor over the past two years. It has all the expertise and resources to support the Boxer. Thales brings with it its recognised UK mission system integration, survivability and electronic architecture pedigree, developed over many years as a trusted partner of the Ministry of Defence.

I hope that the Minister is sympathetic to my representations on behalf of my local employer, Thales. I look forward to hearing what he has to say.

4.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) on securing the debate. I do not know whether something about him means that the whole Chamber leaves when he has his debates—perhaps they should all have stayed to listen to his contribution—but I am glad that he is rightly standing up for his constituents and his constituency. I will come on to some of the specific points he made in more detail in a moment, but I will first provide some context for defence spending in Scotland.

Last year’s report on the contribution of defence to UK prosperity, which was produced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), showed that defence benefits every single part of the United Kingdom. The sector has annual turnover of £22 billion and supports some 260,000 jobs. Scotland very much shares in that national success, benefiting directly from every pound that is spent on defence. To illustrate the point, it is worth looking at two of the key areas where defence spending in Scotland is concentrated. The first element relates to our spending with industry in Scotland. Last year, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South West said, that spending amounted to £1.65 billion, supporting 10,000 jobs. That is equivalent to £300 per capita, which is above the UK average. I know that he was complaining about some other regions, but I represent Yorkshire, and Scotland is doing a heck of a lot better than Yorkshire on defence spending.

We cannot talk about the defence industry in Scotland without recognising, as the hon. Gentleman did, the incredible expertise of the Scottish shipbuilding sector. With a history dating back more than 150 years, it has long been the envy of the world, and it remains a global leader. In the past few years, Scotland has played a major part in the building, assembly and successful delivery of HMS Queen Elizabeth, the most powerful surface vessel in British history, as we all know.
The MOD has already placed a £3.7 billion contract to build the first three state-of-the-art Type 26 global combat ships on the Clyde, in the place—I can now confirm—where all eight will eventually be built. The first of those City-class frigates has been named HMS Glasgow, which I am sure the hon. Gentleman is delighted about, and the last will be HMS Edinburgh, again recognising Scotland’s contribution. Coupled with our order for five offshore patrol vessels, that work will sustain some 4,000 jobs in the Scottish shipyards and throughout the supply chain until the 2030s.

Chris Stephens: I am grateful to the Minister for confirming that all eight of the Type 26 ships will be built in Glasgow. He might get representations from his colleagues in Scotland to name the other ships after different areas of Scotland, but I will leave that to them. Will the Minister kindly update us on the Type 31 frigates? He knows that there is interest in those being built in Glasgow and other places in Scotland.

Stuart Andrew: I was going to come to that, but I will touch on it now. The Type 31e is subject to an open competition at the moment, as the hon. Gentleman knows, so I cannot go into too many details, other than to say that we have three bidders in the competition, which is an exciting and challenging one as we try to change how we procure our frigates. I look forward to seeing the competition progress.

As I was saying, the fact that we have been able to secure those jobs in the Scottish shipyards, with work into the 2030s, is something that no other industry in the United Kingdom can boast or be assured of, so it is not surprising that many MOD prime contractors have sites in Scotland, including Babcock, BAE Systems, Rolls-Royce, Leonardo, Thales, Raytheon and QinetiQ. That goes to prove that the defence industry in Scotland is about more than just shipbuilding, as the hon. Gentleman rightly pointed out.

In the land sector, beneath the prime contract level, many companies across Scotland have provided high-technology sub-systems to the Army’s critical warfighting platforms, which include Challenger 2 main battle tanks, Warrior infantry fighting vehicles, Foxhound patrol vehicles and the new Ajax reconnaissance fleet. Such on-board technology ranges from world-beating, 24-hour, all-weather sensors and sighting systems to the integral design of complex battlefield communication equipment.

Looking forward, the land sector also holds much near-term potential for the Army’s exciting fighting vehicle modernisation programmes. Scottish companies are already bidding competitively in the Challenger 2 life extension programme, the mechanised infantry vehicle programme and the multi-role vehicle protected programme package 2—that’s a bit of a mouthful! For example, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South West said, Thales—a company that I have visited on many occasions, even in the short time that I have been in my role—has a site in his constituency and is one of two finalists, bidding with its Bushmaster vehicle. Thales is also tendering for a range of smaller electro-optical sub-system upgrades for the existing armoured fleet to contribute to the British Army’s warfighting edge. I repeat, however, that the competition is open, so I cannot comment other than to say that I have heard him.

We should also not forget that small and medium-sized enterprises throughout the supply chain in Scotland benefit from our investment. I have really enjoyed seeing the innovation there is among SMEs not just in Scotland but right across the country. Innovative smaller companies such as Denchi Power in the town of Thurso in Caithness provide much of the essential very high capacity advanced battery and charging technology for the British Army’s combat radio systems. In the past financial year, our Defence Science and Technology Laboratory alone invested £4.84 million in research and development contracts with Scottish suppliers.

The second main element of our defence spending consists of investments in critical defence assets, stretching far beyond our submarine and RAF bases. Few are aware that Scotland has some 50 defence sites, including Benbecula in the Outer Hebrides, Buchan in Aberdeenshire and Saxa Vord in Shetland. These are the locations of our military radars, which provide critical long-range coverage of the northern approaches to the UK and neighbouring NATO nations. As the threats from the likes of Russia rise, so too does the significance of those sites.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West mentioned fleet solid support ships, an issue I have had to deal with on many occasions in this role. Those ships’ primary role is to replenish naval vessels with bulk stores. They are non-combatant naval auxiliary support ships, which are manned by civilian Royal Fleet Auxiliary crews and fitted with weapons systems purely for self-defence, so they cannot be designated as warships. I will probably continue to have long correspondence about that with the members of the Defence Committee, and I look forward to replying to their letter.

The relationship between defence and Scotland is mutually beneficial. Scotland is as integral to the United Kingdom’s security as the rest of the United Kingdom is to Scotland’s. Yes, the UK depends on the deep commitment of our Scottish personnel and benefits enormously from the unparalleled expertise of the industries based there, but Scotland also benefits from being part of the United Kingdom as a whole. It benefits from the UK’s broad spectrum of capabilities, it benefits from the sheer scale of defence spending by the UK, which can call on the fifth biggest defence budget in the world, and it benefits from the influence the UK is able to wield on the world stage to make a genuine difference.

Douglas Ross: Will the Minister confirm that another benefit of Scotland being part of the United Kingdom is that, when the SNP made Scotland the highest taxed part of the United Kingdom, the UK Government and his Department were able to mitigate that Nat tax for our armed forces personnel?

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, which my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), who is sitting next to him, raised at Scottish questions just a few weeks ago. Of course, we will have to analyse the latest situation. If we need to make that mitigation, we will do so. The fact is that armed forces are sent where they are needed—they do not choose where they live—so we will step in where necessary to ensure that they are not disadvantaged.
As the dangers to the United Kingdom increase, it is even more vital that Scotland remains a pivotal part of UK defence. That is why we are upping our defence spending there. When it comes to the military footprint in Scotland, force levels will continue to grow. A further 550 military personnel and their families will be based in Moray by 2024. Significantly, numbers on Her Majesty’s Naval Base Clyde will also increase, to 8,200, while the base benefits from further investment of £1.2 billion over the next decade. HMNB Clyde will also become the base port for all the Royal Navy’s submarines, including its fleet of attack submarines, and the UK’s submarine centre of excellence. That is only fitting, since by the 2030s it will welcome four next-generation Dreadnought-class nuclear deterrent submarines too.

Meanwhile, this year, RAF Lossiemouth, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), will welcome its fourth Typhoon squadron, making Scotland home to half of the RAF’s Typhoon force. Thanks to its close proximity to the north Atlantic, where enemy submarines are most likely to operate, Lossiemouth will also be a base for our nine P-8A maritime patrol aircraft, with a £132 million operational support and training facility being built to support them. That will create a further 200 jobs and, once fully operational, bring some 550 additional RAF personnel on site. I know my hon. Friend has been a good advocate of that.

Since becoming Minister for Defence Procurement, I have been pleased to observe the truly unique relationship with Scotland at first hand, and I am determined to do everything in my power to ensure that it continues to go from strength to strength.

**Chris Stephens** rose—

**Stuart Andrew:** I am coming to my last paragraph, but I can see that the hon. Gentleman wants to intervene, so I will give way.

**Chris Stephens:** I thank the Minister for a lot of what he has said, but I thought he would expand a bit more on the fleet solid support ships. Given the comments he rightly made about Scotland’s contribution to the Ministry of Defence, can he justify the fact that those ships might be built somewhere else in the world, rather than in Scotland or, indeed, anywhere else in the UK?

**Stuart Andrew:** I will happily answer that question. The whole point of the national shipbuilding strategy is to make our shipyards as competitive as possible. For far too long, our shipyards have depended too often on defence for their work. The whole point of the strategy is to try to make them as competitive as possible and to challenge them. The Type 31e frigate competition that the hon. Gentleman mentioned is one such challenge to industry to consider how it can become more competitive, so it can go out to the wider world and start winning competitions. That is why I am really pleased that there is a bid from the UK as part of the fleet solid support competition. We will see whether it is successful, but the point is that we want our shipyards to be competitive. That is the way to secure their future now and in the long term.

Next year, Scotland will be home to all the Royal Navy’s submarines at HMNB Clyde, to one of the British Army’s seven adaptable force brigades and to one of three RAF fast jet main operating bases. That is a mighty testament to a relationship that works—a relationship that makes Britain a global force for good. That is why I believe passionately that Scotland should remain an integral part of this United Kingdom, so we can all work for the good defence of our country and around the globe.

**Question put and agreed to.**
Pensions Dashboard

4.28 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the pensions dashboard.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. For many people—particularly younger people—pensions are not a priority. In the early years of anyone’s career, their financial demands usually concern paying off student debt and paying for accommodation, mortgages and travel, no doubt with a bit of socialising thrown in. Only when people gain responsibilities such as a partner, a spouse, a mortgage or children do their minds turn to providing for the future.

Some people are fortunate enough to be provided with a pension through the terms of their employment. That is particularly true for those who work in the public services. Unfortunately, in the past, those who worked for private employers and the self-employed were unable to access the same financial products. There were a variety of reasons for that, including affordability, knowledge of pension products and simple ignorance about how to start a pension. I am pleased that the Government have addressed those problems and that in order to allow employees—our constituents—to understand the level of their pension contributions, the Department for Work and Pensions has proposed the pensions dashboard, which we are speaking about today.

A pensions dashboard is an online service that allows people to see information from multiple pensions all in one place. It is a welcome step towards better financial awareness for everyone.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. The fact that it is so well attended shows exactly how important the subject is to our constituents. My hon. Friend will probably recognise that when the pensions dashboard was first suggested, it was seen as something that might not happen, but now we are on the cusp of it. Does he agree with me that it would be good to see such data sharing across the whole financial services industry? It benefits consumers and gives them power over their own information.

Dr Offord: My hon. Friend is entirely right. I certainly would like to see that across a range of financial instruments. Recently, I was required to find the level of my ISA trust fund. In the past I would receive a statement only over who do not know the size of their savings?

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I was about to come to a statistic that indicates that many people do not know the size of their pension pot. That has repercussions, particularly when people retire and they suddenly realise that they will not have the level of income or the kind of lifestyle that they had expected or previously experienced. Some 25% of people over the age of 55, including those who are retired, say that they do not know the size of their pension pot. The dashboard will address that. It will offer those people and others the ability to access information about their financial contributions from multiple pensions, any time they want to, on their smartphone, iPad or computer. Effectively, it will bring our pensions into the 21st century.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and for securing this important debate. I have been supporting and pressing for the pensions dashboard for many years, since the time of the coalition. Does he agree that it is crucial that in the next pensions Act, the Government make it a legal requirement for all pension providers to go into the pensions dashboard and provide all the necessary information, otherwise the dashboard will fail? Does the Minister—or, rather, the hon. Gentleman—agree that at this late stage, that is critical?
Dr Offord: That is a very important point. Unfortunately, I am not a Minister, but the debate provides the opportunity to put that question to the Minister. Perhaps the Minister in summing up will provide the reassurances that the hon. Gentleman seeks.

Once again, the hon. Gentleman seems to have preempted my speech, because I was about to name him and thank him for coming along. I was going to say that it is very pleasing that the proposal has cross-party support, and that I welcome his support and attendance, along with that of my hon. Friends. Friends the Members for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey), for Solihull (Julian Knight) and for Henley (John Howell).

Mr Jim Cunningham: What about me? [Laughter.]

Dr Offord: Of course, if I had had any forward notice I would have thanked the hon. Gentleman as well. I am particularly pleased to see the SNP here, because the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) signalled his approval for the social security statutory instruments we debated on Monday, so I thank him and the SNP for that.

From the comments I have heard from the Opposition today, I understand that the proposal that we are debating is not only welcome, but something that all parties are agreed on. With that support, the Government have already engaged in a consultation about how the pensions industry can create the dashboards. In the absence of a clear industry lead, it is proposed by my hon. Friend the Minister that a new single financial guidance body should be convened to oversee an industry delivery group to enable successful implementation.

As I see it, there are two issues that some hon. Members or people outside the Chamber may be concerned about. The first is whether the pensions dashboard should be held in public or private ownership. Like some other hon. Members, I have a Merseyside pension scheme from my time of employment in local government, and as a result I would prefer the dashboard to be in private ownership. Merseyside is notoriously difficult to engage with and refuses to discuss its scheme with organisations or the financial advisers that I have had over the years. However, I acknowledge support for the provision of a non-commercial dashboard supported by the Government; some hon. Members may also agree with that.

The Department for Work and Pensions research has built on the recommendation of the pensions dashboard project that a non-commercial service, endorsed by the Government, must be made available. As key stakeholders have commented, multiple dashboards in the private sector would complement a Government-sponsored offer, which should still be available for those who would prefer it, or who may not be targeted by the market.

It was suggested by the pensions dashboard project group—and, earlier last year, by the Work and Pensions Committee—that the single financial guidance body, which launched services to the public last month, would be a sensible place to host such a dashboard. The industry delivery group will need to consider how best to implement commercial dashboards alongside the non-commercial one. Which? magazine and others across the media industry have suggested that this expansion, starting with a single, non-commercial dashboard, is likely to reduce the potential for confusion and help to establish consumer trust.

The second issue of contention is that passing the pensions dashboards on to the private sector will mean that there is no guarantee of compliance from all providers, and will centralise huge amounts of financial information for the private sector to access. In answer to that, I say that in developing the infrastructure for pensions dashboards, industry must adhere to the rights of the individual and principles as set out in the Data Protection Act 2018, which reflects the general data protection regulation. That includes the individual’s right to data portability and principles of accuracy, storage, access and security. There would be no aggregation of the user’s information in the storing of the data in any of the components in the dashboard’s ecosystem, other than by the pension scheme or an integrated service provider operating on behalf of the provider.

That supports the overarching delivery principles of keeping data secure and putting the individual in control of their data. Access to the data would be available only to the user unless specific consent is given—that goes back to my point about Merseyside. Dashboard operators would not be allowed to access the data for any purpose unless they had the specific consent of the user.

I anticipate that the delivery group, working with the regulators, will seek to agree data standards for pension providers and dashboards. Those data standards will need to support whatever level of functionality is required through different phases of implementation and ongoing development of the dashboard service. The pensions dashboard is so important because of the number of people who have now invested in their own pension pot. In the five years from 2012, the percentage of eligible employees participating in a workplace pension rose from 55% to 84%.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this important debate to the House. Does he agree that the auto-enrolment programme that the Government introduced has ensured that many low-paid and younger people are also investing in their retirement? As a young person, I would say that is something we must always push into the future. The system must be accessible to young people as much as to older people, and we must ensure that they are educated in the system that is introduced.

Dr Offord: I must have left my speech on the photocopier, because once again, I have been anticipated. My hon. Friend is absolutely right; among those aged 22 to 29, participation has increased from 35% to 79% over the same period. That is certainly something we can all be pleased about. Automatic enrolment, which was also launched in 2012, has driven that increase and created millions of new savers, with nearly 10 million eligible employees having been automatically enrolled. Since April 2018, those savers are contributing at least 5% of their eligible income into their private pension pot, inclusive of employer contribution, and next year that will rise to 8%, including employer contributions.

In addition to those young people, it is worth mentioning the number of females who are now enrolled in pension schemes. Compared with the figure for 2012, an additional 3 million women now have a workplace pension thanks to auto-enrolment. As I said before, in the 22 to 29 age group, participation in the private sector has risen from 35% in 2012 to 79% in just five years. In total, the...
number of people who possess a workplace pension reached a record high of 41.1 million in 2017, up nearly 50% since 2012.

I ask the Minister to tell me in his summing-up speech whether he will provide not only me, but perhaps the House of Commons Library, with the auto-enrolment figures for all constituencies across the United Kingdom. I am particularly keen to see those figures for my Hendon constituents.

In conclusion, I believe pension freedoms have given people greater choice about when and how they use their pension savings. That is truly a transformation of our savings culture. The initiative displays true Conservative values of creating opportunity, nurturing aspiration and assisting people to take responsibility for their own futures. I hope the pensions dashboard is considered by other Ministers and inspires them to take similar actions in their own Departments.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): I will just say to the Back-Bench speakers that if they take about four or possibly five minutes and manage themselves, the Opposition Front-Bench speakers will have five minutes each and the Minister will have 10, and everybody should be able to get in.

4.43 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) on securing it. I am happy to make a comment within the timescale that you have set out, Mrs Ryan.

Pensions are a thorny issue; many people made their financial plans based on the promise of a pension that has not materialised. There are also those who invested, only to lose their money and get only 30p in the pound of their investment, but that is a debate for another day; in fact, we had a debate on that last Thursday in the main Chamber; it was on Equitable Life, and those who had paid into a pension but did not get their money. It is easy to understand the concerns that some of us have about people’s need for a pension; the hon. Gentleman referred to the need for a pensions dashboard.

I can well recall—although it was not yesterday—my mum taking me down to the Northern Bank, as it was, to open my first account when I was 16. I also remember that when I turned 18, she took me to fill in the policy with the insurance man and said, “Make sure you’re putting money aside every month for that purpose.” That was thriftiness, but it was also really good direction from my mum, as always, because it was important that we knew why we did those things. I am a wee bit older now, and I am glad that I signed up for those things many years ago, because I will benefit from them in the years ahead.

Today’s debate is an attempt to ensure that people are not left in the lurch in the way that women born in the 1950s and the Equitable Life savers have been. It is an issue that it is certainly worth people considering if they are working hard and seeking to invest, so that someday they do not have to work, but can enjoy life without having to miss out on the things that they have while working a nine-to-five job. It is my sincere hope and desire that the work that the Treasury Committee and others are doing to prevent another Equitable Life scandal will be successful, but irrespective of that, a dashboard with real-time information has to be useful for those who are planning their future, as the hon. Gentleman said.

I must say that the key decisions that came from the Government consultation give rise to some concern. One concern relates to data security. The fact that all financials are held and accessible by the industry independently raises concern. I hope the Minister can reassure me on that. My concern is heightened by the breach in Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority data security, which led to the addresses of my staff members being released. That shook our office and caused great concern, given that we hail from a political party in Northern Ireland, and given its history. Such data security breaches underline my concerns. The Government must ensure that there are guidelines in place to reassure people, including my constituents and me.

I also have grave concerns regarding proposals that would result in pension fund members being targeted by those who want their business. Although I agree that multiple dashboards would improve consumer choice, it is essential that alongside those—I think the hon. Gentleman referred to this—there be a non-commercial dashboard, hosted by the single financial guidance body, and offering an impartial service to those who prefer that, or who may not want to be targeted by the market. We must cover all choices and tastes.

Another essential issue for me is that the cost of this dashboard should not hit the pension or the consumers; there should rather be an obligation on the industry to bear the cost. Although the autumn Budget has made available funding for 2019-20 to facilitate the industry’s making dashboards a reality, it is clear that that is to get the dashboard on its feet, as opposed to making it a Government service. That is another consideration.

I am conscious of time, so I will conclude with this point. In principle, I support the idea of people having greater knowledge of their financial status. There are so many people who come into my office with their pension annual statement, not understanding what it means—not only older people, but young career people who have been made to sign up to a pension, but have no idea what the money that they pay, or their employer pays, is used for. It is surprising how many people do not know.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): That is why we need proper enterprise education in schools. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is when it should start, and that it should not end until people enter the workplace?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman; just as the hon. Member for Hendon thought that someone had read his script, my next words are on the very subject to which the hon. Gentleman refers. The subject is not covered in school, but it clearly should be, because these young people literally have no idea what their pension means. He is absolutely right, and his intervention underlines the responsibilities that we have a duty to perform. I sincerely believe that a pension dashboard can help this generation, but the safety and security of financial information is paramount.
I look forward to the Minister’s response; I feel that some of the assurances I have sought in this small contribution are assurances that he can provide, and if he does, he will set a lot of minds at rest.

4.48 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Ryan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) on securing this debate; I thought he did a brilliant job of explaining why the dashboard is so welcome and so necessary, so I will not take up too much time going over old ground, but I want to comment once again on why the dashboard is so important and so necessary.

While it is true that we have 9 million new people coming into the workplace pension scheme through auto-enrolment, and those people can hopefully be more engaged in their pension savings throughout their working life, historically that is simply not what has happened. Quite frankly, many people have absolutely no idea what sort of pension savings they have built up over 20, 30 or 40 years of work. Many companies that they have worked for will no longer exist, and the insurance companies that held their pension schemes may have been amalgamated or no longer exist at all.

Those people will suddenly find themselves coming up to their retirement not really having any idea of what sort of pension savings they have, other than those savings made with a main employer that they were with for a long time. It is not particularly surprising that research shows that one in five adults will admit to having lost at least one pension pot. I think that probably understates it, because there will be people who will not admit that they cannot remember what pension savings they have, and there will be people who do not know that they do not know what pension savings they have.

The Pensions Policy Institute research suggesting that consumers have lost track of about £19.5 billion in pension pots really reinforces why we need the dashboard, why it needs to be all-encompassing and, as was said, why we need to make sure that all providers are properly committed to providing the information. The dashboard will not be much use if whether it is any good depends on which provider a person was linked with in the workplace; what would be the point? It needs to work for absolutely everybody.

I thought it was perfectly sensible that the Government decided to take a slightly different approach and push the private sector to lead more on the dashboard’s development; it had been doing most of the running on that, anyway. However, whatever the final dashboard or various dashboards look like, it is vital that the state pension element be included in it, to give people that full picture of their retirement saving. I liked the idea from my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), who is no longer in his place, of looking at ways to link up the dashboard with broader financial products, but we should probably walk before we can run, and make sure that the dashboard is up and running before we start making it more complicated.

I have a couple of questions for the Minister. First, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised the issue of data security and identity risks, which I think are very real. The Government Gateway is doing a lot of good stuff to protect against those risks, but we will need to be pretty satisfied, through the regulatory framework, that data is secure, and that there will be no danger.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): It may help the House if I address the point raised by my hon. Friends the Members for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), and for Hendon (Dr Offord), and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). For those who have not had the opportunity to see it, chapter 4 on page 29 of the consultation sets out in quite a lot of detail the efforts we propose to take on data security. The matter is clearly subject to consultation, but without any shadow of a doubt, it will not be proposed that the dashboard be a data storage device. Pension companies will provide one individual’s data back to that individual, rather than it going through a conglomerated site, which would be eminently more hackable, for obvious reasons.

Paul Masterton: I thank the Minister for that intervention, which was very useful and clarifies the point nicely. My other questions are on the industry delivery group. Is the Minister in any kind of position to explain the process for setting that up, and when it is likely to be set up? The main point is to make sure that the members of the group have the right mix of experience and backgrounds to deliver.

The pensions dashboard is another example of good pensions policy built on a consensual, cross-party basis. As more people come into the pension system because of auto-enrolment, it will be absolutely critical that they are able to keep track of what they have saved in the long term, over their working life.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) on securing the debate. To state the obvious, pensions are critical, but they can also be extremely complicated. People have an average of 11 jobs over their working life, so they are bound to build up several different pension pots over time. There are more than 40,000 private pension schemes in the UK, so bringing all the information together in one place and making it easy for people to access is sensible, though clearly a big step. That is why the pensions dashboard was supported cross-party, and by the industry.

However, there are real concerns about delegating the operation to the private sector. I will emphasise the areas where we need clarity urgently. First, the Government state that they expect people’s state pension entitlement “to ultimately be part” of the dashboard, but do not elaborate. Given that that is a major segment of many people’s total pension pot, will the Minister say by what date the state pension will be part of the dashboard?

Secondly, the Government say that they expect “the majority” of pension schemes to be included on the dashboard within three to four years, but then say they would legislate to ensure that occurs within “a reasonable timeframe agreed by industry”.

To make better progress and to aid future pensioners, will the Government set a three-year timeframe in legislation and require all pension schemes to comply with it? I understand how big this task is, but we need to be ambitious on the timeframes.
Thirdly, the Government say that they expect “a standard level of identity assurance” for the service. I thank the Minister for his intervention, but given that people’s most sensitive financial information will be centralised, should the safeguards here not be made as strong as possible, just as they should for our consumer banking services? That is really important.

Finally, it was reported today that the Financial Conduct Authority has only 10 staff, out of a total of 3,700, working on investment scams, which is way off being enough. Does the Minister believe that is adequate, given that nearly £200 million was lost to scams last year?

Accurate and straightforward information is essential to helping people navigate this important but sometimes complex field. We need to make sure that they have that information, so that they have peace of mind when making critical financial decisions for the future.

4.56 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) for securing the debate. Speaking as one who probably had many thousands of jobs over my career, I think it is terribly important that we make clear how the pensions system works. This dashboard does just that.

As the Government announced when launching the consultation on the dashboard last December, the platform will put individuals in control of their data. I have to be absolutely honest: I was never clear about the data on my pensions at any given moment, and I used to have to sit down for some time to sort it all out, so this change makes sense.

I have no doubt that the dashboard will be a positive development for Clacton, where, like most places across the country, we have an aging population. In fact, we have the third-highest percentage of retirees in the country. There are 27,485 pensioners in Clacton—a number that now includes me—and by 2030 that is expected to increase by more than 20%, to 32,982. That means that at least 5,497 individuals out there working hard for their retirement will end up living, by sheer good fortune or whatever, on the glorious sunshine coast of Clacton in my wonderful constituency.

I want every one of those people to have a comfortable retirement, just as I want those who are already retired and living in my constituency to be comfortable; they are, after all, 40% of my electorate. As a matter of fact, I will be holding an older people’s fair in June, to ensure that they have all the support that they need. However, I also recognise the range of steps that the Government have taken to help older people during their retirement.

Most important is the triple lock, which we are very sensibly retaining, and which means, as we well know, that the basic state pension will rise in line with inflation or earnings, or by 2.5%, whichever is highest. There are many beneficial policies for older people.

However, while I welcome these changes, I am worried about the prospects of future generations. Even with more people saving, the workers of today are just not saving enough, despite their continuing hard work and the fastest wage growth for 10 years. In the future, when the savers of today retire, they are likely to come under greater pressure from a combination of factors, including reduced wealth and higher expenditure on social care and housing. We must mitigate those pressures, and I believe that the pensions dashboard gives us the opportunity to do just that.

The Pensions and Lifetime Savings Association recommended in its “Hitting The Target” report that “the UK should develop and implement a series of targets” on retirement income

“which build on the current analysis of what people need in retirement.”

According to the report, only 23% of people are unlike me and know how much they need to save to achieve an adequate retirement income. Workers of today must be encouraged to save more, and 70% of those workers say that targets would help them to do just that.

Unsurprisingly, I therefore argue that those targets must be incorporated into the Government’s version of the dashboard, and I ask that the industry does the same when developing its offering. In fact, that should be the minimum of our ambitions for this potentially transformative platform.

I ask the Government to approach the development of the dashboard platform with one aim in mind: ensuring that everyone saves more, but especially the young. The ease of access to data that the dashboard will provide should encourage that. Only 40% of millennials are likely to achieve an adequate retirement income. We are exposing ourselves to huge potential pressures on the welfare and social care systems—issues that we are already struggling to grapple with today—if current savers move into retirement without adequate income. Make no mistake: I do not believe that the dashboard is a silver bullet. However, it is at least a start. A well crafted and ambitious pensions dashboard is central to what I have described.

5 pm

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) on securing the debate. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for insurance and financial services.

I welcome the concept of the pensions dashboard. My hon. Friend the Minister knows that I am a huge fan of it. The world of work is changing. The Government estimate that people will have up to 11 jobs during their working life. That potentially means 11 different pension pots during that time, so it will be very difficult for people to keep track of the funds and work out how much money they will have when they stop working. I cannot claim to have had anywhere near as many jobs as my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling), but having had two jobs before this one, even I find it difficult to keep up to date with the pension funds and who administers them now. The issue is not just that I have changed jobs, but that the companies that administer the funds have changed because the funds have changed hands. It is really difficult to keep up with that.

Figures from the insurance company Aviva show that there is about £400 million-worth of unclaimed pension savings. That highlights the fact that people do not know how much they have or where their pensions are.
The Department for Work and Pensions estimates that, without the dashboard, 50 million pension pots will be dormant by 2050. I am therefore sure that, across the Chamber, we will agree that there is huge merit in the pensions dashboard, which will allow savers to view all their pension savings, including the state pension, in a single online place of their choosing. Certainly the feedback that we have had in the all-party group is that there is strong consumer support for that.

I congratulate the Minister on his tenacity in persevering with the pensions dashboard. I know that it has not always been straightforward, but he has seen this as a really good concept, and that is to be applauded.

I reiterate many of the points made by other hon. Members. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made an interesting point about his mum. My dad was a financial adviser, and I remember him saying to me when I was 17 and had my first job, “Put £10 a month into your pension pot. You’ll never miss it.” He was paying me only £15 a month at the time, I think, but I did not really miss it. There was good economic sense in doing that at the time. We need to get people engaged early in life. The more we can do that, the more their pots will accrue. With an ageing society, it is more important than ever to help people keep track of their pension savings, as I have said.

Having echoed those points, I want to raise just three points with the Minister, and I would be grateful for his remarks on them. First, I agree with the DWP and the Association of British Insurers that competition is key, so multiple dashboards should be available. That will encourage a greater level of innovation, personalisation and consumer orientation. The proposed collaborative approach between the industry and Government is absolutely the right one to take.

However, there is a worry in the industry—this point was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon—that the state dashboard might be done first and then be followed by subsequent dashboards at a later date. Will the Minister comment on the current thinking on that? I think that it could lead to confusion, with people switching and so on, so it would seem sensible to launch them all together.

Secondly, I have heard concerns raised about the funding of both the dashboard and the single financial guidance body. The feedback is that it is important that all providers pay their fair share. There are worries that the proposed model, which uses only the Financial Conduct Authority levies, means that not all will contribute equally. I am thinking in particular of occupational pensions. Again, I would be grateful if the Minister commented on that.

My final point is something of a personal crusade. There is talk of a midlife MOT for people so that they can check where they are in life—how well they are doing and how prepared they are. I suggest that we go further than that and introduce checks every 10 years from point zero, where people are given feedback about their pension pots. If people see that the money starts at zero and they have to build it up by being in work and accruing a fund, I think it will encourage them to work. They will see that they are actually working towards their future by being employed and that if they want a better quality of life in retirement, putting more in their pension pot during their working life will assist that.

To conclude, I welcome the proposals and again thank the Minister for the work that he has done to get them on the table.

5.5 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Ms Ryan, I apologise for joining the debate slightly late. It is a pleasure, though, to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) on this important debate. I entirely agree with much that has been said so far.

The key thing is that the pensions dashboard is a modern solution for modern needs, at a time when having a single-employer career and a defined-benefit pension is largely a minority and public sector exception to the rule. In today’s world, as a result of the pension freedoms introduced by this Government, there are many opportunities for individuals both to access their pension and to pass it on. That means that, alongside the figure that my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire cited for unclaimed pensions, there is not only greater opportunity for people in how to use the pension pots they have accumulated, but greater uncertainty about how to use them and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) said, about how to access the relevant information. For all those reasons, a pensions dashboard is a very good thing.

I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to respond to just one thought. There are two aspects to the pensions dashboard. One is the technology, on which members of the ABI have made significant progress. No doubt we will hear more about that, because it is very encouraging. The other aspect is the preparation that is needed from pension providers. That is important because if the dashboard is up and ready but the information from the pension providers is not there, it will be as much use as a new car without wheels. That would be a very sad thing for the current cross-party consensus in the House that a pensions dashboard will be very useful for many people. I therefore encourage the Pensions Minister to say a few words about what the Government might do to encourage pension providers to ensure that when the technology is ready, everything on their side of the equation will be ready as well.

5.7 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) for initiating the debate. We have heard today, and I think we can all agree, that a pensions dashboard is a positive step. The utility of an online tool that shows users facts and figures about their pensions, such as how much money they can expect their pension pots to hold, is clear, particularly in view of the fact that research shows that 47% of the UK’s population do not know how much their pension pots contain. Given that people have, on average, about 11 jobs in their lifetime, pension pots can be challenging to keep track of, as we have heard.

I know from my own constituents that there was some alarm when the UK Government appeared to distance themselves from the pensions dashboard pilot, before going on to announce that they would introduce multiple pensions dashboards. Nobody would argue that the UK Government should not work in partnership
with the pensions industry to deliver a pensions dashboard, but it really should be the Government’s responsibility. For the purposes of clarity and simplicity, there should be only one dashboard. If, as is proposed, there are multiple dashboards, the only thing we know for sure—and experts in the industry agree—is that there will be confusion and risk, and the whole thing may become ineffective. Ultimate responsibility for the delivery of a clean, simple, comprehensive and user-friendly pensions dashboard must rest with the Government and not the pensions services sector.

A proper pensions dashboard would allow people to see the value of their state, occupational and private pensions in one place, thereby helping them to keep better track of their pension income. In my correspondence and communication with the Minister on this matter, he has demonstrated no firm commitment to ensure that state pension data is included from the outset. I am keen to hear, unequivocally, that that has been reconsidered.

The Minister has offered me no commitment that providers will be compelled through legislation to contribute information or supply data to a pensions dashboard, as the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) pointed out. I am keen to hear that the Minister has also reconsidered that. According to experts in the field, not compelling providers to supply information will mean that the most important pensions data is not captured by the dashboard. It seems that private companies will develop a model for themselves. Now I hear that the pensions industry will take a lead on this matter. That risks the entire dashboard being incomplete and far less useful than it should be.

Many pensions experts have expressed concern that without strong commitment from the Government, the project may fail in its aims. If there is missing data in the pensions dashboard, it will be as useful as a recipe with only some of the ingredients listed. It seems that the UK Government will merely facilitate a dashboard, which I take to mean—perhaps I am wrong and the Minister will correct me—that it will be entirely in the hands of private companies and the information it contains may well be incomplete.

I know that the Government think that their plans for dashboards are revolutionary and radical—or transformative, as the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) said—and it is true that the potential is there, but I fear that it will not be met. I remind the Minister that a single dashboard is essential, not only for the reasons I have already given, but because it will provide a safeguard against scammers through restricted access. We know that consumers who have been scammed have been tricked out of an average of £91,000 of their pension savings. Those who work in this field have warned that unless the public are absolutely clear how many dashboards there are, multiple dashboards could make it easier for scammers to trick the public into divulging personal data, despite what the hon. Member for Hendon said.

We know that data security will be key in giving consumers confidence to use the dashboard to plan their retirement. I heard what the Minister had to say about data security, but I believe that there are ongoing concerns. I ask the Minister to take those concerns on board and to ensure that all those who are retired or are planning to retire can have confidence in a single pensions dashboard that helps to support their understanding and management of their financial future. I believe that the Government must have ultimate responsibility for this, and they must not be seen to abdicate that responsibility to the private sector, given all the concerns I have raised.

5.12 pm

**Jack Dromey** (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) on raising this crucial debate at a crucial moment. To state the blindingly obvious, pensions are about a decent income in retirement, and ensuring security and dignity. To achieve those objectives, it is crucial that people know precisely what they have saved thus far, and what they need to do at the next stages to ensure that they are saving enough to enjoy a decent standard of living, and security and dignity in retirement.

The pensions landscape has been troubled, most recently through scandals around British Steel. My hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) was absolutely right. I will never forget the story of the shift supervisor in south Wales who wept as he told how he had been mis-sold a bad deal. Not only would he suffer as a consequence, but the 20 people he was responsible for supervising all followed his lead and all stood to lose. Pension cold-calling was an utter outrage. I will come back to that in a moment.

Are there still problems? Yes, there are. However, it is also right that we record that welcome progress is being made, cross-party, on four fronts. First, progress is being made on auto-enrolment. The Minister has heard me say before that I was proud to chair the policy discussions when Labour, then in government, appointed Adair Turner to carry out his inquiry, leading to the establishment of auto-enrolment. I welcome the continuity of that policy under this Government.

Is auto-enrolment perfect? The hon. Member for Hendon raised this issue earlier. No, it is not. There remain problems. Because of the threshold, 37% of female workers, 33% of workers with a disability and 28% of black, Asian and ethnic minority workers do not qualify. Auto-enrolment does not cover the self-employed or workers in the gig economy. Having said that, 10 million more people are now saving for their pension, and that is a thoroughly good thing.

Secondly, the Act that the Minister and I took through the House last year, which established the single financial guidance body and banned cold-calling, was a welcome step in the right direction. Thirdly—again, we have been working cross-party on this—the ground-breaking notion of collective defined contribution schemes marks significant progress. The historic agreement reached by Royal Mail and the Communication Workers Union, covering 143,000 workers, delivered a pension outcome infinitely better than if the workers concerned had had to fall back on DC schemes.

Fourthly, the dashboard is a sign of progress. As the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) said, the dashboard is important, because to enjoy a decent income in retirement, one needs to know what one needs to save. There have been some fascinating initiatives taken within the industry. NOW: Pensions provided three examples for consumers: “If you want an old banger for the rest of your life in retirement, choose this...
one; if you want to buy a new car in five to 10 years’ time, choose this one; if you want to go somewhere exotic on holiday, choose this one.” That is very interesting information, which helps to guide people, so that they know what they need to save. Crucially, in the first place, they need to know what they are entitled to, so the dashboard is absolutely key.

The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) was right when he said that there are billions of pounds locked away and unclaimed, which people are entitled to. Hopefully, the dashboard will help to overcome that problem, too. There is no question but that this is a welcome step in the right direction. I stress that we stand ready to work with the Government to give effect to primary legislation as quickly as possible. Yesterday, we spoke about the importance of progress on CDC pensions. The sooner a pensions Bill can be brought forward that focuses on those two areas in particular, the better. While the devil is in the detail, there is such substantial cross-party agreement that we want to get this legislated on, acted on, and taken to the next stage.

The dashboard is a welcome step in the right direction. There has been a great degree of dialogue and an extensive consultation, which is now closed. Some useful points were made in that consultation. The plans for the SFGB-run dashboard are welcome. I agree with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that a non-commercial approach would be preferable. Indeed, one dashboard would be preferable. Against the background of what the Government are proposing, will legislation to compel providers to supply data be in place before the SFGB-run dashboard is live? That is key to ensuring that savers are not given a half-baked product at launch. Will the regulations that compel providers to comply cover all dashboards, or just the SFGB one? When will the state pension data be available to view on the dashboard? Will the Minister reassure us about the point made by the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire in relation to data security?

In conclusion, this is a historic and welcome step in the right direction. The Government need to listen to the concerns that have been raised, including in the consultative process, in order to get this right. The sooner that we can move forward to legislate and bring the dashboard into being, the better.

5.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Thank you, Ms Ryan, for chairing this debate. I thank the 16 colleagues who have supported my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord). He has brought forward a debate that is clearly topical and important. In times when some might argue that Parliament is not debating matters, here is an example of a cross-party approach, to try to address a problem for our times with a modern, FinTech solution. I believe that has application to one and all.

There is no doubt that the pensions dashboard will be part of the FinTech revolution. It is a reform that can harness innovative technology to tech-charged pensions. It will provide accurate, secure and easy-to-understand information about people’s pension pot in one place. Fundamentally, it is a democratiser. It will bring a traditional 20th-century—some would say 19th-century—industry into the 21st century, so that the information is available to one and all on an iPad, smartphone or tablet. That is surely the right thing to do at a time when, as hon. Members have outlined, auto-enrolment has been transformational. Nearly 10 million people have auto-enrolled, and 1.4 million businesses are in a position to provide auto-enrolment to their workers.

I accept the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon, and I will put the auto-enrolment statistics in the Library for all Members. I will also see whether I can make a short written ministerial statement about putting it there. In his constituency, 14,000 people are benefiting from auto-enrolment, thanks to more than 2,000 employers on his patch who are supporting individuals in that way. The stats on how many individuals have the benefit of auto-enrolment, and how many business are supporting it, are available to hon. Members for each and every constituency.

As was rightly outlined by hon. Members, there is cross-party consensus. That is the right way forward, because pension policy works on a cross-party basis. The consultation closed on 28 January, and we hope to respond to it by approximately mid-March. It answers some of the points made by hon. Members. We hope that the dozens of responses submitted will provide further answers, and that the Government response will also provide some answers. Hon. Members will understand that I am constrained in how I can respond to matters raised today by the fact that I am making a live, formal response, but I will endeavour to respond to the best of my ability.

On the point about compelling individual providers, paragraph 180 of the consultation clearly sets out that it is the Government’s intention to proceed to compulsion. My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) and the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) raised the issue of the timetable for data provision by providers. I was interested to hear the suggestion of the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent of a robust three-year time limit. Several providers responded to the consultation, and we will go through those responses in some detail.

There can be no doubt, however, that compulsion is coming, and that the only issue is the timeline. Certain providers could provide the data quite quickly. By and large, they know who they are, because they are the modern master trust providers that are already up to speed. Others will take longer. There is a legitimate debate to be had in this House, as we introduce the Bill, about whether we put in place a specific time limit for data provision, or whether that is done in secondary legislation, and with merely indicative outlines.

I will briefly deal with the Financial Conduct Authority. I am conscious of the evidence given at the Work and Pensions Committee today, and I have spoken to the Chair, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field). I accept that there must be a better way to regulate pension transfers, and to give individuals advice on how they handle their money; there was examination of that point by the all-party Work and Pensions Committee. I welcome its views.

The hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) said that simple is good. There is no doubt that the view of the Government, and of the vast majority of providers, is that simple is the way ahead. If the dashboard cannot be accessible on a laptop or mobile phone, and give an understanding of what assets an individual has in their
pension, there will be difficulties. We need to make a traditional, paper-based business accessible to the individual, and that is certainly what we will seek to do.

I do not have time to go into the detail of the difference between commercial and non-commercial providers of the dashboard. As set out in some detail in the consultation, however, it is definitely the Government’s view that there should be a commercial and a non-commercial provider; they would provide individual dashboards. To harness industry innovation and maximise consumer engagement, the right way forward is to have an open standards approach that allows for multiple dashboards in the future.

However, the delivery body—it should be the single financial guidance body, as we set out in the consultation—should be the provider of a non-commercial dashboard that is effectively state-run through a third party. Such provision is obviously dependent on the delivery model and the delivery group that is set up. That works hand in hand with the response to the consultation, so I cannot give more detail, given where we are at this stage. I hope to update the House in the formal consultation response in March.

Guy Opperman: We all wish to ensure that the difficulties that the hon. Gentleman’s constituents went through with the British Steel pensions scheme do not happen again. I assure him that I met the FCA on Monday. It had an interesting time today in front of the Work and Pensions Committee. The views of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead are clear, and I will liaise with him on an ongoing basis. We know what direction we are going in, but with regard to how we proceed, the devil is in the detail. That relates to not just the transfer, but the advice to the individual thereafter, which is complex. There are various versions of a way ahead on that.

Several other issues have been raised. My hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) made the point about funding. In other countries, funding has been provided through a levy system on the pensions business, as has traditionally been the case in this country. I will take away his point about occupational pensions, but I certainly anticipate that we will go down the levy route, unless others persuade me otherwise.

On my hon. Friend’s other point about the timings of the non-commercial and the commercial dashboards, again relates to the response to the consultation, and is that a matter for the delivery organisation. There is no question but that we desire all organisations to be up to speed as soon as possible. As for how we do the non-commercial and commercial dashboards at the speeds that we are talking about, that is something that we genuinely cannot say at present, but I take the point on board.

My hon. Friend knows that I am a passionate advocate of the mid-life MOT; and I am happy to discuss it in the House on an ongoing basis, because it is definitely the right thing for the future. Various companies, particularly Aviva and Hargreaves Lansdown, are pioneering it; more specifically, the Department for Work and Pensions is considering conducting one for some of its staff.

I am conscious of the time, and that I must give my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon a minute to respond to the debate. I thank hon. Members for their many recommendations. I hope that the dashboard can be used across all financial products, so that our banking apps, and information about our pension providers and our savings, all become available to us in that way in the longer term. I welcome the cross-party support that clearly exists in the House for it, and I look forward to developing it with hon. Members.

5.29 pm

Dr Offord: I thank all hon. Members who attended the debate, even though the House has adjourned.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about saving from an early age, which is something I did with my first TSB account; the dashboard will encourage that. My hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) spoke about the £19 billion lost pensions, which is a sum that could help many people across the country, if it could ever be identified who the money belonged to.

The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) talked about the importance of there being clarity about providers, and the inclusion of the state pension, which is a good idea. My hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) spoke about individuals being in control and the triple lock, which are both good things.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) raised the issue of the mid-life MOT; I would certainly like to see such an MOT for every decade. My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) spoke about the pensions value accrued over his career, and the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) spoke about the single dashboard provider. The inclusion of state pensions would be interesting, as I said.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) brings great experience to the debate, particularly as a former trade unionist. He spoke about the achievements. Finally, I thank the Minister for all his work. He has made pensions interesting.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Neil Coyle: Absolutely. No part of the country is not affected by homelessness in all its forms, but in particular rough sleeping. Of course, the numbers are disproportionately large in metropolitan areas such as London, Birmingham and Manchester, where people are attracted by additional opportunities to get money and food. The bigger cities also have more organisations, so people are naturally drawn to them. It is shameful that we walk in and out of this building past those people.

Not everyone—even among those who want to take action—is comfortable trying to support someone who is rough sleeping, but StreetLink and its partners across the country are amazing. Anyone can refer someone to it—it has an app, it is online and people can phone to ask it to intervene in support of someone they have seen rough sleeping. They can say where the person is, give a rough description and say what time of day the person was seen.

I am grateful for the interventions, but I had not even finished my thank yous. I wanted to thank all the organisations such as St Mungo’s, which is represented in the Public Gallery, that have provided briefings.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I cannot be present for the whole debate, but I too wanted to thank St Mungo’s, as well as Access Community Trust in Suffolk. Such organisations do great work. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that to meet this challenge and solve it, three things need to be done: an assessment of any correlation with the roll-out of universal credit, a move towards long-term funding for homelessness services, and a dramatic increase in the amount of affordable housing we provide in this country?

Neil Coyle: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I should probably finish my speech, because he has just said everything—[Interruption.] Steady on, I am not giving up that easily. He made three salient points, and I hope the Minister heard them being made from her Back Benches.

This issue is not, and should never be, a party political one. I am proud to co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on ending homelessness with the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince). Through him, we have met the Minister—if I had requested a meeting, I do not think she would have been as free with her time as she might be with the hon. Gentleman—and together we have had some successes. I look forward to that continuing. Work on this subject is happening across the parties and the solutions are there if we are prepared to invest in them.

Had I finished my thank yous? No. I was going to mention Crisis, Shelter and other organisations. Crisis provides facilitation for the all-party group.

The background to the debate is the statistics on rough sleeping, which were published a week ago. The wider background, which has been touched on by others,
is the rise in overall homelessness every year for the past eight years. On that wider issue, I hope that the Minister will indicate in her response whether she thinks the overall homelessness figure, which I think is to be published at the end of March, will rise or fall. What is her expectation?

I also pay tribute—as all MPs do—to the work of local organisations in my constituency. That includes St Mungo's, which does some brilliant work.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. If it were not for local organisations, such as the Slough homelessness forum in my constituency, which helps the council to operate two night shelters, we would be in a much worse situation. Does he not agree that it is a shocking indictment of our society that rough sleeping has more than doubled, increasing by more than 165% since 2010?

Neil Coyle: I have not been able to disagree with a single intervention yet—someone will have to challenge me. I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. There is a positive and a negative: the positive is that the public care about this issue. Volunteers help out, and even St Mungo’s in my constituency relies on them to do the outreach. I went on a walkabout with them, to support homeless people and to try to get them into shelters during the very cold spell last year. The public appetite is there. People are willing to give their time and donations to address the issue. That, however, is in the face of eight years of annual increases in homelessness and of Government policies that directly contributed to that rise. That is the negative.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): Organisations such as Depaul and the YMCA have projects that help thousands of young people who sleep rough, nationally and in North Tyneside. Does my hon. Friend agree that those organisations should have the Government’s ear on policy issues? Depaul, for example, would like to see the shared accommodation rate put back to the 30th percentile of local rents, so young people can have somewhere affordable to stay at night.

Neil Coyle: Again, I agree. I was going to mention Depaul specifically because it has a base in Bermondsey. Its policy is for equal benefit levels for young people—their rent is not cheaper just because they are 20. That is a complete falsehood that leads to arbitrary levels of benefit that do not match people’s needs. Depaul does some fantastic work in Bermondsey and beyond.

The church-run Robes Project, which is specific to Southwark and Lambeth, opens for five or six months in winter. Every year, it has had to provide more accommodation as a result of the outcome—whether intentional or not—of Government policies. That strikes at the same point. If the organisations working on homelessness, as well as those with experience of it, were listened to, some of that could have been avoided.

The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) mentioned universal credit; I have had constituents, including one with a significant mental health condition and another self-employed and in work, who were made homeless as a result of universal credit. That was avoidable. That direct link is unacceptable, but there is no brilliant data set for identifying those kinds of people.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I know homeless people who have not applied for universal credit because it is so complex. Does my hon. Friend agree that is another failing of the system?

Neil Coyle: It certainly is. The universal credit training centre is at the London Bridge jobcentre in my constituency. The jobcentre staff do what they can with limited resources and time, but people come to see me because they have been failed by that jobcentre. A few weeks ago, a man in his fifties who could not even spell his own address came to see me. He had not been told about advance payments; he was told he would have nothing for six weeks.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a fantastic opening speech. He talks about some of the inherent problems with universal credit. Does he agree that the fact that it is digital by default ultimately prevents a number of people making applications, because they do not have access to online resources to make the initial application?

Neil Coyle: We are keeping up the trend, because I completely agree. People who have very little and who use certain mobile networks cannot call freephone numbers from their mobile phone, let alone use their phone to go online and fill in a form that they have to add extra information to multiple times, just to get it right.

Returning to Harry, who came to see me about his universal credit, he had no heating, electricity or food. He was told just to turn up at the council office. The council has not had a walk-in appointments system for years, yet the universal credit training centre in my constituency sent someone there, who they knew would not get help elsewhere.

There are massive failings. In my surgery sessions I have seen many people, and the number rises every year. Already this year, two homeless people—not just at risk of homelessness—have come to see me at my surgery. One lady, who is cleaner, was carrying all her belongings with her. She was still working and was sleeping on night buses. We are fortunate to have those—it is not the same in other parts of the country, where there is no opportunity to have somewhere warm and as safe as possible to sleep.

Paula Sherriff: I want to make the point about homeless women who may not have access to sanitary products, and how undignified it must be not to have access to those products and to a bathroom. I support the food banks and other agencies that provide menstrual products for those women.

Neil Coyle: My hon. Friend has done a huge amount of campaigning on that issue, including on the tampon tax. People may be unaware of the Red Box Project. In my office, we provide sanitary products—this is the situation that MPs are faced with, which was not there in 2010. In my office, I have a food bank box, a toiletries box and a red box for tampons. Not everyone knows where to go for those items, but I encourage those who are not already to get involved with Red Box. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on food banks. “Food
bank” is a misnomer—it is not just about food, although of course that is part of it, but about toiletries. What is shocking to many people who are unfamiliar with food banks is the number of families who come in for their babies. Food banks have to give out nappies, because those families would not otherwise be able to look after their children.

Rachael Maskell: And baby milk.

Neil Coyle: Yes, baby milk too. If anyone watching this debate wants to donate, do not just take food—it is not just about pasta and beans—but take all the other daily essentials.

A young woman who came to me was sleeping with someone different every night rather than go back to an abusive domestic environment or sleep on the streets. That is an appalling situation for people to be in. The two truisms from all the individuals I see is that no personal circumstances have been anything other than tragic, but all of them are avoidable—without exception—if we get the policies right.

The latest statistics are shameful: in the sixth wealthiest nation on the planet in the 21st century, an estimated 4,700 people are forced to sleep rough. That is completely unacceptable, whatever the politics. Genuine efforts to tackle rough sleeping are welcome. It is the most extreme form of homelessness, but in November last year, Shelter estimated that there were 320,000 homeless people in Britain. That fuller extent of homelessness needs adequate attention. It is not just about rough sleeping, because moving people from the streets into temporary accommodation still leaves them homeless.

Those statistics show that for every homeless person we see sleeping rough, there are about 63 other homeless people who are less visible: they are in temporary accommodation, sofa surfing or on night buses like my constituent. Some say that rough sleeping is the tip of the iceberg, but if an iceberg is one-eighth out of the water, the analogy is not strong enough. Rough sleeping would not even be a quarter of what is visible above the water, if my maths is right—I make no claim to be a mathematician.

The latest statistics on rough sleeping show that the total number of people counted or estimated to be sleeping rough on a single night was 4,677, which is down 2% from the 2017 total of 4,751. That is a decrease of 74, based on a faulty test, is on the back of an increase of 2,909 since 2010, using the Government’s own measure. Under the last Labour Government, the number of rough sleepers was at an all-time low. The latest figures suggest that rough sleeping may have reached a two-year low.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The figures that my hon. Friend mentions are compelling, but even if we did not have them, we can see the problem anywhere—I know about it in my constituency, and that applies to most of us. In the centre of Leytonstone, by my office and by the library where I do my surgeries, the number of rough sleepers is massively greater than eight years ago when I was elected. On top of that, universal credit has just gone live. In the next few months, many of us—particularly me—are very apprehensive about the effects of UC when it really hits our area.

Neil Coyle: Sadly, my hon. Friend is right to be nervous. Of course, I gave way to the chair of the parliamentary Labour Party in the hope that he might call me in a debate at some point. Southwark was one of the earliest test areas for universal credit. My experience is that my hon. Friend will have more cases of rough sleeping as a result of the universal credit roll-out.

The 2% drop nationally comes with very significant variances. There was a massive 60% jump in rough sleeping in Birmingham. In Manchester, I believe it was about 31%, and 13% in London. There were not such high numbers overall, but there were statistically significant jumps in areas such as Doncaster, where rough sleeping is three and a half times what it was just a year ago. In Rugby, there is five times as much, and in Corby there is seven times as much, albeit from low bases. Those anomalies need addressing. The towns and cities with large rises need more significant attention. I hope that the Minister will address that.

I want to highlight areas that are doing better than others. Brighton has reduced rough sleeping by two thirds; Luton has almost cut it in half and Bedford has cut it by about a third. Some areas are doing better, and I hope that their perhaps better practice is extended. My own council has bucked the London rise of 13%. There were just three additional rough sleepers in Southwark last year, and it is leading work to train staff in other local authorities to implement the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I have been out with the police in Lancashire and Kent and have seen their joint agency approach to tackling homelessness. Does he agree that a whole-system approach is necessary, and does he share my concern that some police forces still use the Vagrancy Act 1824 to criminalise rough sleepers without giving them the support they clearly need?

Neil Coyle: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I know she does a huge amount on policing. The police should not be picking up the pieces of failing systems elsewhere. That is an avoidable drain on their resources.
Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): My hon. Friend touches on something vital: we must deal not just with the phenomenon of homelessness and rough sleeping but with its causes. We need to make more effort on employment, the benefits system, young people coming out of care, people leaving the armed services without the necessary support and, yes, drug and alcohol problems. All those issues—including mental health problems, by the way—need to be addressed if we are really going to get on top of this problem.

Neil Coyle: My right hon. Friend is spot on. It is a sad truth that we know who these people are. We know which people are more likely to become homeless or sleep rough. They are an identifiable group. They are care leavers, women fleeing domestic violence, ex-forces people and people with mental health problems. We know who they are. We also know from experience—the scrapping of the Supporting People programme had direct consequences in this policy area—that there is no silver bullet. I do not think anyone suggests that there is, but we know who is more likely to become homeless, and we know how we can support them to avoid that.

Ruth Cadbury: My hon. Friend is being incredibly generous with interventions. We know what the causes are. We also have experience of the solutions. We had lots of rough sleeping in London in the mid-90s. The Labour Government addressed the issue by identifying all the people who were vulnerable and putting in joined-up services. By 2010, there was virtually no rough sleeping in central London. Does he share my anger at Ministers who say that this is a complex problem and they do not know where to start?

Neil Coyle: My hon. Friend is right. I am a member of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions. I recommend our report on that subject, which calls for a dramatic change to the sanctioning system.

When the DWP, under the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), scrapped disability living allowance and brought in personal independence payments, its own impact assessment stated that 500,000 disabled people would not qualify for support. Making it that much harder for disabled people to obtain basic funding—the average DLA payment was £3,500 a year—of course pushes more people towards the street. I should plug the Trussell Trust’s campaign to scrap the waiting time for universal credit. I encourage Members to sign up and support it.

Most organisations that work in this area have a long-term focus, and the Government should too. There has been only a 2% drop in rough sleeping so far, but will the Minister say how even that low level will be sustained if the pilots are temporary? I hope she will also tell us whether the funding for the schemes that exist—there are not enough—will be extended. We need an answer, because local authorities and organisations such as Shelter, which works with Southwark Council on this issue, need to know that they have longer-term funding. Their own sustainability is at stake. Without longer-term planning, I am uncertain whether we will halve rough sleeping even by 2051. I hope the Minister tells us how the Government intend to build on success in some of the pilot areas.

Lots of local authorities got in touch with me in advance of the debate. Last year, the number of households accepted as homeless was almost 60,000 in England, 34,000 in Scotland and 9,000 in Wales. Southwark is doing a lot of work on this issue, and it deserves credit for that. Southwark spends all its discretionary housing payment. It receives £1.3 million, and it all goes out—there is not a penny left—to try to support people to stay in their homes. It needs more. Southwark has trained all 326 councils on the Homelessness Reduction Act, and 271 councils have visited to shadow its service and learn.
how to operate in the HRA environment. Southwark has established both a London training academy, which has trained 1,000 council officers, and a rough sleeping training academy, which has trained the 81 councils across England that have the highest levels of rough sleeping. I acknowledge that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government funded that.

The Local Government Association got in touch to say that homelessness

“is a tragedy for all those it affects,”

and that rough sleeping

“is one of the most visible signs of the nation’s housing crisis.”

It estimates that councils provide temporary housing for more than 82,000 households, including 123,000 children. “Temporary accommodation” does not begin to describe the circumstances of some of those households. Children will have woken up on Christmas day with a shared kitchen or even a shared bathroom. How can families celebrate Christmas day when they cannot even cook their own food? That is an appalling set of circumstances.

The number of people living in temporary accommodation has increased by 65% since 2010. In Southwark alone, 2,400 families are supported in temporary accommodation. The Local Government Association estimates that the funding gap will be £110 million this year, and £421 million in 2024-25.

I will touch on dehumanisation. Last year a man died at Westminster tube station, right on the doorstep of this building. It got a lot of attention because of where it happened, but sadly it is estimated that 600 homeless people—600 people—died on the streets last year. We should be more shocked by this, not just because somebody died at Westminster and that case got more attention. It happened, but sadly it is estimated that 600 homeless people died at Westminster and that case got more attention, not just because somebody died at Westminster and that case got more attention than usual, but because of the level of the problem and the age at which homeless men and women die, which is around 40 years old.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that although we welcome the severe weather emergency provision money, which people in my area who run the shelter—largely the churches—get, the problem is that it is based on predictive weather planning? It is never easy for a volunteer to try to work out whether they are going to be needed on a particular night. Some of that money could be used more creatively for preventive work, to get people into accommodation before they need to go to the shelter.

Neil Coyle: Absolutely. The costs of getting this wrong are far greater than the costs of the up-front preventive measures.

The sector is unanimous, and it is a recommendation of the all-party parliamentary group on ending homelessness, that adult safeguarding reviews should become the norm for any adult rough sleeper who dies on the streets. We have them for children’s services, but there is not an automatic assumption that they will be done for adults, and there should be. A review should be done in a no-blame culture, so we can identify what interventions might have helped to prevent that death on the streets. I hope the Minister will commit to that today.

I have an example of a really difficult case. A woman whose sister had died in Ghana came to my surgery. The day she left to go to her sister’s funeral, she wrote to the police, the council, the South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust, the GP and others begging for help for her grandson. She had looked after her grandson as he grew up—his mum had died and his dad was never on the scene—for as long as she possibly could. However, his mental health had broken down and his behaviour became too much, so he was supported elsewhere, in sheltered accommodation.

What happened next was tragic. The grandson was not getting the mental health support that he needed. His behaviour became erratic in the shelter and problematic for other residents, and he was evicted. He was beaten to death in Walworth. He had stolen someone’s bike and pawned it, and the people he had stolen it from found him and beat him up, and he died. The morning his grandmother got back from Ghana, the police knocked on her door to tell her he was dead, despite the fact she had begged everyone to provide an extra, small intervention that could have prevented such an awful occurrence. Personally, I think the mental health services should have done more in that case, but we need to learn from incidents like that, to make sure that all avoidable deaths are actually made avoidable.

There is a question mark: are homeless people worth less, somehow? They have been made to feel that way. Being homeless is a dehumanising experience and the lack of human contact—even eye contact—is something that comes out in homeless group sessions, when we talk to homeless people directly.

There have been some bizarre policies. At Poole Borough Council the solution to rough sleeping was to introduce public space protection orders, which imposed fines on homeless people. Unsurprisingly, those fines were not paid when the council attempted to impose them, because homeless people do not have much money. It was a bizarre attempt at policy, but perhaps not as bad as the Cardiff Conservative councilor, Kathryn Kelloway, who was so outraged at the indecency and indignity of homelessness that she called for homeless people’s tents to be torn down—not because they had new homes, but just to take away their tents. That was shameful. She was suspended by the Welsh Conservatives, but less well publicised is the fact that she has already been readmitted, which speaks volumes.

Perhaps I have talked for too long, but I want to touch on some other issues. The private rental sector is the fastest growth area for people becoming homeless. Lots of organisations, some represented here today, are calling for no-fault evictions to be scrapped and section 21 reformed. There are lots of reasons why I want more rent controls and longer tenancy agreements to try to prevent some of this, as well as an increase in expenditure on help to rent, to try and get more people into the sector where possible.

Hon. Members have already referred to domestic violence, which I will touch on. The Government statistics, which I have taken from the House of Commons Library briefing, are astonishing. From April to June 2018, 4,500 households were owed a statutory homeless duty where the reason for losing their last settled home was “violent relationship breakdown with partner or associated persons.” That is 8% of all households owed homeless duty. The Women’s Aid annual survey 2017 found that housing was the most frequent co-presenting issue for women experiencing domestic abuse, above health, justice, finance and children.
[Neil Coyle]

The crisis in refuge funding has been driven by the demise of the Supporting People programme. If there is one specific programme that should be rebuilt, it is that one. In 2015-16, one in 10 homeless acceptances were due to domestic violence. Half of St Mungo’s female clients have experienced domestic violence and one third said domestic violence had contributed to their homelessness.

There is an issue around the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. Fleeing from domestic violence does not automatically make women a priority need. They still have to meet the vulnerability threshold in the legislation to meet the criteria for assistance. That needs addressing, because councils are getting this wrong. The Women’s Aid project No Woman Turned Away looked at the reasons given to women for not getting homelessness assistance—we should think about the circumstances in which councils are doing this—which included the woman needing proof of abuse. Some women were deemed to be intentionally homeless as a result of being beaten up by a partner. That is not an acceptable excuse to try and deny someone the support they need. Some were even told to return to the violent partner, rather than get help from their council. Those circumstances must change.

The “no recourse to public funds” policy is completely unacceptable on every level. Either we believe in human rights or we do not. NRPF denies people equality of opportunity and rights to family life. I will give some examples, but for those who do not know, let me first explain that it is used to apply only to illegal immigrants to the UK—to those who had no lawful reason to be in this country. The coalition Government, to their shame, then extended it to families, including those with British-born children; there are now 50,000 British-born children, born to parents legally in this country, who are not entitled to any public support. The circumstances into which those families are driven are horrific, and in some cases they are the result of Home Office error.

On Monday, Mr Musari sent me a message. I am godfather to his son; when we first met in 2015, he was about to become homeless. He had been working, paying tax and paying private rent, but the Home Office told him to stop—apparently we did not want him working, contributing or paying tax—and he was made homeless while his wife was pregnant with their third child. They were put through the wringer so much that he nearly killed himself; he said that he thought his children would get more help if he were dead. Only on Monday, almost three years later, was the decision finally overturned, granting him access to public funds—it has taken that long to correct a Home Office error.

Let me give one more example from my constituency. A woman was told seven years ago, in court, that she had a criminal record and did not meet the “person of good character” criterion, so she would be denied access to public funds. She has just got her new biometric card, but it has taken until now to overturn the decision, because it was a case of mistaken identity. She has never committed a crime, in this country or anywhere else—not so much as nicking a pint of milk of from a supermarket, which I am sure we have all done. She too has been through the wringer: she and her son, now 10, were made homeless and were reliant on friends and family. That boy was three years old when this situation began as a result of a Home Office mistake.

The all-party parliamentary group has made recommendations, including reinstating access to legal aid so that people in those circumstances do not have to wait three and a half years, or seven years, to overturn awful erroneous decisions by the Home Office. It is unacceptable. The Zambrano restrictions, which deny people access, should be lifted for anyone with a dependant. No child should be put through this process as a result of where their parent may have come from.

It is completely unacceptable that Surrey Square Primary School in my constituency has 40 children in those circumstances. If my daughter Esme were old enough, those children could have been born in the bed next to hers in St Thomas’s hospital, but they are denied access to the same support that Esme might qualify for. The children get this. They understand how unfair it is to victimise their classmates and friends. The Government are missing what this divisive and horrific policy is creating in our schools, especially in areas such as my constituency.

I will touch on the criminal justice system, which a couple of hon. Members have already mentioned, and the cost of getting this policy wrong, with specific reference to criminal justice. I hope the Minister sees her role as a cross-Government one, because there is not just one solution to this; it touches on many other areas.

The cost to the taxpayer of getting this wrong is extortionate, through councils, the NHS and mental health services, which we have already talked about. Rough sleepers experience higher levels of certain health conditions that result in hospitalisation, and that is not free.

The response to a question I put to the Ministry of Justice revealed some figures that I think are shocking. The total number of people going into prison has fallen slightly since 2016, but the proportion of homeless people going to prison has risen from 23% to 27%.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am finding the hon. Gentleman’s speech of great interest, and he has obviously researched this subject very deeply, but I will tentatively point out that it has been going on for 42 minutes, and while I am enjoying it, it would perhaps be more appropriate, given that there are other people here, if he came to his peroration.

Neil Coyle: Finally, an intervention that I can say “Get lost!” to. Bad luck; perhaps the hon. Gentleman did not want me to take interventions. He will be pleased to hear that I am nearly finished, but his intervention was in poor taste, I think. Perhaps I will take a bit longer—I do not know.

As I was saying, the total number of people going into prison has fallen slightly, but the percentage of those people who are homeless has risen to 27%. Last year, that will have amounted to 27,000 people entering prison who are of no fixed abode—homeless, in other words. The average cost of keeping someone in a prison in England is £35,000; it is higher in Scotland and much higher in Northern Ireland, where it is more than £50,000. If we just use the England figure, 27,000 people at £35,000 a year means that the Government’s failure fully to address homelessness is contributing to a prison population costing roughly £945 million a year.
What a waste—what an awful waste. That is nearly a billion quid. I know the Government did not get their money's worth out of the Democratic Unionist party, but this £1 billion would be much better invested upfront in preventative services to stop the scandal of people being made homeless and forced into crime. We know who is among the prison population: people with mental health conditions, care leavers and people who are ex-forces, as has already been touched on. The Government should invest in those groups to support them and prevent them from becoming homeless.

I would like to think that this is linked to the rising and extortionate cost of getting this wrong, but, as touched on previously, the public will is there to tackle this problem. The public do not want people to be sleeping rough or to be made homeless. As an indication of that demonstrable public will, the intervention and support of the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, who has done some brilliant work on this, meant that last year StreetLink had more referrals and more donations from the public than ever before.

Paula Sherriff: Batley Homeless Project, Dewsbury Cares and Churches Together in Dewsbury are doing amazing voluntary work, but Sarah Watkinson of Winter Warmers of Mirfield is now taking the space-type blankets that people get at the end of a marathon to the railway station in the morning and asking people to give them out to homeless people they see on their commute. Does my hon. Friend agree it is a shame that people have to do that and that, while we are grateful for the work they do, if the Government got their act together, perhaps they would not have to do it?

Neil Coyle: We are, of course, grateful to the army of people out there who are propping up this failing system. They want to see action from the Government and they are not getting it. I will plug StreetLink again: people can phone to make a referral, and StreetLink will do the intervention. Anyone who wants to help directly should do that.

I will end, hon. Members will be pleased to know, with a quick point. The Minister made the commitment and the intervention and support of the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, who has done some brilliant work on this, meant that last year StreetLink had more referrals and more donations from the public than ever before.

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I will end, hon. Members will be pleased to know, with a quick point. The Minister made the commitment last year that if rough sleeping continued to rise, she would resign. Obviously there has been a 2% drop, so we are glad to see her still in post—I mean that genuinely; she would resign. Obviously there has been a 2% drop, so may not be picked up in rough sleeping headcounts. However, I think we need to go much further. To tackle homelessness and rough sleeping, it is important that we truly understand it. The hon. Lady mentioned the statistics; the reality is that we do not entirely know, because in nearly all cases they are estimates. We have some reasonably good estimates for London, but for the rest of the country they are often based on a headcount on a single night, at one point of the year. As the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark rightly pointed out, numerous people will come into a town centre of an evening or during the day, because they can beg, and people will be kind and generous. However, because of the danger of violence in the evening, they will actually head out of town to parks and recreational spaces to sleep in tents, so may not be picked up in rough sleeping headcounts.

We know that the reasons for homelessness and rough sleeping are numerous, varied and complex. I wish it were as simple as saying that the answer is just more money, but money is only part of the answer. To some extent—I err on the side of caution when using this phrase—homelessness is a little like an illness. Successive Governments have thrown huge amounts of money at the problem, which, a bit like a painkilling, has worked in masking the pain but has not actually treated the underlying condition or, even better, actually cured it.

It is difficult to conduct a debate about rough sleeping without viewing it in the wider context of homelessness. The hon. Gentleman gave a compelling and comprehensive speech; it will not surprise him that I do not agree with all of it, but much of it I do agree with. He referenced a lot of the all-party parliamentary group’s work, and I will try not to repeat too many of the points that he made so eloquently. I also thank the Minister. I know it has not been a very easy 12 months for her, but she has worked very diligently on this issue and thank her and the Secretary of State for the roles they have played.

Over the past 12 months we have seen a small decrease in rough sleeping, but it is important to point out that that is in the context of increases in London, Birmingham and Manchester in particular, and of figures still showing an increase of 165% since 2010. I welcome the Government’s ambition to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and end it entirely by 2027, but that is too long. I put it to the Minister that we must be far more ambitious.

Lyn Brown: I know that the figures are disputed and that the CHAIN—combined homelessness and information network—statistics show differences year to year, but with a decrease of 2% a year it will take until 2052 to deal with rough sleeping in Britain, and that is frankly not good enough.

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention; I picked up on that point, which the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark, my co-chair on the all-party parliamentary group, also made. I think it is a little misleading, if I dare say so, on the basis that the past year is the first year in which a number of interventions kicked in, of which is the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, so it is not necessarily correct to say that we will see a 2% decrease; we should see a much sharper decrease this year, next year and the year after. Of course, the key is ensuring that we stay on top of those figures and, through further debates such as this one and through the all-party parliamentary group, we continue to hold the Minister and Secretary of State’s feet to the fire to ensure that those ambitions are met.

However, I think we need to go much further. To tackle homelessness and rough sleeping, it is important that we truly understand it. The hon. Lady mentioned the statistics; the reality is that we do not entirely know, because in nearly all cases they are estimates. We have some reasonably good estimates for London, but for the rest of the country they are often based on a headcount on a single night, at one point of the year. As the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark rightly pointed out, numerous people will come into a town centre of an evening or during the day, because they can beg, and people will be kind and generous. However, because of the danger of violence in the evening, they will actually head out of town to parks and recreational spaces to sleep in tents, so may not be picked up in rough sleeping headcounts.

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An old adage that works just as well for homelessness and rough sleeping as for anything else is that prevention is always better than cure. We need a two-pronged approach that covers both. In order to prevent homelessness and to help those currently homeless, we have to truly understand them, looking at those numerous, varied and complex reasons and then putting in place timely interventions to address each and every one of them, otherwise we risk regression.

The all-party parliamentary group goes to all parts of the country, and I have seen too many cases, particularly in London and my constituency of Colchester, of rough sleepers who have been through the council system. They have had support and been through temporary accommodation, and in many cases have been given social housing, but for so many reasons that has failed. That is one of the biggest problems, and if we do not address those underlying issues that cause homelessness at the outset, the likelihood of regression is sadly very high.

We need much better data—as I said, we have reasonable data for London but not for the rest of the country—in order to understand those root causes of homelessness and then address them. We know some of the causes. They include poverty, debt, eviction and section 21 notices to end assured shorthold tenancies, which are now the No. 1 cause of homelessness. They also include relationship or marital breakdown, domestic violence, landlords not letting to those in receipt of benefits, alcoholism, drug addiction, mental health issues, leaving prison or care, being LGBTQ—a particularly vulnerable cohort—hospital discharges and leaving our armed forces, which the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark mentioned.

We also have to consider the wider context. In 2017-18, we built 6,463 social homes, yet nearly 1.2 million people are on council housing waiting lists. Successive Governments have not built anywhere near enough social homes.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I do not disagree with the point the hon. Gentleman is making. Would he like to comment on the opinion of the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government that the Mayor of London should build fewer affordable homes and more luxury homes, as he said yesterday?

Will Quince: I had not seen that, so it would be ill-judged to comment on it. I can point the hon. Gentleman to a very fine article from only last week in, I believe, the Colchester Gazette, authored by the local MP, on why we need the most ambitious Government investment in social housing since the second world war. I will touch on that in a little bit.

Sadly, we have an estimated 4,677 people sleeping rough on our streets, and 277,000 homeless households. That is due in part to a lack of security in the private rented sector, which, as I mentioned, is now the biggest single cause of homelessness. We have areas where demand massively outstrips supply, including some of our major cities and large towns, with Colchester being a prime example, so landlords will not let to those in receipt of benefits.

The Government have done some great work, which is starting to make a difference and gives some reason for optimism, including the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. I was pleased to speak at all stages of its passage and to sit on its Bill Committee. There is also the £28 million Housing First pilot, the rough sleeping initiative and the Somewhere Safe to Stay pilot. There is funding for non-UK nationals sleeping rough. There are rough sleeping support teams and mental health support outreach workers. Improvements have been made to StreetLink and there are homelessness experts in jobcentres. Those are all part of that £100 million package to support the rough sleeping strategy announced last year.

My concern is that, worthy, important and valuable as those programmes are, they treat the symptoms, not the cause. What do we need to do? The first thing I should say to the Minister is that I do not have all the answers. However, I have some suggestions on ways in which we can start to prevent homelessness and address the issue. First, we need a full nationwide roll-out of Housing First as quickly as possible. The three pilots were important and a great start, but we know that it works; we have seen it work in other countries, particularly in Scandinavia, where rough sleeping has been entirely eradicated. Secondly, fewer than half of local authorities have a night shelter, so we need to fund and build more of those. Regional hubs are hugely important.

As the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark mentioned, we need to lift the freeze on the local housing allowance, which was introduced in 2016. We also need to embed and fully fund the Homelessness Reduction Act. It is a great piece of legislation, but we must monitor it to make sure that it is working and is fully funded and, equally importantly, that local authorities use it to its full and interpret it in the right way. That is hugely important, particularly in relation to the duties it places on them. As the hon. Gentleman also mentioned, we need a help-to-rent scheme. We need to look at people who have no recourse to public funds. In London and some of our big cities, between 30% and 40% of rough sleepers are non-British nationals and are not entitled to any support, so we need to find a solution for those individuals.

We need to start treating homelessness, and particularly rough sleeping, as a health issue. I mentioned alcoholism, drug addiction and mental health issues. We need mental health support workers to go out with every outreach team and down the country. I am pleased to see that £30 million will be invested in that regard, which will make a huge difference. For the Minister to say at one of our all-party parliamentary group meetings that the Department very much sees rough sleeping and homelessness as a health issue was an important step change.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman may feel positive about the Government accepting that homelessness should be seen as a health issue, but his Government have cut public health funding.

Will Quince: The hon. Lady makes a good point about health funding. I have raised my own concerns about that privately with Ministers. There is a huge amount more work to do in that area. I specifically refer to outreach workers going out in our towns and cities across this country and providing support. It is often those outreach workers who are trusted to provide that support. However, I very much take her point.
Minister, we need specialist, well-funded interventions for those high-risk groups that I mentioned—particularly prison leavers, care leavers, survivors of domestic violence and the LGBTQ community. We have to give more support to those amazing charities and voluntary organisations that work so hard to tackle homelessness up and down our country. Many of those charities have been in existence for decades, but the pressures on them now are huge.

Ruth Cadbury: I apologise that I will not be able to stay to hear the Minister’s response. While I appreciate the hon. Gentlemen’s concern and care for what he thinks should be done, perhaps he could look at the record of the two years before and after the millennium. Those of us in local government then worked with and funded—or were supported by Government funding—via several different routes, the public sector and the third sector to provide the very services that he describes. Those services supported all sorts of vulnerable people before they became homeless. They were thought of not as homelessness services but as early intervention and prevention services, and they prevented a host of problems, not only rough sleeping.

Will Quince: As I mentioned, the last Labour Government made several helpful interventions, but I genuinely believe that throwing money at the issue, which the Labour Government did as much as any of their successors, is not wholly the answer. It worked like a painkiller, masking the pain, but did not address the underlying condition.

Marsha De Cordova: The hon. Gentleman is making an incredibly long speech. It is not about throwing money at homelessness. It is the policy of austerity that has led to the rise in homelessness. That is just a fact.

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I mentioned that the issue is in part about money, but it is not wholly about money; it is also about getting the right interventions in place. The hon. Lady may not have been listening entirely. I would very much welcome her coming to some of our APPG meetings, because then she would know that it is not just about austerity. Austerity may be part of the issue, because of course if we cut back on services up and down the country, everything has a consequence, but the reasons for homelessness and, in particular, rough sleeping are complex, varied and numerous. It cannot be put down to just one thing.

We need to address the availability of high-strength cheap alcohol on our high streets. I appreciate that doing something about that is not within the Minister’s gift, but I hope that she can take the issue away.

I know that this will be a controversial point, but we need to try to rechannel the generosity of the British public. Too many people are, understandably, giving money to people on the streets. My message to them is this. That generosity is incredible, but please direct the money to the amazing charities that work in our towns and cities up and down the country. By all means, support people with food, blankets and all sorts of other things, but not with money, because in too many cases, as we find if we speak to rough sleepers, it ends up going on drugs and alcohol, and sadly that is helping to perpetuate their rough sleeping. It is making the problem worse, not better, so I encourage people to support charities that are working on the ground and not to give money to individuals.

I want to come back to what the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) said. Yes, we can throw money at an issue, but unless we address the underlying cause, we will not solve it, and the underlying cause of this issue is that successive Governments have failed to build anywhere near enough social housing. That is as true of the last Labour Government as it was of the Government before them and of the Government before them. That is why I genuinely believe that, finally and most importantly, we need the most ambitious and largest Government social house building programme since the second world war. I refer the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) back to that rather punchy article on this issue.

Andy Slaughter: Again, I cannot fault what the hon. Gentleman is saying about social housing. It is what all the homelessness charities are urging on us. I just hope that he can have some influence on the Government whom he supports. But perhaps he can explain, then, why rough sleeping fell by 75% in the last 10 years of the Labour Government and has gone up by 165% in less than 10 years of his own party’s Government.

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. There are many reasons for what he refers to. The Government could tomorrow invest tens of millions of pounds—well, it would be more than tens of millions—in more temporary accommodation, and that would get more people off the streets, but it would not address the underlying problem, which is that we need long-term, permanent, secure accommodation for people up and down our country.

I come back to the fundamental point about social housing. I want us to get back to building in the region of 100,000 social houses a year. The Office for Budget Responsibility has estimated that in 2018-19 the total housing benefit bill is likely to hit an incredible £23.4 billion—£23.4 billion—and it is only going in one direction; it is only increasing. That means that we are spending more than £20 billion a year to mitigate the effects of a housing shortage brought about by successive Governments, without finding a long-term solution to the problem. Arguably, what is worse is that, because of the lack of social housing, those who need homes are being housed in the private rented sector, so taxpayers’ money is being transferred into the pockets of private landlords, which in turn only increases demand in the private rented sector and drives up rents for everyone else. I suggest that investing in social homes is a far more efficient use of public money. Once built, those social homes would be public assets that would appreciate in value.

Mr Howarth: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his generosity in giving way. Does he agree with me on this point? The Government recently announced that they would make direct payments to private landlords to avoid escalating rent arrears. Would it not be sensible to make the same offer to social landlords?

Will Quince: I will have to look to the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark, because I believe that that is a recommendation that the all-party parliamentary group has made. It is one of those changes that would be a positive step.
[Will Quince]

The other reason why a large and ambitious programme of social housing would be a good thing is that it would provide—this is why there is a strong Conservative case for doing it—an immediate financial return through the reduced housing benefit bill. It would also alleviate hugely the pressure on the private rented sector and ultimately, I believe, lead to cheaper rents.

I will conclude because I am conscious that many hon. Members wish to speak in the debate. Although I hugely support the Government’s aim and ambition, I want us to be far more ambitious, and, through the all-party parliamentary group, we will continue to push the Government to be more ambitious. I said earlier that homelessness is a little like an illness. I want us to invest fully and properly in the treatment and cure, and that does mean significant resource. So I say to the Minister: please set out an ambitious strategy to tackle the root causes, and the whole House—I believe that Minister: please set out an ambitious strategy to tackle this would be cross-party—will support you in making the case to the Treasury. It would lead not only to a financial benefit but to a huge social benefit. One family homeless or one person sleeping rough on our streets is one too many. Let this be the Government who put in place the long-term strategy to end homelessness, and Minister, we will all be behind you.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I say to hon. Members that they may seek to make interventions, but I ask them to try to refrain from making comments while they are sitting down. I suggest that they seek to make interventions, rather than making comments from a sedentary position. I call Justin Madders.

2.36 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. There were a lot of thanks in the opening remarks from my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle), in chairing the APPG on ending homelessness. My hon. Friend gave a passionate and well informed introduction to the subject.

Sleeping out on the streets happens all year round, but it is at times such as this, when the temperature is very low and any night could be someone’s last, that the issue comes into focus. I commend those organisations that have taken extra steps in recent weeks, when the weather has been particularly cold, but we must recognise—as I think hon. Members do—that, welcome as those interventions are, they deal only with the issue as it presents itself. We need to look at the underlying causes of what I consider to be a national scandal.

Rough sleeping is a national crisis. As we have heard, the figure has risen by 165% since 2010. No doubt we will hear—indeed, we have heard already—that there has been a 2% fall in the number of people sleeping rough across England as a whole in the last year, but what I see with my own eyes tells me that we have a crisis right here and now. I have been a Member of this House for just under four years and I have noticed a significant increase in the number of people sleeping in doorways on the walk back to my flat. This morning, while walking in, I saw lots of sleeping bags and cardboard boxes—evidence of people sleeping rough. I notice, whenever I go out in a big city, that there are more and more people sleeping on the streets; there are more than there used to be. I have also noticed an increase in the number of people coming to my surgery who are sleeping rough or facing homelessness. Every night when I leave this place, I see the people sheltering in the subways under the Palace of Westminster and I feel ashamed—ashamed that right by the corridors of power, in one of the richest countries in the world, we have people sleeping rough. I am sure that I am not the only person who, looking at that, thinks: how can we let this happen?

As we have heard, there is a huge crisis. There were 4,677 people sleeping rough on any given night last year, compared with 1,768 in a similar survey in 2010. Nearly 5,000 people sleep rough every night. Saying the number does not really do the issue justice. Imagine filling a stand at a lower-league football ground and saying that every single person in it will be out on the streets that night. Think about exactly where those people will go, how they will feel and how that could be happening to a similar number of people not just that night, but every night throughout the year. That gives us a sense of the scale of the challenge that we face.

In the context of these surveys, those who are seen sleeping rough are, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark said, only the tip of the iceberg. Rough sleeping is the most visible form of homelessness, but of course many people are in temporary accommodation; there are people relying on friends and family for a place to live; and there are people sheltering in alcoves or other places away from the worst excesses of the weather.

It has not always been like this. As we know, in 2010, after 20 years of concerted Government effort across the parties, rough sleeping appeared to be almost at an end. Because homelessness is not inevitable, it can be prevented. It is clear that the Government accept that it can be prevented, because they aim to eradicate it by 2027. That seems an awful long time away for such a national scandal. We need to act more firmly now.

We have heard about the connections between health and rough sleeping. The British Medical Association tells us that being homeless can have a devastating effect on people’s mental and physical health. That is borne out by the Office for National Statistics figures, which show that a staggering 597 people died while sleeping rough or in emergency accommodation in 2017. That means that every night, at least one homeless person died. The average age of the people dying is 44 for men and 42 for women. Those deaths are premature and entirely preventable. It is a stain on this country that we did not prevent those deaths.

The interventions and funding in the Government’s new rough sleeping strategy are welcome, but they are only a first step. If the Government are to reach their own targets of halving rough sleeping by 2027 and ending it by 2027, they must address the key drivers, which we have heard a bit about in the debate: spiralling housing costs, lack of social housing, insecurity for
private renters and cuts to homelessness services. Only by addressing those issues can we have long-lasting change.

Since the Government came to power, rents have become increasingly unaffordable. Between 2011 and 2017, rents grew 60% faster than wages. In those circumstances, it is no wonder that people struggle to keep a roof over their heads. At the same time, welfare reforms have made private sector landlords increasingly reluctant to rent to tenants who rely on housing benefit. As we have heard, many landlords now refuse to accept tenants in receipt of benefit at all.

A quarter of private renters, equating to over 1 million households, rely on housing benefit or a housing element of universal credit to keep a roof over their head. Because of the decline in social housing stock, with nearly 1.2 million people trapped waiting for social housing, many of those families face greater and further instability with rising rents in the private rented sector. Housing benefit, as we have heard, is only paid up to the rate determined by the local housing allowance. The decision to freeze that in 2016 is causing real problems now. There is no requirement for landlords to let their properties at that level. It is a perfect recipe for people to fall further and further into debt.

If the Government were serious about tackling these issues and meeting the goals they have set, they would tackle the causes of homelessness. We need to make more homes available to people with a history of rough sleeping, and to continue to improve security for private renters. Three-year tenancies should be a minimum. We need to look at rent controls. We need to build thousands more homes for affordable rent.

Those are some of the causes, but I also question whether the system does enough to help those who become homeless. The new duties on local housing authorities to assess, prevent and relieve homelessness under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 are welcome. However, I have seen that amount to little more than handing out a list of private landlords for people to contact. Shelter tells us that the leading cause of homelessness is the loss of a private rented home, so I find it incredible that some local authorities see their duty to prevent homelessness as being fulfilled by nothing more than pointing people back in the direction of the sector that was responsible for their situation in the first place.

We know that, once evicted, many more people now struggle to find a new property due to the cost of securing a new tenancy, with deposits and other fees coming on top of the unaffordable rents that I have already referred to. I also have concerns that people who are given notice to quit by their private landlord are not really helped by the local authority. They are given no special priority until they are very close to the eviction date, which causes unnecessary stress and anxiety, and encourages—if not forces—landlords to go to court to get the eviction order they need. Who picks up the tab for these legal costs? Of course, it is the tenant. That approach does not help anyone.

Telling people who go into the council with a notice to quit that it might not be a lawful notice and they should seek legal advice is not actually helping people to get rehoused. The landlord will get them out eventually. It might take them a bit longer or cost them a bit more, but the council is not discharging its duties.

In response to the draft homelessness code of guidance, Shelter also identified a problem with the system for local connection referrals. Even when referrals are made in the proper way, people are often left in a period of limbo, during which they may not get any help with the relief of homelessness. This is even more of a problem when the referral is actually disputed. People in that situation are at risk of becoming citizens of nowhere, so it is hardly surprising that we see the consequences of that every night.

I am conscious that many hon. Members want to speak, so I will conclude. I believe that rough sleeping is a damning indictment of our society. The lack of priority and support we give to those who have fallen on hard times should shame us all. We have to do much better than we currently do.

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): I will not impose a time limit on speeches at this stage, but I urge hon. Members to keep to seven or eight minutes. I would appreciate that. Otherwise, I might set a time limit later.

2.45 pm

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Sharma.

If hon. Members have not already been, I recommend that they walk a few hundred yards down Millbank to see the exhibition of Don McCullin’s photographs at Tate Britain. He is famous for his haunting photographs of war over the past few decades. However, I had not previously seen the pictures he took in 1970 of homeless people in Spitalfields in the east end. One of those photographs is one of his most famous. They are at least as haunting as the images of the ravages of war that he produced. It is shaming that decades on we are still grappling with this problem, which should not exist in a successful, modern economy. His photographs are a reminder that these problems have been with us for some time.

Other hon. Members have spoken about the importance of measures to prevent homelessness in the first place. It makes sense, of course, to try to direct the focus of Government policy in so many areas of social concern towards prevention, rather than picking up the problem after it has happened. However, that is easier said than done. Generally, Finance Ministers are resistant to generalised bids to increase money in preventive measures, for fear that they will end up picking up the costs twice. That is one reason why it has been so hard to shift policy towards preventive measures in areas of public health, for instance. However, it is essential that we do so in relation to homelessness, because it is preventable.

The importance of mental health services has been mentioned. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) was right to focus on housing supply. I have spent 14 years in my affluent constituency of Arundel and South Downs dealing with requests from local communities to prevent the building of new housing. In truth, much of that housing is for other relatively affluent people and only part of it goes to social housing. The concern about the impact of new housing—a genuine concern about the impact on the countryside, local services and so on—obscures the wider point, which is that there has been a systematic failure to ensure that housing supply meets demand.
This is not only a question of social housing provision, to which Opposition Members have rightly drawn attention. The failure to provide sufficient private housing also has a knock-on effect on rent levels: rents become higher because housing supply is too low. In turn, the state directs large amounts of money towards housing benefit in order to help people meet those rents, and we enter a vicious circle. It is important that we have determined measures to increase housing supply and that we try to deal with some of the problems and the objections that people have. That includes a mix of private sector and social housing.

Hon. Members have rightly drawn attention to concerns about welfare policy. The five-week wait for universal credit has been mentioned. I know that the Government have taken some steps on that, but they need to go further, because it has clearly been a factor in homelessness.

Housing benefit is also an issue, particularly the shared accommodation rate, which has been frozen since 2016. The charity Depaul, which I will come to shortly, has pointed out that in one night, official figures indicated that 225 young people aged 18 to 25 were sleeping rough, but only 57 rooms could be found that would be available to them at rents within the shared accommodation rate. The support that is available to people has not and cannot keep pace with the level of rents, because it has been frozen, and the local housing allowance does not cover rents for 90% of areas in England. That welfare issue has to be addressed.

A related budgetary issue has affected Stonepillow, a local homelessness charity in West Sussex. West Sussex County Council has found itself at the receiving end of sharp reductions in local government funding, so it in turn has decided to nearly halve the housing-related support allowance. Effectively, that passes the burden on to district councils, with the knock-on effect that support for Stonepillow will be reduced by £300,000. If we are serious about tackling these problems, we should not penalise the important charities that do so much good work on the ground in providing help to people who become homeless and in helping to prevent homelessness.

As well as preventing homelessness and rough sleeping, we need to make sure that measures are available to help people who have become victims of it. I draw hon. Members’ attention to the charity Depaul, which I mentioned earlier, and its Nightstop service. On 10 October, World Homeless Day, I and several other hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Members for Colchester, for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) and for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) and the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin), and Baroness Suttie and Baroness Grender, slept out at the Oval cricket ground at an event organised by Depaul. Some 100 volunteers raised money for Depaul that evening. I declare an interest, which is that my partner is a fundraiser for Depaul, so it is not so much a financial interest for me as a matter of domestic harmony that I take an interest in such issues.

The experience of sleeping out on the concrete ground for just a few hours was a tiny insight into the experience that people have when they are sleeping rough. The truth is that we were all looked after before we pitched our cardboard boxes for the evening and, a few hours later, we were able to return to the warmth of our homes, a hot bath or shower, a meal and a job. Most of us were seized by the realisation of how debilitating it would be if we had to pick up our cardboard box and move on without any of those things to go to. I hope that when Depaul organises its sleep-out event in central London next year, many more hon. Members will take part to help the fundraising effort, draw attention to the issue and share in that experience on World Homeless Day.

Depaul runs a good service, Nightstop, which I mentioned. It has been going for a few years and it is interesting because it is a good example of the shared economy. Private individuals open up their homes and provide a bed at night for a homeless young person. Of course, they have to be approved and thoroughly vetted. The introduction to that service is a reminder of the various forms of homelessness, but those young people are often vulnerable and need a bed, security and a meal for the night.

In 2017, the Nightstop service provided more than 11,000 bed nights to nearly 1,500 young people. There is a tremendous opportunity to expand that volunteer-run service, but that would require additional funding. Less than half the local authority areas in the UK are covered by the Nightstop service, but Depaul is keen to expand it.

Depaul would like the Government to invest just £2.2 million over three years in five new sub-regional Nightstop services. After four years, it will pick up the funding for those services itself; it merely needs the seedcorn funding—the Government do not often get that kind of offer. That self-sufficient service would provide up to 7,500 more nights of emergency accommodation a year for young people. I encourage my hon. Friend the Minister, who takes a strong interest in these issues and who has done so much in the last year, to meet Depaul, perhaps visit a Nightstop service, and consider that incredibly cost-efficient and worthwhile proposal.

The numbers of people sleeping rough have levelled off, but they are still too high. Underneath the global figures, there are some big regional disparities that we need to understand, such as the disparity between the numbers of homeless people outside London and in London. In London, half the people sleeping rough are foreign nationals—almost all EU nationals—and the welfare issues around them are much more complex.

We should also realise that although the numbers appear to have reduced only slightly in the last year and are still too high, there was a much bigger reduction—23%—in the 93 areas that were targeted by additional money as part of the Government’s rough sleepers initiative introduced at the beginning of last year. That suggests that targeted funding, which is carefully directed at measures that are integrated and can help to deal with the problem, will be needed and worth pursuing. This is a problem that can be dealt with.

This issue should embarrass and shame us as an advanced economy. I welcome the Government’s ambition to halve the number of people sleeping rough by 2022 and end rough sleeping by 2027, but I disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, the chairman of the all-party group, of which I am also an officer,
that we need to do better than that. The Government should make the issue their highest priority, because no Government should want it to happen on their watch.

2.57 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Buck. I know you would be speaking on the issue if you were not chairing, and I congratulate you again on the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018, which received Royal Assent recently.

I will not take up too much time; I will deal with just two issues. Rough sleeping is the tip of the iceberg. I agree with the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) that it is a complex issue, so I will say a bit about that. It is also a solvable issue, however, which was not entirely solved, but was largely reduced, by the application of skill and resources, so I will also say something about that and where we go with it.

Many hon. Members have mentioned the fact that some short-term solutions and immediate measures could be adopted to relieve the pressure of rough sleeping, as is often done at this time of year. I pay tribute to the Mayor of London for his initiatives and the specific action that he has recently taken in the cold weather to make sure that, on compassionate grounds alone, people who are forced to sleep outside on very cold nights have somewhere to go. That is good.

Equally, I pay tribute to the fact that the Mayor of London has made the expansion of affordable social housing a priority in London for the first time in many years, because London is severely affected. As has been said, even as the high numbers of rough sleepers flattened nationally last year, they went up by 13% in London. Since 2010, rough sleeping has, I think, tripled in London, while it has gone up by about 165% overall. Yes, there are a lot of emergency and temporary measures that can be taken, but in reality we will not resolve this problem unless we address the underlying causes. I think everyone agrees on that, and it is good that there is consensus across the Chamber.

Some of those underlying causes are to do with the individual—I will come on to that in a moment—but a lot of them are to do with the housing system in this country, the instability of housing and the associated risk. I was struck by a figure from Crisis, which says that

“there were more than 170,000 families and individuals experiencing the worst forms of homelessness…This includes people sleeping on our streets, sofa-surfing with strangers, living in hostels, and stuck in other dangerous situations.”

That is an intolerable situation, but the trend in housing policy means that it has simply got worse over the years, because there has been huge growth in the use of temporary accommodation.

The ability of local authorities to discharge their housing responsibility into the private sector permanently under the Localism Act 2011 is one factor in that growth. As I have suggested, it is also about housing conditions—the very poor quality of housing and the attitude of landlords. Landlords may be willing to evict tenants who complain about the conditions they are in, or those conditions may simply become too bad and the properties unfit for habitation.

The problem is also related to restrictions on benefits. The cap on local housing allowance—one of the two key issues that Shelter identified in its briefing for this debate—makes it very difficult for anybody on who is on benefits to find housing in significant parts of the country, particularly in areas such as mine in inner London where housing costs are so high.

Universal credit is causing extraordinary problems. I met representatives of the Shepherds Bush Housing Group, which is one of the big housing associations in my area. They said that about 4% of their tenants are in some form of arrears, but the figure is three or four times that for those who are on universal credit. People are being evicted simply because the universal credit system is letting them down.

There is this fetish of relying on the private rented sector to solve problems that it simply is not designed to solve. The massive growth in the private rented sector and the decline in both owner-occupation and social housing, as a deliberate arm of Conservative Government policy, are at the root of these problems.

The other key point that Shelter makes—Members on both sides of the Chamber have also made it—is that we must have a significant commitment to social house building, including in expensive areas of the country. Social house building is very difficult because of land prices, and that is not just the case in London anymore; in other major cities and significant parts of the south of England, it is extremely difficult to achieve social house building.

How on earth did we get ourselves in a situation where £24 billion can go, with no long-term benefits in housing terms, into landlords’ pockets? I am sure that there are good landlords who use some of that money to invest, and landlords with property portfolios who are prepared to take on difficult tenants or tenants who are reliant on benefits. Neither of those scenarios reflect the picture that I find in my constituency, nor is that how the system is designed to work.

My second main point is that although the situation may be complicated, it is not a difficult one to resolve. We know what the solutions are, because we have a very sophisticated group of organisations—the big ones include St Mungo’s, Crisis and Shelter—which have huge reservoirs of knowledge about how to tackle the difficulties involved in homelessness. Homeless people are often very vulnerable people or people with complex problems, often related to addiction or mental health.

I know that there is a move now towards the Housing First model and I do not disagree with that, because putting a roof over somebody’s head is—I think this is fairly self-evident—key to ending homelessness. That model did not find favour previously because those tenancies would often break down, because people who were not used to managing their own lives in that way were unable to sustain tenancies.

The Housing First model obviously has to go hand in hand with a lot of support, but that support is generally there. We are dealing with people who are used to dealing—in an extraordinarily compassionate way but also in a professional way—with people with complex problems every day.

Two weeks ago, I was at one of the St Mungo’s hostels in my constituency. I go to those hostels often and we have hour-long sessions with their residents, and
I get asked all sorts of questions. They are sophisticated, educated and intelligent people who happen to have fallen through the cracks and on hard times. I made my excuses and left when I started being asked why Gordon Brown sold the gold reserves and why Labour adopted private finance initiatives, which gives people an idea of where the debate was going. At that stage, I decided that I had another appointment and needed to move on.

Nevertheless, there is a willingness among residents of such hostels and among people who are sleeping rough, as well as among the organisations that look after them, to resolve these problems. The resources to do that have to be available, however, and I am just not finding that to be the case at the moment. Immediate investment is what is lacking.

I know that the Minister will talk about the Government’s rough sleeping initiative, which has the aim of reducing rough sleeping by half by 2022 and reducing it fully by 2027. Of course we will support the Government in that aim, but it means that in about five years’ time we will be in the position that we were 10 years ago. I find that a bit depressing, to be perfectly honest.

I will try to be positive. We all know the large organisations that we work with on this issue. As other Members have already mentioned, there are also a lot of small organisations in our own constituencies. I will mention one—I am a patron of it, so I am obviously biased towards it—called The Upper Room, which is in my constituency. It started in 1990 as a group of local people who were concerned about rough sleeping, both by British citizens and by a lot of European citizens, at that stage. The problem has not got any better, particularly with the increase in “no recourse to public funds”.

Simply out of sheer compassion, those local people got together and raised funds; they are now raising about £350,000 a year from individual donations and charitable giving. Every day they provide a hot meal for about 1,500 people, but they have also gone on to provide an employment service and—particularly for ex-offenders—a service that teaches people to drive. That is a very good skill to help people to get into employment.

Nobody asked those people to do that. It is not a state enterprise; this is people simply seeing a problem and trying to resolve it. The good will is there and the expertise is there. However, with all due respect to the Minister, I do not feel as though there is yet sufficient will to challenge the immediate problems of rough sleeping or to address the issue of housing policy.

It is gratifying that I am now hearing Conservative MPs talk about that issue, and I try not to intervene every time a Conservative MP tries to teach me about the benefits of social housing. It is good if there is going to be a cross-party consensus on that, but there needs to be a sea change in Government policy, not tweaking at the edges. It requires investment of billions of pounds, year on year, to turn things around. We are starting from a very low base, with a very low level of house building. It is not just about identifying the land, reforming the planning system or bringing developers to heel regarding what they want to build.

Frankly, the comment that was made to ITV—I think it was made yesterday—by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, who I normally have a lot of time for, was a disgrace. To say to the Mayor, “You should concentrate more on building market housing and less on building social and affordable housing in London”—I mean, come and look at the problems in London of trying to get anybody housed, given the sort of conditions that people are living in and the length of time that people are waiting for a permanent home; it can be 10 or 15 years. Only by putting ideology to one side and saying that social housing is an absolutely key part of the housing market in this country will we ensure that these problems are not temporarily dealt with in a sticking-plaster way, but resolved for good.
Coastal towns such as Worthing have traditionally had a problem with rough sleepers. Worthing was not excluded from that, but we wanted to find practical solutions. Turning Tides and the council got together to quantify the extent of the problem to see what initiatives they could come up with. They wanted to engage with local rough sleepers to make sure that the services offered were suitable and matched the individual needs of local rough sleepers. In November 2017 they calculated the highest number of rough sleepers, with a count estimate of 34 and an actual count of 19. We know the problem of the actual numbers and the hidden numbers, but it was a more accurate picture than we had had for some time. The biggest challenge, not surprisingly, was sourcing sufficient emergency accommodation to offer them some refuge. The supported housing schemes run by Worthing Homeless Churches Projects were constantly full, despite good throughput and move-on rates. I pay tribute to the innovative and practical schemes that it ran for those with alcohol, drug and other problems. However, many rough sleepers were waiting too long to gain access.

In 2017, the council and Worthing Homes, the local social landlord after a large-scale voluntary transfer from Worthing Council, held an event on housing matters, in which I participated, to try to find a consensus in the town about what we could do about the issue. Worthing Homes has been very proactive in trying to make available step-up accommodation for rough sleepers once they get back to some stability and are able to take on some independent living themselves. I pay tribute to it.

At the event was a local developer, Roffey Homes, which has done some very worthwhile and commendable projects in the town. Inspired by that event, the owner of Roffey Homes saw an opportunity to provide emergency accommodation. He had just bought the local nurses’ home, which was surplus to requirements, next to the local hospital and intended to develop it. He was not going to develop it for several years, so he offered Turning Tides a five-year lease on a peppercorn rent. The council chipped in, planning permission was obtained and the council helped fund the work to enable it to be used as a 37-bed high-support short-stay accommodation project. Housing benefit funded the majority of the 24/7 staffing and the project opened in May 2018. I have visited it and seen the benefits.

The last count of rough sleepers in November last year showed the number had virtually halved in Worthing as a direct consequence of the project, although we have not solved the problem. There are still rough sleepers. Some of them will not instantly go into accommodation even when it is available because their needs are more complicated problems, as I have said. The Lyndhurst Road project, as it was called, was modelled to be accessible to clients who had not managed the requirements of the Worthing Churches Homeless Projects’ more structured supported housing schemes. The project offered wrap-around support from the multi-disciplinary team using the best practice of MEAM: Making Every Adult Matter. It is not just a matter of providing accommodation. There are mental health support workers on site to help. People come regularly from the local benefits office to help with jobs, benefit applications and support. A computer suite offers skills and access to enable people to apply for benefits, job opportunities and other things.

Yesterday I was told the story of one individual by the head of Turning Tides, John Holmstrom, who has really nailed his colours to the mast of the project, and I pay tribute to him for the work that he has done. He told me: “Today in court J told the Judge that Lyndhurst is the first place he has felt he can call home since his adoptive placement broke down when he was 13. J said he really likes Lyndhurst and trusts the staff and has never had that before...since J has been at Lyndhurst he has not been arrested or in trouble with the police”.

He was in court because of an historical issue before he became a tenant. His story applies to other people who have found not only accommodation but stability and a way of getting their lives back on track that will hopefully lead to some degree of independent living. It is not rocket science. The local council showed willing and used some Government money, and a local developer showed a bit of corporate social responsibility and some imagination. They and a well-run and well-supported homelessness charity that is very well regarded in our town came together, using the whole-systems approach that hon. Members have mentioned, to come up with a solution, rather than just constantly highlight the problems of homelessness and rough sleeping.

The project has not been without problems. My right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) mentioned the cuts in homelessness support that are affecting West Sussex charities. They will certainly impact on the project. It would be a great shame to see such good work go into reverse. The charity said: “The government’s decision to maintain supported housing within the Housing Benefit scheme has been a critical factor to stabilise our supported housing. This was very welcome.” However, it said: “We would urge the support element funding that was devolved to Local Authorities under Supporting People is ring fenced so supported housing can be stabilised for the long term”—so that projects can continue to benefit.

As I said, the project was not without problems. It has taken some brave characters, including two local councillors, to deal with it. I certainly pay tribute to Councillors Alex Harman and Keith Bickers who represent the area. There has been some antisocial behaviour, as often happens with such projects, usually not by people using the project themselves. It attracts drug dealing and antisocial behaviour to the vicinity, for which the project then gets blamed. It has taken brave local councillors and others to continue to support the project, despite residents’ complaints. They have gone out and organised public meetings and liaised with the police to get better police enforcement where there is antisocial behaviour and criminal activity in the area.

What I am outlining is the way forward. We can talk about the problems of homelessness and rough sleeping—the historical problems going back years—until we are blue in the face. We need such imaginative projects, and imaginative and forward-thinking people working in partnership to come up with solutions. Those solutions exist. We have not solved the problem in Worthing, but we have greatly alleviated it. It is noticeable that there has been a great reduction in the number of rough sleepers, who were causing problems in the town; that was being commented on. They have not just been hidden or disguised. People have been helped and supported, so that they will—I hope sustainably—avoid rough sleeping.
again in the future, when the accommodation comes to an end. That is the sort of practical solution to look at, and I am proud that it has been done in Worthing.

3.20 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck, not least because of your interest and tireless work in the field we are considering. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on his opening speech and on his work with the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince). There need not be an issue of rough sleeping, which is why we are having this debate.

I want to challenge the Minister, as have many hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber, about ambition. I believe that she is committed to the agenda, but that she lacks ambition in talking about 2027 as the date for the end of rough sleeping. That is far too late, because of the many statistics we have heard, and because of the lives involved—lives of people we have personal contact with. People urgently need redress. If the metro Mayor of Manchester can shorten the timescale, and in the light of the progress that has been made in Worthing, there is no reason why the Minister, with the resources in her hands and the power of office, cannot make a significant difference and change the landscape. I therefore urge her to reflect on the debate and to shorten the timescale, so that in 2022 street homelessness in our communities will have been obliterated.

We have today heard many reasons for the level of homelessness and rough sleeping, and we recognise how the country’s housing market has completely failed. In York, luxury apartment after luxury apartment is built while there is a housing crisis and people cannot access the market. There are 1,500 people waiting for a house, and people sleep rough every night. However, what shook our city was hearing at the end of last year that 11 homeless people had died in York. I went to the council to investigate and find out more about those individuals’ lives. A quarter of the deaths of homeless people in Yorkshire were in my city—a city that everyone tells me is lovely, which it is. Why, then, are these things happening? There is affluence as well as huge poverty in the city. There is huge inequality.

The council told me that it was not a question of homelessness; drug dependency and alcohol were the factors. In fact, one person did not count, because they had come down from Scotland. Who do those people belong to? Who has responsibility for those lives? The reality is that often local authorities hand out train tickets so people can return to where they came from. We must say that we are all responsible. If people reside on our doorstep, we must take responsibility for their lives and give them every opportunity. That includes people with no recourse to public funds—perhaps people who are here without legal documentation. They are human beings. We cannot and must not turn away from that, and it is a matter of shame that so many people have, for such a long time.

Before I go on to focus on deaths related to homelessness, I want to raise with the Minister the fact that local authorities still fail people and put them on to the streets. It was bitterly cold last week, and in York it was due to go down to minus 6°C at night. My office had a phone call from a young woman. She had not complied with all the rules put upon her in the context of the support and services she was given. She was therefore turned away from accommodation, on to the streets. My office intervened and found a bed, but we cannot have such things happening on the council’s watch. It is a disgrace. I have talked to the Minister many times about what is happening about homelessness in the city. In the summer, a homeless person came to see me after not being allowed access to their tent, and being evicted from it by the local authority. If that is happening, something has gone seriously wrong.

We have heard the statistics, including the figure that 597 people are reported to have died while rough sleeping in the past year. That is a serious crisis and a stain on our systems. It means that people have died unnecessarily. I have reflected on the fact that in many such deaths there are related problems and issues of comorbidity, with 32% being related to drug poisoning, compared with a figure of 0.7% for the rest of the population. Ten per cent. of deaths in that group are alcohol-related, compared with 1.2% in the rest of the population; and mental health is involved in 13%, compared with 0.9% in the rest of the population. That shows the complexity of homelessness, which the Minister understands, but it also demonstrates the need for a public health approach to address the whole issue.

Professor Nicholas Puckle of the University of York has provided evidence for the importance of putting housing first. The evidence is there. We do not need pilots anymore. The work has been done, as we have seen in global examples from Canada, New Zealand and Scandinavia. Let us get the programme rolled out across the country. It will make a significant difference.

I understand that Nottingham has a nurse working with people on the streets; let us put such approaches in place. What a difference that will make. It will affect physical health: many communicable diseases including tuberculosis and hepatitis can affect rough sleepers. It will also make it possible to address serious concerns about substance misuse and alcohol dependency, among other factors. Foot care and podiatry and general practice services can also be provided in that way. A rough sleeper in my constituency had serious respiratory problems but was denied anywhere to stay and had to sleep out in the damp and cold. The relevant services need to be in place to provide holistic care for individuals.

We also need to get upstream, however. Many people are on the streets because they have experienced trauma, including ex-members of the armed forces, people who have had broken relationships or those who have lost their job. I had a conversation with a gentleman in my constituency. Life turned against him when he lost his job, and he could not afford to live in a city where housing is so expensive. Many rough sleepers are lonely, and many are broken individuals. During the day they may not have anywhere to go. I ask the Minister whether we can ensure that there can be a safe place for people to go 24/7, day and night, where they can get food at meal times. Can we ensure that homeless people get the basic amenity of 24-hour access to public toilets? Those simple things can make such a difference to people who sleep on the street. We must put such systems in place.
I want to mention the question of ownership again. When it comes to the deaths of homeless people, who has responsibility? Currently no one does. Where is that data held? What is the definition of a homeless death, and can we learn from carrying out proper investigations how to improve things?

I ask the Minister to make a commitment today that for every person who is homeless and who dies, a safeguarding audit review will be carried out, so that we can learn the right strategies that we need to prevent deaths—to have no more deaths—this year and moving forward. Without ownership, we are not only saying to those individuals that their life has not counted; we are saying that they did not exist. Somebody who has had their identity suppressed by the circumstances around them throughout their life does not have dignity in death either, so will the Minister at least make that commitment today in order to move this debate forward?

3.30 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck.

Neil Coyle: Too long!

Kevin Foster: Given that heckle, I will be considerate as there are Labour Members who want to speak, even though I am not under a formal time limit.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on having secured this debate, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince). Rough sleeping is clearly an issue in Torbay, as it is in many other coastal communities. We have the contrast between those people with a £1-million boat in the harbour and a coastal apartment, and the people sleeping on the streets nearby.

The last count showed that 24 people were sleeping on the streets of Torbay. However, the Minister will know that from my time in local government, I have some suspicions about how the rough sleeper count is carried out: it is literally an exercise in going out and spotting homeless people. I suspect it is hard to work out another way of doing it, but if somebody is walking around, even though they visibly could have been sleeping on the street, they do not count towards the statistics. There is even some suggestion that if somebody is stood up with bedding around them, they may not be counted as a rough sleeper, even though most of us would look at them and see exactly what is going on.

The rough sleeper count is a measure that originates from Victorian times, and I am much happier with the way in which the Torbay End Street Homelessness campaign has set about doing a proper survey of those who are sleeping rough on the streets of the bay. Over the course of a week, people have been going out and engaging with those they find; not just spotting someone and saying, “There is someone who is sleeping rough,” but interviewing them about the reasons why they are engaging with those they find; not just spotting someone and saying, “There is someone who is sleeping rough on the streets of the bay.” Over the course of a week, people have been going out and engaging with those they find; not just spotting someone and saying, “There is someone who is sleeping rough on the streets of the bay.” Over the course of a week, people have been going out and engaging with those they find; not just spotting someone and saying, “There is someone who is sleeping rough on the streets of the bay.”

Another charity that works closely with those who find themselves on the streets of Torbay is People Assisting Torbay’s Homeless, a wonderful volunteer organisation that, sadly, is now trying to find a new home. It was removed from one of its previous properties because of a development going ahead, and now finds itself facing possession action by the local council. I certainly hope that the council will not implement a possession order until an alternative base has been found. I accept that the place offered up was temporary, but for PATH to be evicted and literally become homeless would be a rather cruel irony.

There is, of course, Shekinah in Torbay, which has provided a long-standing facility at Factory Row—the Leonard Stocks Centre, to which I used to be one of the closest residents. I recognise some of the comments that other Members have made about the issues that can occur, particularly when residents of such places are targeted, for no other reason than the evil intentions of those who are targeting them.

That leads us on, however, to a wonderful initiative that is happening in Torbay: the town’s night shelter, for which local churches come together and open their buildings to provide an option for those who are sleeping rough over winter. It is not just about having somewhere to keep warm and something to eat; it is about people finding a system of support and friendship, with a family or home atmosphere, to try to get them off the streets for good. Ultimately, it is not spending one night in a church hall that will make a difference to someone; it is having a system of support. I know that the churches in the bay are keen that their buildings should not just be magnificent Victorian structures that people visit on a Sunday morning, but places that really live out the gospel. That is a massive resource, and I know that some others are looking at how they can take it further.

I would certainly like Housing First to be extended into our bay, as we think it would make a great difference. The work of the Mayors of Merseyside, Greater Manchester and the West Midlands in driving that project forward is very welcome, and I do not see why it would not make a difference in Torbay. It has been slightly misconstrued as closing the hostel, but it is not; it is about making sure that people are supported from day one in terms of housing, rather than having to earn a right to housing via being in a hostel for a longer period of time. There will always be a need for emergency accommodation. Other Members have touched on the issue of housing supply, which clearly needs to be dealt with if we are to move forward.

I will conclude with some remarks about the Vagrancy Act 1824, which is a hopelessly out-of-date piece of legislation. I hope that in any review of that Act, we can take a mature cross-party approach, as happened with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and “to your credit, Ms Buck”—your campaign for the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Bill the following year. That Bill became an Act, and it made a difference to people.

The 1824 Act is hideously out of date: it is both morally and practically wrong to think that homelessness can be dealt with by hauling people down to the magistrates court. I was only too happy to stand up against the idea of using a public spaces protection order against rough sleeping in Torbay—I did not see that as a practical
thing to do at all—and I was pleased that councillors from both the Conservative and Liberal Democrat groups made it clear to the independent administration that it was not something they would tolerate or accept. PSPOs should be used against antisocial behaviour. The act of sleeping rough—a person putting their head down and going to sleep—should not lead to them being arrested by the police; it should lead to them being supported by agencies.

This has been a welcome debate, and one that could probably go on for a lot longer. I hope that we will be able to take some comfort from the Minister’s response.

Ms Karen Buck (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, it is obvious to Members that we have three speakers to go, and we will be moving to the Front Bench representatives just before 4 pm. I ask Members to time their contributions accordingly.

3.36 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) and the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) on securing today’s debate.

Members of the public are rightly horrified by the idea that anyone should be sleeping rough. Only yesterday, people throughout the country watched a 19-year-old lad on Sky News struggling to maintain his sanity in a situation in which he had no money, no address, no home, no ability to wash or change his clothes, no way to apply for jobs, no prospect of achieving an interview—but alone being employed—and no access to any benefits or support because he was unable to provide written evidence that he was looking for work. If we are to eradicate rough sleeping, the first thing we have to do is to remove such ridiculous Catch-22 situations, which are imposed by the Department for Work and Pensions and by the Department for Housing, Communities and Local Government, forcing people who are actually rough sleeping, although many present as looking for work, to remove the requirement for a job to access support, because they are not able to provide evidence that they were looking for work.

We need society to be committed and to commit the resources it takes to eradicate rough sleeping. If we can do that, I believe we will also go a long way to reducing chronic addiction and begging.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck.

On a personal level, it is good to see the Housing Minister back in her role. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) not only for securing the debate, but for the great work he has been doing with the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) on the all-party parliamentary group. I have been pleased to attend one or two of its meetings.

Austerity has many faces, but none is more damning than the number of people who are having to live rough on our streets. Across not just our cities, but our towns, the scenes of people sitting on street corners or lying on sleeping bags and mattresses and in bivouacs are probably the most shameful visible manifestation of a Government who that just do not care. One does not have to go far to be made aware of the crisis. As we know, just 2 metres from the entrance to Parliament, we see people trying to survive against the odds. Here we are in Parliament, the supposedly powerful legislative body, and yet we are unable to persuade the Government that halving rough sleeping in five years or solving the issue by 2027 is an acceptable aim. The public believe that the situation is wrong, and the Opposition certainly agree. In fact, I
think most of us in this room believe that the Government are showing neither urgency nor ambition in tackling the problem. Perhaps we can persuade them today.

In the past year, two people from the rough sleeping community within the Westminster tube station area have died. On each occasion when such things happen, outrage follows. The Secretary of State claims that it is one death too many, and that collectively we cannot allow it to happen again. However, the fact that people can die so close to this place suggests that there is too much easy rhetoric from Government and not enough real action dedicated to tackling this humanitarian disaster.

To restate the oft-quoted fact, we are the sixth richest nation in the world. Let us be clear and honest: rough sleeping did not start with the coalition Government, but the crisis did. The two Governments since have done little to arrest the exponential increase in the numbers of people rough sleeping. Back in 2010, 1,768 people were recorded as rough sleeping. According to the 2018 count, which was published recently, the figure today stands at just under 4,700. That is a rise of 3,000, or 165%, since 2010.

Perhaps surprisingly, my constituency of Warwick and Leamington has had the highest number of rough sleepers per head of population across the west midlands. At present, 12 rough sleepers are officially recorded by the district council, although that figure is disputed by charity and voluntary workers. It would also be disputed by the public, who see so many more people on our streets every day. In 2017, the figure was 21.

One of the primary reasons why we find ourselves in this situation is simply the basic lack of social housing, as we have heard. I elevated that issue here through the parliamentary campaign for council housing, which has cross-party support. Since 1980, successive Governments have failed to deliver enough affordable housing, particularly social housing. To put that into focus, in the financial year 2017-18, the Government delivered just 6,463 social homes, while nearly 1.2 million people are on waiting lists. By way of example, in my constituency, the council has accepted housing developments that have under-delivered social and affordable housing. In the period from 2010 to 2017, only 28% of new homes built in major housing schemes in the area—against a policy of 40%—have been either social or affordable. The lack of housing stock results in the council having to take a harsher line because it is essentially rationing housing, leaving a lot of people in unsustainable situations.

However, the crisis is not just down to a lack of housing, although it is central to the problem, and I will return to that point shortly. Under the Government’s welfare policies, rates for local housing allowances have been frozen for five years from April 2016. The LHA now does not cover rents in more than 90% of areas in England. Then there is the added challenge of having to wait five weeks for universal credit, which has pushed so many people into arrears. Indeed, universal credit has caused a significant rise in homelessness and rough sleeping.

For many who find themselves living on the streets, the lack of direct and immediate support to address their complex health and welfare needs perpetuates the crisis. In 2017-18, mental health needs were most often cited as the greatest need among people sleeping rough, with 50% of those assessed during the period having a need in that area. Alcohol-related support was the second most prevalent need, at 43%, while 40% of rough sleepers were assessed as having a support need relating to drug dependency. Those needs are compounded by the insecurity of the private rented sector. A significant number of the new rough sleepers—38% of them—recorded their last settled accommodation as private rented housing. Specifically, no-fault evictions are one of the leading causes of homelessness.

We all know of cases from our constituencies, and I hope Members will forgive me if I give just one illustration. A young man in my constituency approached me not so long ago. He has been homeless since October. He resides in a car and has previously had problems with drugs and alcohol, although in prison he received support for them. Since leaving prison, he has been reluctant to go into shared hostel accommodation, because he does not want to be exposed to similar behaviours again. The local council, however, will not allow him a single room in a hostel, because that is not in line with the policy, which is a progression from shared hostel room to single hostel room, to supported housing and then to independent residence. As a result, he continues to sleep rough, because he is adamant that he cannot go into a shared hostel.

A year ago, I called for a summit and brought together all the local agencies and authorities to pose the question of how we could address the issue. The ambition we set was to try to resolve and eliminate rough sleeping within a year. I am pleased to say that the council and other organisations seized on that ambition. Just a few months ago, the local council and its housing team opened William Walls Grove House, a direct access hostel in Leamington. It provides around-the-clock accommodation, onsite support and referrals for 22 people, all year round.

Although that is positive, over recent years the Labour group on the council has been pressing for a change in the severe weather emergency protocol. Before, someone had to endure three consecutive nights of temperatures of 0°C before they would be provided with accommodation. Now—many years later, after much pressing and on the insistence of that Labour group—that has been reduced to one night.

What are the solutions? I stress that more social housing is critical. As other Members have mentioned, the evidence from Scandinavia—particularly in Finland, where there is an absence of rough sleepers—shows that the issue can be addressed by a housing-first approach. It is therefore critical that we end the benefits freeze, re-establish the link between housing benefit and local rents, and reform universal credit.

I will end by saying this: as we have heard, a further 600 people died from homelessness in 2017—up 24% since 2013. That is almost two people every day. At the current rates, many thousands of people will die before this Government are defeated. That cannot be acceptable.

3.49 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as always, to see you in the Chair, Ms Buck. I know how personally committed you are to dealing with housing issues.

There is no more depressing image of the cumulative impact of the austerity policies of the Conservative Government and, before that, the coalition Government.
than the image of people sleeping rough on the streets everywhere we go. If anything, the last Labour Government failed to boast about their achievements on that. We can be incredibly proud of the fact that we virtually eradicated rough sleeping on our streets.

It has been a cumulative impact—a toxic cocktail of benefits cuts and sanctions, and a lack of support for people with mental health problems and addictions. All those things go together, of course. Often people present with a multitude of problems that result in their ending up on the streets. The failure to build housing or to provide affordable housing is part of that in particular.

The annual official account of rough sleepers that we carried out in December 2018 found that 82 people were sleeping rough in Bristol. That was down four from the previous year, but we know that that is just the tip of the iceberg; many more people over the course of the year will sleep rough. Bristol City Council is one of the few councils to keep any semblance of a record of homeless people who die in the city. Over the past five years in Bristol, at least 50 homeless people have died.

I pay tribute to Michael Yong, who was an excellent journalist at The Bristol Post. Sadly, he has just moved on, but he had been working with the Bureau of Investigative Journalism to tell the stories of all the people who had died, and to add a touch of humanity to them. Often their cause of death was unknown, their stories and even their dates of birth were not recorded, and in some cases it was an awfully long time before their families even realised that they had died.

We are trying to tackle the problem in Bristol. We have increased the provision for homeless people. There is a city-wide initiative for organisations to open their doors when the weather is particularly cold. Church groups, for example, and local hostels are involved. The city's first 24-hour homeless shelter—St Anne's House, in my constituency—was opened by the Secretary of State. I join others in paying tribute to St Mungo's, which leads the rough sleeping partnership in the city.

Looking back at the history of Bristol, in Hillfields, in my constituency, some of the very first council houses were built 100 years ago under the Addison Act. In 1949, 70 years ago, Nye Bevan came to the city to lay one of the stones for the 10,000th house built since the second world war. That was when he was Minister for Housing. Everyone remembers him being Minister for Health, but he was Minister for Housing as well. It was crucial that those two things went together, because the population cannot be healthy unless they live in decent homes. It is so sad, as we celebrate the 100 years and the 70 years since those house-building programmes, that we are in the situation that we are in now.

Bristol is trying to build new homes. It has a target of building 2,000 homes a year, of which 800 will be affordable, by 2020. We are also setting up a new council-owned housing company that will give the council the ability to build even more new affordable homes. However, permitted development rights are a real problem. The fact that it is not necessary to apply for planning permission to convert office blocks to residential accommodation means that we do not have any power over the affordability element. In a place such as Bristol, that has a real impact.

I will briefly mention Jasper Thompson of Help Bristol's Homeless, who is converting shipping containers into amazing homes for the homeless. The idea is that people will live in them for six months or so. They are really well furnished and well kitted-out. That also offers the opportunity for people who are moved off the streets into those homes to get extra support.

The Minister knows that I am concerned about supported housing provision—I have actually met with officials in her Department on that matter. The level of local housing allowance in Bristol is low. For a family living in a two-bedroom house, there is a monthly shortfall of around £217 between the LHA rate and a typical rent charge in the city. That is encouraging many providers to move into the supported housing sector, because they can make a lot more money. Some of them are not at all interested in providing support, and because the sector is not regulated, a business model is emerging that I think puts people at risk.

There is a particular property in my constituency where several people have died in recent years. Homeless people have actually said to me that they would not go there. They do not want to go there. They would be scared to go to Wick House, which is the name of the property in question. I have met with Lorna, the sister of Paul Way, who died in Wick House in 2017. It was meant to be supported accommodation, but it took support staff three days to knock on the door of his room and find his dead body. I also met with Catherine, the mother of George Mahoney, who died in 2016.

There have been some changes. Local authorities are piloting multi-disciplinary teams looking at all the different agencies that could perhaps help to regulate the sector more: the housing benefit people, the environment agencies, and people who deal with antisocial behaviour. I hope that Bristol can be part of that, and that there will be more unannounced inspections. We also need legislative changes to help to resolve the situation. We need to upgrade the definition of support; currently, it just has to be “more than minimal”. The definition of supported housing has not changed since 1977.

Ideally, everyone would have a home that they can call their own, and they would not be in halfway houses and temporary provision. However, if we are to get people off the streets, as a first measure we have to ensure that supported housing is fit for purpose. As I have said, it is costing local councils an awful lot of money, because providers can charge much higher rates for housing benefit properties than for ordinary accommodation. Organisations such as St Mungo's are doing a great job providing such places, but others are exploiting the system, and I know that the Minister agrees.

3.56 pm

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I, too, thank the hon. Members for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) and for Colchester (Will Quince) for securing today’s debate.

There is no sadder sight for a Member of Parliament than to leave these buildings at night, or indeed at any time during the day, and see people sleeping rough on the streets next to our mother of Parliaments. Whether they are under cardboard or just look like a bundle of
blankets, every single one is a real human tragedy. For me, it is a national embarrassment that some people are asked to sleep in those conditions, and to live their lives like that every day of the week.

Some of the most progressive and robust homelessness laws have been introduced in the Scottish Parliament in recent years. As a result of a major amendment to the Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003 that took effect from December 2012, local authorities in Scotland now have a duty to find permanent accommodation for all applicants who are unintentionally homeless. That led Shelter to describe Scotland as providing “the best homelessness laws in Europe”.

Crisis, another charity focused on ending homelessness, said:

“This gives people in Scotland some of the strongest homelessness rights in the world.”

Nevertheless, a robust legal framework does not, in itself, solve all the problems; we still have people sleeping rough on our streets. That is why the Scottish Government set up a £50 million fund to tackle rough sleeping in 2017. We are also working with organisations such as Social Bite on its Housing First scheme, which will increase investment by £6.5 million over the programme period. The programme started with 8,000 people joining the world’s largest sleep-out in Princes Street Gardens in Edinburgh in December 2017, and a call to end homelessness in Scotland for good. The Sleep in the Park campaign was extended in December, with the number of people taking part increasing to 12,000. That gave those people an idea what it is like to be homeless for just one night, but imagine the impact on someone’s health and wellbeing when it becomes a relentless experience, night after night and week after week.

In November, the Scottish Government published an action plan to end homelessness and rough sleeping, which takes forward 70 recommendations from their homelessness and rough sleeping action group and focuses on providing a person-centred approach. At the heart of that approach is prevention, which many hon. Members have mentioned. The action plan will also prioritise the provision of settled and mainstream housing to ensure quick and effective responses and join up the planning process with as many resources as we can possibly bring together to solve the problem.

Aside from legislation, there are other factors that do not make it easy for people whose life is on the street. The underlying causes of homelessness must be addressed to get to the root of the problem. We cannot afford to ignore the impact of the UK Government’s austerity agenda, particularly on social security, from the four-year benefit freeze to—it has to be said, Minister—the shambolic roll-out of universal credit. Fransham and Dorling, two experts from the University of Oxford, argue that austerity policies lie at the heart of soaring homelessness and related health issues:

“What is needed is a comprehensive strategy that improves services for vulnerable people, an increased supply of affordable housing, more security of tenancies”.

The National Audit Office states that homelessness is “likely to have been driven by welfare reforms”,

while the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has noted with concern the impact of social security reforms on the right to adequate housing. Several academic studies have also shown strong links between homelessness and Government reductions in welfare spending in England. It has been estimated that the number of homeless people in England has tripled since the Conservative Government’s tough austerity programme began.

The evidence is irrefutable. No matter how the Government cut it, no matter how they dress it up, there is a direct link between austerity policies and homelessness in the UK. The bedroom tax has forced some people out of their homes; in Scotland, we continue to fully mitigate that unfair policy with a view to abolishing it as soon as possible, but we cannot afford to mitigate every single daft policy that comes out of this place.

The impact of benefit sanctions is also widely known. Many claimants in my constituency are turning to food banks after being sanctioned by the Department for Work and Pensions. My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) introduced a private Member’s Bill to ensure that a person’s mental health, caring responsibilities and risk of homelessness were accounted for before a sanction could be applied. Disgracefully, that Bill—the Benefit Claimants Sanctions (Required Assessment) Bill—was shot down when the then Minister used parliamentary tactics to dismiss it. I ask the present Minister to reconsider my hon. Friend’s Bill and look at whether there is anything we can all learn from it to create a much fairer society.

Finally, I should mention the economic case for reducing homelessness, which in these troubled times should itself be an incentive for the UK Government to end homelessness and rough sleeping. In 2017, the NAO estimated that homelessness costs the public sector more than £1 billion a year, even before factoring in how the homeless are less likely to make a huge contribution to the economic wellbeing of the nation. A University of New Mexico study that examined the economic impact of homelessness has shown that it actually costs less to house someone who is chronically homeless than to leave them on the street: providing homeless people with housing led to a 15% saving of public money.

People who are appropriately housed are also more likely to gain employment, thereby paying back into the economy. In a world in which disrespect appears to be the order of the day, it is time we pushed for a much more respectful society. We cannot do that better than by giving people a roof over their head and a way of protecting their family. A 2018 report by Crisis suggests that for every £1 invested in the solutions recommended to move people directly out of homelessness, £2.80 will be generated in benefits, including cashable savings and a value for wellbeing. The report also points out that people who are moved out of homelessness are expected to use public services such as the NHS and the criminal justice system with much lower frequency.

We are in the midst of a housing and homelessness crisis, which I am sure will be exacerbated by Brexit as jobs become less secure. I ask the Minister to act now, before the crisis becomes a disaster for so many individuals and families across the country. Her actions must go beyond her own Department; we need a cross-Government approach. If we cannot create homes for heroes, maybe we can create homes fit for people.
Rough sleeping has more than doubled since 2010, so we have to acknowledge that specific policies put into place by this Government, and by the previous Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, have led to more people suffering on our streets. We cannot ignore the impact of a housing system that is not fit for purpose, a stripped-down drug and alcohol support system, cuts to hostel and supported accommodation provision, and ill-thought-through changes to the benefits system that are leaving people homeless and driving them on to the streets. My hon. Friends the Members for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) both mentioned the importance of supported housing, which is critical in ending the cyclical nature of homelessness and making sure that people have support—that they are not just given a roof over their heads and left to their own devices. It is also critical that supported housing is properly monitored to make sure it is fit for purpose and people are not put in dangerous situations.

Last week, I visited Rugby and met Labour’s candidate, Debbie Bannigan, who took me to see the work of Hope4. That organisation has seen a huge rise in the number of people using its services. It relies on donations and lottery funding to provide clothing, meals and somewhere to stay for just a few short hours throughout the day, as well as shower and laundry facilities—the only services in the whole town available for people who are rough sleeping.

The reality is that the root cause of rough sleeping is the failure to provide adequate housing for all. Booming house prices and a failure to build anywhere near enough social housing that is truly affordable—a point that we should really start to hammer home is that it needs to be truly affordable, because “affordable” has become an artificial description—mean that far too many in this country are living in housing insecurity. That is precisely the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) is drawing to our attention with his campaign for more social homes, and for council housing in particular. Social housing was once available to many who had a housing need, but a number of social rented homes equivalent to a city the size of Coventry have been lost through a combination of a move into so-called affordable housing, and schemes such as right to buy. The failure to provide adequate replacements means that in places such as Southwark, applicants for social housing may wait an average of three and a half years for a two-bedroom council property.

Many people are now in the private rented sector, and my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) raised the need for more security in that sector. At the moment, tenants may face unfair and punitive bans on properties across the sector, landlords may impose punitive rent rises if they want a tenant to leave and renters may be evicted through no fault of their own with just two months’ notice. I know my hon. Friend is deeply concerned about those points.

Last night, I attended the launch of Mind’s “Brick by brick” report, which tells us just how devastating housing insecurity can be for tenants with mental health problems. One in four such tenants have serious rent arrears, and one in 14 have experienced eviction. Living in such poor housing is making their health worse. GPs spontaneously identify housing issues as a common contributing factor to their patients’ poor mental health. When the last
barrier to homelessness is a rental market that is simply unsustainable for many people with complex or specific needs, it is unsurprising that many end up falling out of it and into homelessness and rough sleeping.

If the Government are serious about eradicating rough sleeping, they must eliminate the housing insecurity that fuels it. That requires more social housing and a private rental sector that places security of tenure at its heart.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) was particularly clear—2027 is far too long. Why does the Minister not raise her ambitions and bring that date forward? What is stopping her from doing that? I am sure that by now she knows what the causes of homelessness are. It is not just Opposition Members who are saying this; it is her own Back Benchers, too. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) said that in five years’ time, we will have the glory of being back to where we were in 2009. That is not an achievement.

Will the Government look to address the shortage in social housing by placing a moratorium on right to buy and pledging to build 1 million genuinely affordable homes over 10 years, to make sure that we get back the council stock we need to get people off the streets? Will the Minister also address the insecurity that many in the private rented sector face by scrapping section 21 and reaffirming the rights of tenants on social security to rent without discrimination? That is something that I have raised with the likes of Zoopla. Will she tell us when we should expect a response to the Government’s consultation on longer tenancies? It closed five months ago and we are yet to hear anything. I also ask her to support the calls of the leader of the Labour party—as, surprisingly, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) has done today—and recognise the absolute pointlessness of the Vagrancy Act 1824.

Even if tenants find themselves homeless, it should not mean that they end up on the streets. After almost a decade of austerity, however, councils simply do not have the resources to provide the type of homelessness service that is needed to end rough sleeping.

4.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck, and that of Mr Sharma before you. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on securing this debate and thank him and my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) for their tireless work as co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group for ending homelessness.

This is a debate about rough sleeping, so I am thankful for the experiences and expertise shared today, whether that comes from a constituency or a wider perspective. I am grateful to hon. Members for their speeches and questions; I hope to answer them as I work through my speech, but given the time limit, I may not answer them all.

Ensuring that everyone has a decent, affordable, secure home is a core priority for this Government. That is why we have made a commitment to halve rough sleeping, as everybody has said—I am glad that everybody knows it—by 2022, and to end it by 2027. It is an ambitious target, but it is essential that we achieve it. Underpinning that bold commitment is a concerted cross-Government effort to address homelessness in all its forms.

As hon. Members will know, last year we launched the rough sleeping initiative, working with the areas with the highest levels of rough sleeping, and with the support of charities and experts from across the sector, many of which we have heard about today. We announced the rough sleeping strategy, backed by £100 million, and introduced the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, the most ambitious homelessness legislation in decades, with prevention at its heart. In total, we have committed £1.2 billion to 2020—a not insignificant amount of money—to ensure that the most vulnerable in society have the support they need.

I, for one, am encouraged by the figures published last week which show that our approach is working. This is a significant moment. For the first time in eight years, the number of people sleeping on our streets has fallen. That follows year-on-year increases, with an average annual increase of nearly 16%, so we are moving in the right direction. To be clear, our rough sleeping initiative has been up and running for five months in those 83 areas, and those areas have seen a 23% reduction in the count. That is just the beginning; we are bringing in further funding and embedding services. I look forward to seeing progress at the next count—which will deal once and for all with any question of my resigning.

I know we still have a way to go and, as many of you have remarked, it is simply unacceptable that people have to sleep on the streets in 2019. That does not reflect our country, which we want to be the best, which is why I am determined to put a stop to it. The cross-Government rough sleeping strategy, announced last August, is the blueprint for sustained action, looking across the spectrum from prevention to intervention to recovery. In the six months since our strategy was published, we have focused our energies on delivering key commitments that will help those in need and prevent people from sleeping rough in the first place.

We have announced the early adopters of our rapid rehousing pathway, an approach that a number of hon. Members have called for today, which includes 11 areas with Somewhere Safe to Stay hubs. A hub has already started delivering in Nottingham, helping people to secure routes off the streets, with the specialist support that the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) was so keen to secure. We have also secured up to £30 million in the NHS long-term plan for specialist mental health services for people sleeping rough, which will be informed by the findings of a health provision audit to be carried out this year. We have provisionally allocated £34 million for 2019-20 to the 83 areas with the highest levels of rough sleeping to continue their excellent work supporting those currently on the streets, and opened up bidding for a further £11 million to all other local authorities to support them in helping people off the streets now.

There are particularly encouraging results in the 83 areas supported by our rough sleeping initiative, which is backed by £30 million of Government investment this year. In those areas, numbers have fallen by almost a quarter. Indeed, almost three quarters of RSI areas have reported decreases from the previous year. I thank councils across the country for working tirelessly to
support people off the streets and into recovery. Those figures are proof of what can be achieved when we all pull together in the same direction.

In just seven months since the funding was announced, councils have used the investment to create an additional 1,700 beds and employ 500 dedicated staff, such as outreach workers, mental health specialists, nurses and substance misuse workers. This means that there are more people in warm beds tonight as a direct result of Government funding and the wrap-around support that goes with it. An excellent example of this is the local authority in the constituency of the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark, who secured this debate. It is receiving £615,000 this year, which provides funding for a worker from Solace Women’s Aid to support offenders who have experienced domestic abuse, and a further 72 new beds to tackle rough sleeping.

Some 33 Members have spoken in this debate, including both interventions and speeches. The right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) made a fascinating intervention—at the last count, there were no rough sleepers in Knowsley.

Melanie Onn: But there is no proper counting system—

Mrs Wheeler: With respect, that is not good enough—

Ms Karen Buck (in the Chair): Order. I advise Members not to conduct conversations bilaterally.

Mrs Wheeler: In the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, the number of rough sleepers is down to 13. In Liverpool it has reduced from 33 to 15, in Torbay from 24 to 19, and in the Worthing and Shoreham area from 35 to 11.

Neil Coyle: One of the specific questions I asked was whether the Minister would improve the data collection to ensure that these figures were robust. There is a question mark over them.

Mrs Wheeler: People have asked these questions. Some councils choose to do an estimate, and some choose to do a count. Personally, I prefer a count.

The number of people rough sleeping in York has reduced from 29 to nine, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Yorker Central on all her hard work in that area. In Ipswich the number has gone down from 21 to 11. In the Warwick area it has gone down from 24 to 12—the area received £370,000-worth of Government funding to help with this. I work very well with the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) on these particular issues. Her area has received £583,000 of Government money and there has been a slight reduction in rough sleeping, but there is much more to do. We very much recognise the importance of the certainty of funding for services. The Chancellor has said there will be a spending review this year, and Ministers have made it clear that rough sleeping and homelessness are key priorities for this Government.

I shall crack on and then allow the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark to wrap up. We note the release of the first ever ONS death statistics—hon. Members have mentioned this—which will help us to ensure that we are targeting our action to prevent deaths. We know that the risk to life increases during periods of cold weather, which is why we launched an additional £5 million cold weather fund in October. The fund has already enabled us to increase outreach work further, extend winter shelter provision and—I am sure that Members will be pleased to hear—provide over 800 additional bed spaces. We are also ensuring that when a homeless person dies or is seriously injured, safeguarding adult reviews take place, where appropriate, so that local services can learn lessons from the tragic events and prevent them from happening in the future.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Wheeler: If I could just finish my sentence—it might help the hon. Lady.

We expect all local areas to conduct SARs according to guidance. We will also work with the LGA to ensure that lessons learnt from these reviews are shared with other safeguarding adult boards.

The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark raised the issue of female rough sleepers who have suffered domestic abuse. Domestic abuse is a devastating crime that nobody should have to suffer. Supporting victims of domestic abuse and violence is an absolute priority for the Government, and we need to do more to ensure that they are appropriately supported. We all agree that survivors of domestic abuse should have access to a safe home. Councils have a legal duty to provide accommodation to families and others who are vulnerable as a result of fleeing domestic abuse. The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 requires councils to take reasonable steps to help eligible homeless families to secure accommodation.

Nick Herbert: They are exactly the kinds of vulnerable people who the Depaul Nightstop service is helping in half of local authorities. Would the Minister agree to meet Depaul, and perhaps visit a Nightstop service, to see how important and cost-effective it is and to see the potential for the roll-out that I mentioned earlier?

Mrs Wheeler: Absolutely. My apologies—when I mentioned the fantastic reduction of rough sleepers in his area from 35 to 11, I meant to say that I would be delighted to meet Depaul.

Will Quince: At the moment, survivors of domestic abuse are subject to a vulnerability test. Could the Minister look at removing that, so that it is an automatic priority need?

Mrs Wheeler: We will keep all such matters under review.

I hope that my remarks have demonstrated the Government’s commitment to halving and ending rough sleeping and to reducing homelessness. I thank hon. Members for their speeches and questions, and I thank all the charities mentioned today. I look forward to working with the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark and other hon. Members of different parties in the coming months and years. I also thank my brilliant team for all their hard work.
4.25 pm

Neil Coyle: I thank both Chairs and everyone who contributed to the debate.

I asked several questions in my speech. The Minister referred to her team, and I hope they are busy drafting their reply to the inevitable letter in which I put those questions again, because not all of them were answered. Will the funding for the pilot be continued? Will the data be improved? Is the Minister still committed to resigning if rough sleeping rises again? Will there be changes to legal aid and the Zambrano restrictions? How can we ensure that safeguarding adult reviews are more routine? Councils are simply not carrying them out. Even in the example I gave, that did not occur.

There were several running themes in the debate. The first is shame. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) both touched on that powerfully. People are ashamed that the system in our country has compelled so many people to sleep rough. It simply should not be happening. There is a public appetite for change, but sadly not in the Government.

The second theme that came out strongly is ambition, which the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) and my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) touched on. The Government's target is simply not ambitious enough. They are not on target to meet their weak, unambitious target to halve rough sleeping by 2022. Their figures show that they will not meet it. The risk is that this problem will continue for far longer than necessary. There was some complacency in the Minister's response. She did not listen to the debate.

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend, who opened the debate brilliantly, is summing it up brilliantly. I am afraid that I heard the Minister read out a prepared speech that just seemed to say that everything is going terribly well. It is complacency. We have heard very good speeches from hon. Members on both sides of the House advocating an immediate solution to the problem.

Neil Coyle: Absolutely. There were some warm words, but they will be cold comfort to those who are living in these extreme conditions. The Minister said that three quarters of councils in the pilot areas have done better than average at reducing rough sleeping. That means that, even in the pilot areas, a quarter of councils have seen rough sleeping increase. That is simply not good enough. There may be pilots, but there does not seem to be a cockpit or even a plane. The Government must properly address this problem. I will end on that and start drafting my letter to the officials.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,
That this House has considered rough sleeping.

4.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.
The question of starting times has been considered at various points in recent years. There are strong feelings on both sides of the debate. I am not an education or neurological development expert, but I am told that many studies across the world over the years, particularly in the US, have suggested that a later start time may have a positive impact on pupils. However, some reviews have found more mixed results, and some have raised concerns about the quality of evidence. In Singapore, a school found that a delayed start time had a positive impact after nine months. A study in Canada found that

“Students from schools that started later slept longer, were more likely to meet sleep recommendations and were less likely to report feeling tired in the morning.”

The authors claimed:

“The study adds weight to the mounting evidence that delaying school start time benefits adolescent sleep.”

Canadian researchers claim that letting teens start school just 10 minutes later might help them to get more than 20 minutes extra sleep on a typical night. Although that might not sound like much, for some sleep-deprived adolescents it might be enough of a difference to enable them to get the recommended minimum eight hours of sleep a night. A lead author of a study into this issue, Karen Patte of Brock University in Ontario, said:

“Our body’s circadian clock naturally shifts later at puberty, so teens get tired later at night (due to later melatonin release) and therefore, need to sleep in longer in the morning in order to get sufficient rest. Delayed (school) start times have been recommended for adolescents to align with their delayed sleep schedules.”

Generally, though, it is thought that a further exploration of the evidence is required. One study, “Delayed School Start Times and Adolescent Sleep: A Systematic Review of the Experimental Evidence,” stated that

“School start times were delayed 25 to 60 minutes, and correspondingly, total sleep time increased from 25 to 77 minutes per weeknight. Some studies revealed reduced daytime sleepiness, depression, caffeine use, tardiness to class, and trouble staying awake. Overall, the evidence supports recent non-experimental study findings and calls for policy that advocates for delayed school start time to improve sleep. This presents a potential long-term solution to chronic sleep restriction during adolescence.”

However, the study goes on to state that

“there is a need for rigorous randomized study designs and reporting of consistent outcomes, including objective sleep measures and consistent measures of health and academic performance.”

I am grateful to Harriet Sherwood, who wrote an excellent piece for The Guardian a few weeks ago highlighting some of the issues underlying this debate. She wrote:

“Sleep experts are warning of an epidemic of sleep deprivation among school-aged children, with some urging educational authorities to alter school hours to allow adolescents to stay in bed longer. Adequate sleep is the strongest factor in the wellbeing and mental health of teenagers, and a shortage is linked to poor educational results, anxiety and obesity”.

She reported that the French Education Minister recently approved a proposal to push the start of the school day back by an hour—at least 9 am—for students aged 15 to 18 in Paris. The article continues:

“Scientists say that humans’ circadian rhythms—the body clock that manages the cycle of sleep and wakefulness—change in adolescence. The cycle shifts two hours in teenagers which means that they are wired to go to sleep and wake up later. ‘It’s like they’re in a different time zone,’ said Dr Michael Farquhar, a consultant in paediatric sleep medicine at the Evelina children’s hospital in London.”
I am particularly grateful to the headteachers of Hills Road and Long Road sixth-form colleges, of Coleridge, Cambridge headteachers and principals mentioned plenty of positives. The proposed change could provide opportunities for childcare relief for staff, allowing teachers more time with their children in the mornings, which in turn may improve recruitment and retention—a key issue in my area. A lot of people pointed out that starting school later could significantly reduce traffic problems, which are particularly acute in university cities such as Cambridge, and delaying the start of the school day for teenagers could make a substantial change to public transport peaks. Many of us notice the difference getting in and out of Cambridge outside term time.

However, one local headteacher told me that he thought the proposal would work only if it was “co-ordinated across the system. That is the big issue, as with the current term structure. Because of the need to co-ordinate with primary schools on childcare, working patterns of parents by and large running 9-5, it is hard for individual institutions to step outside the norm.”

His point is well made. I agree with him about co-ordination, although I have to say that I am less convinced that everyone works nine-to-five these days. I note that better employers are introducing more family-friendly flexible working. That should be encouraged, and it could be part of the answer when it comes to staggered school start times.

Let us look at some of the downsides. Although across-the-board change may be positive from an organisational perspective, the context of the school in question is key. Another Cambridge head, who I think has experience from a previous posting, said that although starting later has worked well at Portsmouth College, “it is very context dependent as a stand-alone solution”.

Clearly, different communities have different requirements and preferences, and any change must take that into account.

There are also questions to do with the impact on the wider community and families—many parents who do the school run on their way to work may find a later start disruptive—and at what age such a change would best suit students. Parents who allow their children to walk home alone may feel uncomfortable with the school day starting at 10 am, as it may mean children returning later in the afternoon or early evening. Clearly, some parents might not feel comfortable with their 11-year-old travelling home in the dark in winter.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. We cannot exonerate the parents. For good or bad, I have two grammar schools in my constituency. Children come to Stroud’s grammar schools from the other side of Swindon. That means there are 11-year-olds who have to get up at 5 o’clock in the morning. We can talk about putting the start of the school day back to 10 am, but at the moment, the days of some 11-year-olds start at 5 am and do not end until at least 9 pm, by the time they have finished their
homework. That cannot be good for children. We need to look at what makes a school accessible, rather than letting the free market go mad and letting parents make the choice.

Daniel Zeichner: Many of us continue to argue for a good local school in every area. Parental choice sometimes leads to difficult journeys for children, as my hon. Friend explained. That may be the choice people make, but the impact on children may not be as positive as one might wish.

The proposed change would affect not just children and parents but teachers, many of whom already work very long hours. They may prefer school to finish earlier, because they have more to do when the school day finishes. Of course, the change may cause complications for families with children at both primary and secondary school. It may also impact after-school extracurricular activities, particularly in winter, when inter-school sports games may be affected by darkness. Of course, other voluntary sessions happen after school, including exam revision, music classes and community outreach. There is a range of potential pitfalls.

As I mentioned, others in the world do things differently. There have been changes to school start times in other countries. In fact, some of our European neighbours start their days even earlier; some schools run from 7 am until 1 pm. Of course, that depends to some extent on the local climate, but that all shows that this is a very complicated range of issues.

That complexity is not always understood by everyone. Some people have characterised this debate as somehow being about lazy teenagers. Today I was on BBC Radio Cambridgeshire’s excellent morning programme with Thordis Fridriksson. I am told that many people who contacted the show had little sympathy for what they described as “sleepy teenagers”, and thought that getting up on time was good practice for the world of work. That is pretty unsympathetic. People of my generation and older should try to remember what it was like for us up on time was good practice for the world of work. That is pretty unsympathetic. People of my generation and older should try to remember what it was like for us up—they enjoy and look forward to school—but they genuinely raise the dead. I can see that it’s not that they don’t want to get up at 6.30am and not feel, as I do, that this is far too early…! Having to wake 5 teenagers out of bed every day at 6.30am each day is like trying to raise the dead. I can see that it’s not that they don’t want to get up—they enjoy and look forward to school—but they genuinely can’t get up. Being forced to wake up before they are ready has a massive impact on their health and well-being, which suffers hugely, and moreover so does mine! The school morning is without question the most stressful time of the day for children and parents.

I will read one of the contributions from a parent, which puts the point very well:

“I have five teenage children and it is an absolute nightmare getting them all ready for a 9am start every day. In order to start school at 9am they have to leave the house at 8am and therefore get up at 6.30am.”

That echoes the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew). She carries on:

“I would defy anyone to try and get 5 teenagers out of bed every day at 6.30am and not feel, as I do, that this is far too early…! Having to wake 5 teenagers at 6.30am each day is like trying to raise the dead. I can see that it’s not that they don’t want to get up—they enjoy and look forward to school—but they genuinely can’t get up. Being forced to wake up before they are ready has a massive impact on their health and well-being, which suffers hugely, and moreover so does mine! The school morning is without question the most stressful time of the day for children and parents.”

I have some sympathy for that account, and I am sure others will recognise the situation.

As for the quantitative response to the questions in the survey, the figures are pretty stunning. One of the questions was:

“How often do you feel drowsy or sleepy during the day?”

That is not a question for MPs. Mrs Main, but a question for teenagers. More than 85% of teenagers said that they often or always felt drowsy or sleepy during the day. That is a message that we should take seriously. The next question was:

“How often have you been bothered by trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much?”

Some 60% were often or always troubled by sleepiness. There is something going on out there that we clearly need to pay attention to.
I hope that I have been able to lay out just some of the arguments made for and against teenagers starting the school day later, and to show that although some might swiftly dismiss such a suggestion, when you look into matters more deeply, they are never as simple as they seem. My conclusion would be that schools and colleges must make their own decisions, but within a co-ordinated and organised local framework, and with sufficient funding to make it possible. We are a long way from having either of those, but we are a rich country, and it does not have to be this way; it is a matter of political choice.

The time may soon come when these issues should be addressed by a radical and reforming Government. We are living through a world of dramatic technological change; knowledge is more universally available than ever before, through every smart phone. Within a couple of decades, the context has changed beyond recognition, yet our organisational structures for learning remain very much as they were half a century ago. As we learn more about ourselves—how we learn, and how we are different at different stages of our lives—why not reform our structures to meet our needs? Why always say that is too difficult? When hundreds of thousands of young people are telling us that they want change, perhaps it is time to create a system that works for them, instead of telling them why it cannot be done.

4.57 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main, and it is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner). I will say straightaway that there is a kernel of truth in what he has said, but more research needs to be done on the subject. That is the bottom line of what I am going to say, so I could stop there, but I want to talk about a couple of things. Before he left this place, I remember George Osborne saying what a fine profession we are in when 9.30 is considered to be early.

As an aside, when I was a sixth former, there were completely different regimes for the sixth form and the rest of the school. Sixth formers came in for their particular classes, rather than spending all day at school. That flexibility in the system was a good thing to encourage. If I may say so, given that I am here participating in this debate, it certainly did me no harm. More research along those lines would be useful and I would welcome it.

5.4 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I suspect the irony of our debating this issue, when we start the working week in Parliament at 2.30 on a Monday, has probably not been lost on anyone, and it may have been emphasised by our slightly later-than-scheduled start time—but I am sure that what just will add humour to the debate.

When I first saw the title of the petition I wondered whether it was serious, and the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) also mentioned such scepticism. I was fascinated when I read the research publications and saw that there are serious, positive ideas on the subject. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), whose opening speech went through much of what I am going to say, so I could stop there, but I want to talk about a couple of things. Before he left this place, I remember George Osborne saying what a fine profession we are in when 9.30 is considered to be early.

As an aside, when I was a sixth former, there were completely different regimes for the sixth form and the rest of the school. Sixth formers came in for their particular classes, rather than spending all day at school. That flexibility in the system was a good thing to encourage. If I may say so, given that I am here participating in this debate, it certainly did me no harm. More research along those lines would be useful and I would welcome it.

The petition received 431 signatures from my constituency, which makes it the second most popular in my area. It is second only to the petition on fireworks, which received 431 signatures as well.
To recap quickly the position in Scotland, the Schools General (Scotland) Regulations 1975, as amended, require schools under education authority management in Scotland to be open for 190 days a year. However, they do not define the length of the school week for pupils, which is a matter for the discretion of education authorities, within their responsibility for the day-to-day organisation of the schools. There is a widely accepted norm of 25 hours and 27.5 hours for primary and secondary schools respectively, and school holiday dates are also, of course, set by the local authorities.

The primary focus in any discussion of schools must be on the quality of the education provided, which is why the Scottish Government continue to invest so heavily in education. Schools spending has risen under the Scottish National party since 2006. The average spend per pupil has increased by almost 13%. Scottish spending per pupil was £4,968 in primary schools, and £7,046 in secondary schools in 2016-17. That is an increase in cash terms of at least 12.8% for the primary sector and 13.1% for the secondary sector. Education budgets are rising—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. I have indulged the hon. Gentleman somewhat in his listing of the amounts of money being spent on Scottish education, but the debate is about secondary school opening hours, and the hon. Gentleman somewhat in his listing of the education provided is fundamental, and must be the key to the issue. It is a question of what satisfies that criterion. If school hours have an effect, we should be willing to look at them. I am keen to see more research. If I had seen only the title of the petition I might have laughed it off, but actually there is a lot of substantive work behind it, and we all need to look at that and see what we can learn from it.

5.9 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your Chairmanship, Mrs Main.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on moving the petition so eloquently on behalf of the Petitions Committee, and Hannah Kidner on coming up with the idea for a petition that has attracted so much support in such a short space of time. She can be very proud indeed that she has made Parliament act on her idea; I will go into why I think it was so popular.

On first reading the title of the petition, that school should start at 10 am as teenagers are too tired, many people will have dismissed the idea—hon. Members have made that case—but there is a growing body of opinion that starting the school day later would be better for teenagers, both in terms of their physical and mental health, which I will come on to, and in relation to their academic performance.

When I researched this debate, I found a 2017 study by Dr Paul Kelley of the Open University. It was conducted at an English secondary school that showed that delaying school start times for teenagers can have major benefits, including better academic performance and improved mental and physical health. The study found that rates of illness decreased by more than half over a two-year period and students in their mid-teens got significantly better grades when they started school at 10 am instead of the usual 8.30 am.

As has been pointed out by several hon. Members, however, children across the world are sleeping less. Here in the UK, the national health service is seeing more serious problems than before, with hospital attendances for children under 14 with sleep disorders tripling in the past 10 years. British schoolchildren are the sixth most sleep-deprived in the world, with American children topping the rankings. There are likely to be a number of sources for that problem, as the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) pointed out, with mobile phone and tablet use featuring high on the list. More than 80% of children in the UK now have their own phone by the age of 12, while 58% have their own tablet by the age of 10, and two thirds of teenagers say they use those devices in the hour before they go to bed. As it happens, it is one of my personal rules not to do that.

Let us face it: we have all become slaves to these devices, and parents must be role models and set an example in that area. Indeed, the Minister has made the issue the focus of his attention in recent weeks, suggesting that our schools should ban mobile phones altogether. I think that suggestion got rather more attention than he ever thought it might when he made it.

I think the reason why so many young people signed this petition is that they see mental health going up their agenda. The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) mentioned that we in Parliament start our day at 2.30 pm on a Monday, but my day started at 9 o’clock with a visit to a company in my
to work when they arrive at school is hugely important. Clearly, ensuring that teenagers are refreshed and ready at school and be alert and receptive to what is taught would be a happy one. The Government want them to do well and I are no stranger to that. In the current climate, it is difficult for schools to make such changes, even more so when they need more sleep than they currently get, and while some results have shown a benefit from a later start to school, particularly in the United States, where schools typically start significantly earlier than in the United Kingdom, the effects of delaying school start times are as yet unproven here.

The hon. Member for Cambridge cited research conducted by the University of Surrey and Harvard Medical School in 2017, which found that delaying school start times is unlikely to reduce sleep deprivation in teenagers. The research predicts that turning down the lights in the evening would be much more effective at tackling sleep deprivation. The research went on to say: “The mathematical model showed that delaying school start times in the UK would not help reduce sleep deprivation. Just as when clocks go back in the autumn, most teenagers’ body clocks would drift even later in response to the later start time, and in a matter of weeks they would find it just as hard to get out of bed. The results did, however, lend some support to delaying school start in the US, where many schools start as early as 7am.”

It continued: “The mathematical model shows that the problem for adolescents is that their light consumption behaviour interferes with the natural interaction with the environmental clock—getting up late in the morning results in adolescents keeping the lights on until later at night. Having the lights on late delays the biological clock, making it even harder to get up in the morning. The mathematics also suggests that the biological clocks of adolescents are particularly sensitive to the effects of light consumption.”

Finally, it said: “The model suggests that an alternative remedy to moving school start times in the UK is exposure to bright light during the day, turning the lights down in the evening and off at night.”

A further study, the Teensleep Project, looks at adolescent sleeping patterns and the impact of sleep education on teenage students. Professor Foster from the project says: “Our pilot study showed that about 25% of teenagers had clinically poor sleep—can we justify late starts when it might only benefit 25% of students? Instead, we must introduce sleep education with parents, teachers and students. We are not ruling out a later
school start, but we need a good set of data to show this is having a huge impact on adolescents. Unless later starts are combined with sleep education, it may actually worsen the issue”.

That conclusion tallies very much with what my hon. Friend the Member for Henley and the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk said.

The Government welcome the chief medical officer’s report into screen time, which was published on 7 February and includes advice on managing screen time and social media use in a sensible and effective way. The report is clear that scientific research is currently insufficiently conclusive to support the chief medical officer’s evidence-based guidelines on optimal amounts of screen use or online activities, such as social media use. However, the report provides advice for parents and carers based on child development research. It includes leaving phones outside the bedroom at night time or taking screen-free meal times, which I am sure that the shadow Minister also does.

We recently consulted on the draft regulations and guidance for relationships education, relationships and sex education and health education. The guidance sets out the content for the subjects, including health and prevention. It says that pupils should know the importance of sufficient, good-quality sleep in promoting good health, and that a lack of sleep can affect their weight, mood and ability to learn. It also sets out that teachers should make sure that pupils are aware of the benefits of physical activity and time spent outdoors, which should be linked to information on the benefits of sufficient sleep and good nutrition.

Good mental health is a priority for the Department and for the Government. It can have a profound impact on the whole of a child’s life, not just their attainment. Schools and colleges have an important role to play in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people by putting in place whole-school approaches tailored to the particular needs of their pupils and students.

The decision on when to start the school day lies with individual schools, as was pointed out by the hon. Member for Cambridge. All schools have the flexibility to decide when their school day should start and finish. Most schools start their days at 9 am or earlier. That is not to say that a later start time can never work, and some schools have decided to begin their school day later. Monkseaton High School in North Tyneside trialled a 10 am start, but has since reverted to 8.55 am.

In 2011, we revoked the regulations prescribing the procedure for changing school opening times. Since then, maintained schools and academies have had the autonomy to change their own school opening times. The Education (School Day and School Year) (England) Regulations 1999 require all maintained schools to be open to educate their pupils for at least 380 sessions—190 days—in each school year, with every school day consisting of two sessions separated by a break in the middle of the day. Academies and free schools are not bound by these regulations, but their funding agreements state that the duration of the school day is the responsibility of the trust.

There are no specific legal requirements for how long the school day should be. Governing bodies of maintained schools are responsible for deciding when sessions should begin and end on each school day, the length of each lesson and the timings for the morning sessions, the midday break and afternoon sessions. The governing body has the power to revise the length of the school day as it sees fit. Schools are also responsible for setting the timetable for their school day, and so could, for example, schedule more intellectually challenging subjects later in the day if they decide that that is when their students are more receptive to being taught.

Schools also have the autonomy to extend the length of the school day or offer provision after the end of the school day if they believe that it would be beneficial to their students. Extending the school day, or offering extra education activities around the school day, can help children—particularly from the most disadvantaged backgrounds—to improve attainment and social skills, raise aspiration and help parents with childcare.

We expect schools changing the length of their school day to act reasonably when making those decisions, including by consulting parents, giving parents notice and considering the impact on pupils and teachers, and on parents’ work commitments and childcare options. They should also consider the impact of reducing students’ time in school. Our evidence shows that every extra day of school missed can affect a pupil’s chances of achieving good GCSEs, which has a lasting effect.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Cambridge for highlighting this issue. The Government cannot, and should not, insist that schools delay the start time of the day. Schools already have the power to do so themselves, if they feel that it would be in the best interests of their pupils. That is a key point: schools know what is in the best interests of their pupils. They are best placed to make a decision on whether to change the content, structure and duration of their school day to get the best outcomes for their pupils, and they know the individual circumstances of their pupils and of the local area.

We would not want to take away the freedom of any school by requiring them to start the school day at a set time, especially when evidence on delaying school start times in the United Kingdom is, at best, inconclusive.

**Vicky Foxcroft:** I have listened intently to the Minister’s speech, and he is absolutely right about the lack of evidence on delaying start and finish times. However, I mentioned the BMJ research on young people and their likelihood of being stabbed or facing violence, and the lack of evidence around that. Will the Minister commit to getting more research on delaying start and finishing times, to make sure that our kids are kept safe?

**Nick Gibb:** I am interested in the staggered end times of schools, as mentioned in the BMJ research that the hon. Lady cited. That feeds into schools’ autonomy to decide when to start and finish. We trust headteachers to make those decisions, which will be based very much on local circumstances, including when other schools in the area finish for the day and so on. We are always open to more research being conducted on these issues. We certainly want to make sure that children are safe when they leave school and walk home in the evenings.

The focus should be on ensuring that children and young people understand the importance of sleep and how best to get sufficient sleep at night, to enable them to achieve their best.
Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful to all Members for their contributions, a consistent feature of which was the call for more evidence. I sometimes think that people call for more evidence when they do not necessarily like what they hear from the evidence already there. It seems to me that the strength of feeling of young people in this country, demonstrated through the petition that was so admirably put forward, bears some thinking about. I actually think that there is plenty of evidence—particularly the Open University study—that shows a real potential educational gain here, and some schools and colleges might want to seize that opportunity.

I am always mindful of the level at which these decisions are taken. I remember in the early days of the Labour Government after the 1997 general election, when there were discussions on banning smoking in public places. Tony Blair came to a Labour event and said that it might be left to local councils to decide, because he was a bit nervous about taking that decision. We said, “This needs leadership,” and in the end he did it and no one thinks it controversial now. I would say that the evidence shows that it is very hard for local schools and colleges to take the decision that we debating today on their own. It needs some leadership, and I am hopeful that at some future point we will have a Government who have the courage to listen to our teenagers, act on what they are telling us and find the evidence to back it up.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved,
That this House has considered e-petition 229178 relating to secondary school opening hours.

5.30 pm
Sitting adjourned.
**Westminster Hall**

**Tuesday 12 February 2019**

[Mrs Philip Hollobone in the Chair]

**Missing Persons Guardianship**

9.30 am

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered missing persons guardianship.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

Imagine that someone you love went missing out of the blue. Try to imagine the anxiety, the shock and the sadness, and then imagine not being able to sort out any of their affairs in their absence. That frustration, confusion and hurt is exactly what my constituent experienced.

My constituent came to my surgery in May last year to tell me about her missing brother. She told me that he was an experienced traveller who was used to travelling alone. He had gone to visit the Galapagos islands, and it was from there that he vanished. He was last sighted on 11 March 2017 and never returned to his hotel room. He was a keen photographer, and his last photograph was taken on the island of San Cristóbal. Despite extensive searches on the islands, he was never found.

My constituent was very close to her brother, who would contact her regularly when he was abroad, so when she had no contact with him for more than 10 days, she suspected that he was dead. No body was ever recovered.

After the shock and grief of her brother’s disappearance, my constituent set about trying to manage his affairs, but she came across a number of problems. She discovered that banks and other financial institutions would not directly engage with her, as she could not prove that her brother was dead. During that time, mortgage payments and utility bills went unpaid, and direct debits continued to be withdrawn from her brother’s bank account. She found the situation incredibly frustrating, and it caused her even more anguish after she had just come to terms with the fact that her brother was missing and, in all likelihood, dead.

Shocked by my constituent’s experience, I told her that Parliament must legislate to stop it happening again. Imagine how disturbed I was when she told me that Parliament had already done so. I promised to look into the matter further, and I was staggered to discover that the Guardianship (Missing Persons) Act 2017, which dealt with my constituent’s exact circumstances, had received Royal Assent on 27 April 2017 but had not yet been implemented.

With time against her and options running out, my constituent was forced to go down the presumption of death route to get an order allowing her to deal with her brother’s affairs. However, although she applied for a presumption of death order, she was not certain to get one, due to the provisions of the Presumption of Death Act 2013. That Act makes it clear that if the missing person has not been missing for seven years, the court has to be convinced that they are dead. If it is not, it can refuse to make an order. That is the route the family of Lord Lucan had to go down 42 years after his disappearance, with no body ever having been recovered.

They were easily able to satisfy the Act’s seven-year threshold, whereas my constituent could not. Although she was ultimately successful, she should not have had to go down that route for her brother, who had been missing for just over a year, when there was a more straightforward alternative.

The charity Missing People estimates that more than 1,000 people go missing for more than 12 months in the UK each year. The families of those who go missing suffer the distress and anguish of not knowing what has happened to their loved one, which is compounded by the powerlessness of not being able to manage their affairs. Family members have to make futile telephone calls to banks, building societies and utility companies, which will not co-operate with them due to fears of data protection breaches and fraud.

All the while, arrears accrue. If things escalate, the family may have to deal with bailiffs and lawyers to stop their loved one’s home being repossessed. They will also be unable to stop direct debits from draining that person’s account. If it is a joint account, that makes matters even worse, since financial institutions often insist on getting both parties’ express consent to change anything. Financial institutions are among the strongest supporters of the 2017 Act, as it is their staff who are forced to say no to the families of loved ones. An order declaring that someone has a right to deal with their loved one’s affairs makes it far easier for all concerned and removes the additional stress and worry from the equation.

At an event organised by Missing People, I had the privilege of meeting Mr Peter Lawrence, the father of missing person Claudia Lawrence. He told me about the challenges he faced in dealing with financial institutions in the aftermath of his daughter’s disappearance. I am pleased to say that Peter is here with us today. Peter is a remarkable man, and I have nothing but admiration for his ongoing efforts to reform the law. It was partly due to his campaigning and raising of public awareness that the Government eventually decided to legislate for the guardianship of missing persons.

In preparation for the debate, I read transcripts of previous debates about guardianship for missing persons. I note with some disappointment that the very same points I have made so far today were made by the hon. Members for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) and for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) and my hon. Friend the Member forIslwyn (Chris Evans) in March 2016. In that debate, there was criticism of the Government’s failure to progress legislation they had consulted on in 2015. The Minister closed his remarks by saying:

“It is vital to get the reform right, given that it creates a legal power over another’s assets. We are committed to proceeding as swiftly as we can, never forgetting for a moment the scope that it offers to ease...the pain and suffering endured by the families who have lost loved ones.”—[Official Report, 23 March 2016; Vol. 607, c. 596WH.]

I am sure that that debate had a bearing on what happened next, as a year later the Guardianship (Missing Persons) Bill had been drafted and was making progress. On 6 April 2017, when that Bill had its Second Reading in the other place, the Minister said that it “is unlikely to come into force earlier than one year after Royal Assent, but the Government will endeavour to keep any delay to an absolute minimum.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 6 April 2017; Vol. 762, c. 1188.] The Bill passed all its stages and received Royal Assent on 27 April 2017.
The 2017 Act is a good piece of legislation. It defines what guardianship orders are and who can apply for them and in what circumstances. It covers the scope of the orders and their duration, and provides for their revocation. It was supported in Committee by all political parties. It was one of those rare pieces of legislation that transcended party politics and had genuine cross-party support. At a time of division in the country, it was something that everyone could sign up to. Unfortunately, since then, there have been a number of false dawns and dashed hopes with respect to when the Act will finally be fully implemented and when people will be able to use it. Some 21 months have passed since the Act received Royal Assent, and it has not been possible to apply for a single guardianship order.

I accept that there may be complications with getting the judiciary to familiarise themselves fully with the provisions of the Act, and no doubt some technical measures need to be properly scrutinised and overcome. I also appreciate that Brexit continues to take up significant time in Departments and that the Ministry of Justice, which has had significant cuts to its budget over a number of years, is probably very stretched. I cast no blame on the Minister, whom I have always found to be true to his word and helpful in my dealings with him. But the fact remains that the current state of affairs just is not good enough.

Since the 2017 Act received Royal Assent, the Ministry of Justice has introduced two more Bills to Parliament, both of which have passed all their stages and are now Acts—the Civil Liability Act 2018 and the Courts and Tribunals (Judiciary and Functions of Staff) Act 2018 both received Royal Assent on 20 December. I do not suggest for one minute that those are not important pieces of legislation, but I am concerned that they managed to leapfrog the 2017 Act and will in all likelihood be implemented before it. How is that possible? I suggest that the 2017 Act has not received the priority it deserves. Time and again, it has been put to the bottom of the pile while other things have taken precedence.

In my first and only question to the Prime Minister, on 28 November 2018, I asked about that delay. I am relieved that, since then, things have started moving. On 19 December 2018 the Ministry of Justice launched its consultation on the implementation of the Guardianship (Missing Persons) Act 2017, which among other things covers the code of practice, rules of court, practice directions, the registration and supervision of guardians, and fees—I note that, by some strange coincidence, that consultation ends today.

I have received assurances from the Ministry of Justice that the 2017 Act will be implemented fully by July 2019, but that is still five months away, and although I very much welcome that commitment, I am concerned to avoid further delays. I therefore ask the Minister to give a commitment that the Act will be implemented by July this year, and that if there is any delay, he will explain the reasons for it and allow hon. Members to question him.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this timely debate on an emotive subject, which he is dealing with properly and appropriately. Does he agree that, in advance of the legislative change in July, there will be an expectation—hopefully as a result of this debate and other pressures—that financial institutions will consider these matters practically and sensibly when dealing with families?

Bambos Charalambous: I entirely agree, and one of the biggest areas of distress for people is dealing with financial institutions. If measures can be introduced to enable things to run more smoothly, I would strongly support that, as, I hope, would the Minister.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): As we know, the hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen), who first promoted the Presumption of Death Act 2013 as a private Member’s Bill, is now the Economic Secretary to the Treasury. I wonder whether the Minister discussed this emotive issue with him in the hope that we can bring the financial services to the table.

Bambos Charalambous: I was not aware of that, and my hon. Friend makes a good point. I hope the Minister will hold such discussions with the Economic Secretary, if he has not already done so.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I agree with everything he has said so far, and it is important that the 2017 Act is implemented by July. He mentioned the figure of 1,000 missing people, but perhaps the Minister could give some indication of what the number would be if we included all those who are in the pipeline for an application.

Bambos Charalambous: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. One thousand people go missing a year, but some people have been missing for many more years, and the figure will obviously be far higher than the 1,000 I mentioned.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I promoted the Guardianship (Missing Persons) Act 2017, and in my experience the financial services are keen on its provisions. They wish to help and to take a different approach when these tragic situations occur, but the difficulty is that they are tied to the law on such issues. We therefore need this change so that they can provide more assistance to those who face such difficulties.

Bambos Charalambous: I entirely agree. If a person dies, probate can be granted to financial institutions and used as a way of allowing the executor to access a person’s accounts. More needs to be done, and financial institutions need to be protected in that area.

I hope the Minister will agree that those who have a missing family member should not have to endure the indignity of being unable to deal with their loved one’s affairs because they cannot prove death, especially when they should not need to. The 2017 Act needs to be implemented as soon as possible, because no one should have to endure the anguish endured by my constituent. The Act will make a huge difference to the lives of the families of the missing. It will bring closure to some of them, as well as some comfort following the suffering and anguish they will have endured not knowing what fate may have befallen their loved one. This is a great opportunity for the Minister to show Parliament at its
best, with Members coming together to make a real difference and doing something that we all agree on and that will make a positive change to some people’s lives.

9.44 am

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak with you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) on securing this debate and keeping up the pressure to ensure that the Guardianship (Missing Persons) Act 2017 is implemented to help the many people in need. The Act is vital because around 2,500 people waiting for such measures have already been affected when someone they know has gone missing—perhaps a relative or loved one—and it must be implemented as soon as possible. I am delighted that the Government have nailed their colours to the mast by providing a date of July for the implementation of these measures, rather than saying “shortly” or “in due course”, and that those who face such devastating circumstances will be helped from July this year.

This issue came across my desk early in my parliamentary career, because my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) and I co-host the Lawrence family in our constituencies. Being a local person, I was aware of the tragic and mysterious disappearance of Claudia Lawrence, which will be 10 years ago on 18 March this year. Despite the fact that it is 10 years on, Mr and Mrs Lawrence still need this Act, and I wonder how many other people it will help. It is vital.

I promoted the Act as a consequence of Peter Lawrence pushing me to push Ministers to raise the issue up the political agenda, which we managed to do. The Government were always supportive of the Act, but even in easier times parliamentary time is not easy to secure. I pay tribute to Peter Lawrence and to many others, as well as to the charity Missing People, which has kept up the pressure and highlighted the issues caused when people go missing and in the aftermath of such tragic circumstances.

The Act is referred to as Claudia’s law, to recognise the 10 years that Claudia has been missing. I was lucky enough also to sponsor the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Bill, which was called “Will’s Bill”, after my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) and another tragic circumstance. Many people stood up in those debates—including me, as a father of four children—to say that the worst thing that could possibly happen to any parent would be to lose a child. I wonder, however, whether it is actually even worse to have a child who goes missing, because of the anxiety about what happened. People want to know and they hope not to receive terrible news, but they probably accept that such news will be the inevitable consequence if somebody has been missing for some time. Just as the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate outlined, when a person goes missing, although people know that something tragic has happened they do not know what, and that is probably even worse than a bereavement. It is therefore right to move this issue forward as quickly as possible.

Thousands of people go missing annually, and the Government estimate that the 2017 Act will help between 50 and 300 people a year, with a mid-range estimate of about 100 people. Those 100 cases affect thousands of people—their loved ones and friends—and this Act is vital. As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, in the aftermath of someone going missing many things need to be dealt with, including direct debits, rents or mortgages, and the Act will introduce measures that are similar to the power of attorney. It is a simple measure, and based on a well tried and tested formula. The Act has been well drafted to meet those requirements, and we have learned from our experiences with such legislation over recent decades.

It can certainly be argued that the legislation has been a long time coming. It was first talked about in the Justice Committee in 2012. The Government consulted on it in 2014, and the private Member’s Bill started, probably, with Peter Lawrence pushing me to push the Government, in 2015. It started with a ten-minute rule Bill, and not many of those become legislation, so I am delighted that we were able to use that route. We did so, of course, with Government support. Ministers were always supportive. The process from drafting and First Reading to the moment the Bill passed through the House of Lords—the last day before Parliament prorogued, so it was pretty tight—took 11 weeks. That shows what cross-party support and consensus there was for the legislation. I am grateful to Members on both sides of the House, and to Ministers and shadow Ministers of all parties who helped to get it through. I am also grateful to others who acted, not least the Missing People charity, and the all-party parliamentary group on runaway and missing children and adults.

The finish line of July 2019 is now in sight. Of course it is not the finish line for the loved ones—the people who face such terrible tragedies. However, it will make life just a little easier. I again thank the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate for bringing forward this important debate and the Minister for doing a tremendous job in making sure that we get over the line in July. He is a great fellow. I thank other Ministers as well—Lord Keen and successive Justice Secretaries—and many officials, not least of them Paul Hughes, who did a brilliant job of drafting and has been supportive from day one. The Act is vital legislation and it will help thousands of people. Let us get it into operation as soon as possible.

9.51 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank and congratulate the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), who brought the matter forward, as well as the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) and other Members who have attended to speak. I look forward to hearing the speeches of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero), and the Minister. He is of course ably supported by his Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), who will keep him right—although that will not be hard to do.

The issue is important, and that is why I am here to give support. It is always good to speak on issues that affect our constituents. I am sure that I am not the only person who was touched by the Missing People choir in “Britain’s Got Talent”, when TV gave an insight into the issue. That was in 2017, which is not that long ago. As we get older, the years go by more quickly than we would ever have imagined. I admit that, like others, I shed a tear as the photos flashed up showing clearly how many people there are in this country every minute of whose days is affected by a missing person. That
made it clear that there is a real issue. The pain of not knowing—rooms that remain untouched and lives that are unled—lost in the realm of waiting, is nothing short of heartbreaking. I rejoiced when I learned that one of the missing persons linked to the choir had been found. Yet that happy ending is not a normal ending in such cases; that is a fact. The 2017 Act was passed to help families and enable them to deal with financial and other issues that arise when someone has gone missing, although it will never help to ease the pain and suffering.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland has a website that displays photos of those who are missing, in an attempt to enable people to give others peace of mind. However, I believe that we must have a UK-wide national register of missing persons to provide a snapshot of live missing persons incidents across police forces throughout the UK, as a way of finding missing people if possible.

In the provincial papers back home, such as Sunday Life, there are unfortunately regular stories about people who have been missing over the years, with a renewed plea for people with evidence to come forward. It is always good to publish such information. I do not go to America every year, but I recall seeing, when I was there on holiday, that Walmart stores had pictures up of children who had gone missing. There were pictures galore on the wall—a wee timely reminder of the losses that happen. The children in those pictures are always smiling. Each missing person case is a story of loss and heartache, and the pictures resonate with everyone who looks at them.

I support legislation to make life easier for the families of missing people. I should make it clear that it is not an issue that affects only a small number of people. In the United Kingdom there is a report of someone going missing every 90 seconds, and 180,000 people are reported missing every year. There are 340,000 missing person incidents every year. Children are more likely to go missing than adults—that really creates grief and strain. One in 200 children and one in 500 adults go missing each year. Research has shown that stress is one of the most common reasons for adults to go missing. In up to eight out of 10 cases of missing adults, diagnosed or undiagnosed mental health issues are the reason. Relationship breakdown is responsible in three out of 10 cases. Dementia is another cause, in one in 10 cases. Four in every 10 people with dementia will go missing at some point. Those people do not intend to go missing, but they do. That has happened in my constituency in the past couple of years. Both people were found in time, thank goodness, and had no knowledge of where they were or recollection of how they got there.

Whatever the reason for someone going missing, the pain is the same. The Government were right to pass the legislation and now, at the close of the consultation period, it is time to implement the measure that will make so many things easier for waiting families to deal with.

**Julian Sturdy** (York Outer) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful argument about the ways that people go missing. Does he agree that it is positive that we are moving towards the endgame, in July, for this important Act? However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) mentioned, 2,500 people are still waiting for the measure to be implemented. A thousand people go missing every year, and, as has been said, they all have families. Must we not use the debate to make sure that the timescales for implementing the Act do not slip further?

**Jim Shannon**: I agree wholeheartedly. We look to the Minister now to encapsulate our thoughts and give us reasons why we are having this debate. Now is the time. We cannot wait longer. The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate mentioned that it is the last day of the consultation, and we look to the Minister for reassurance.

Every one of us can understand the families’ uncertainty. I agree that there must be a long waiting period before a declaration of presumed death can be made; yet there are issues that should not have to wait that long to be discharged. That is what this legislation is about, and it is on that matter that we want the Minister’s reassurance. It will be helpful if a path can be set out for family members left without the financial support they need and expected, or unpaid creditors who must turn to insolvency procedures. It will be helpful also in the case of mortgages and repossession procedures. It is relevant to problems that arise when banks and other financial institutions are unable to release the missing person’s assets, or even information about them, to those left behind. In such cases the missing person’s money can be wasted by automated payments. Direct debits go out every month with no control and cannot be stopped. The person’s assets decay for want of repair. Those things happen at the moment, and that is why the urgency of the matter cannot be emphasised enough.

There has been much consideration and the time has come to implement the law right away. Many hon. Members realise that there is a need to fill a void, and to look after those who have lost loved ones, so that they can continue their lives in a way that enables them to remember. The pain of families left behind will of course never go away, but the Act will enable us to look after them.

9.59 am

**Chris Evans** (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. It is rare to be in a debate in Parliament where we feel that the whole House is coming together on an issue that affects nearly everyone. A quarter of a million people will go missing each year. Many of them will be found, but the families left behind are in no man’s land.

I will start with a bit of history. As it did for the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), this issue came to the fore with me very early in my parliamentary career, when I met Rachel Elias, the sister of Richey Edwards of the Manic Street Preachers, who went missing in 1995. The funny thing is that before we meet people and learn about the story, we sometimes think of it as a mystery and we forget that these people are real and leave behind lives. With Richey Edwards being a high-profile guitarist and songwriter with the Manic Street Preachers—one of my favourite bands when I was a mad indie fan as a kid—we forget that these people are real. When I met Rachel, I discovered the devastation that his disappearance had left behind: mortgages unpaid, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, direct debits unpaid and a kind of no man’s land.
It is hard for people to accept, when someone has
gone missing, that they may have died; they do not want
to recognise that. I pay tribute to the Missing People
charity for its hard work to bring this issue to the fore.
When I met the charity, I was told that the law at the
time was like crazy paving, with no certainty about
what happens when someone goes missing. I think the
hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton will agree with me
that that was the best way to describe it.

I was interested at the time in the Presumption of
Death Act 2013. I will do something strange for a
Labour Member and commend the Government, because
from the beginning of my involvement in this campaign
the Government got this, and I believe they got it right.
When I was on the Justice Committee in 2011, I asked
the then Chair, Sir Alan Beith—now Lord Beith—to
look into the matter, and he did. We had the hon.
Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly), who was then
a Minister at the Ministry of Justice, before us, and he
said that the Government were supportive of a presumption
of death Act but did not have parliamentary

That legislation was introduced as a private Member’s
Bill, which I mentioned in my earlier intervention, by
the hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen), who is now
a Treasury Minister. I was delighted to be part of the
Committee that ultimately brought about the Presumption
of Death Act, which came into force on 1 October 2013,
but I always felt that that was just part one of solving
the problem. Yes, presumption of death was right—as
the hon. Member for Strangford said, it is correct that
we give a certain amount of time for people who have
gone missing before they are pronounced dead. That is
absolutely right because, sadly, we have seen high-profile
cases where people have come back—I am thinking of
the famous canoe man.

The second part, and the original point that Rachel
brought up with me, was about still being liable for
debts, direct debits and, in particular, mortgages. Banks,
having no recompense, may have to look into liquidation.
The financial pressure that families face is huge, at the
same time as they are going through the emotions of
losing and missing someone, so I was delighted when the
hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton introduced a
private Member’s Bill that became the Guardianship

However, for all the good work done on this by the
coalition Government and the present Government, I
feel that they dragged their heels a little, and I am
disappointed by that. It is pertinent, as my hon. Friend
the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) mentioned, that today is the end of the
consultation. I think we have dragged our feet a little
too much on this, and I look to the Minister to ensure
that the Act comes into force in July. Too many people
are left in limbo and need help, not in July, but now. If
they have the banks on their back and everything else,
the pressure on them is immense.

As I said in my earlier intervention, the hon. Member
for Salisbury has been elevated to the Treasury team—he
is on to great things—but he has responsibility for
financial services now, as the Minister will know, and I
hope that they have had discussions. I know the hon.
Member for Salisbury enjoys a good relationship with
the financial services sector, and I hope he will be
heavily involved in ensuring that the banks and other
financial services come to the table and talk about this
to ensure a smooth transition as the Act comes into
force in July, so that the financial pressure is taken off
families.

I also understand the problems with the Act: we are
asking someone to take on the affairs of someone else,
and I know there has to be sensitivity around that.
When the Minister responds to the debate, I hope he
will touch on that sensitivity of someone else taking on
responsibility for someone who is missing and does not
know that they have got hold of their financial affairs.
As we always worry in these cases, despite all the many
genuine cases, there is always potential for fraud, so I
hope the Minister will talk about how the Act will deal
with that.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford, who
I think is setting the record for the number of Westminster Hall debates that he speaks in. He spoke very well, as he
always does, and he mentioned something that I had
not thought of before: whether a central database of
missing people had been created by the police. I hope
the Minister will have conversations with the Home
Office about bringing that about. It is interesting that
when we travel to America, if we buy a carton of milk,
there are often pictures of missing children on there. The Government could speak to supermarkets about
bringing that about, and I hope that will be thought
about.

Of course, I pay tribute to Peter Lawrence, who I am
delighted to see here today, for his dignified campaign.
Anyone who has met him knows his passion to ensure
that no other family should have to go through what he
has been through. I share his sadness that it is now
10 years since Claudia went missing, and I hope beyond
all hope that one day he gets some positive news,
because he deserves it.

I also pay tribute to my constituent Rachel Elias for
her high-profile campaign, especially through the popular
press, to ensure that Richey’s tragedy is still talked
about 24 years later. I met her mother Sherry and her
father Graham, and I find it sad that they passed away
without knowing what happened to Richey. Again, I
hope that they find some closure in that case and that
there is some positive news about all this; but I will say
of Rachel that, in the midst of all the negativity, she has
found something positive and she has campaigned very
hard. My heart goes out to everybody who has someone
who has gone missing. I pray and hope that they find
closure and hear some positive news eventually.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to
the Front-Bench speeches. If the Front Benchers split
the time between them, they can have up to 25 minutes
each, but it is not compulsory.

10.6 am

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): Do not worry,
colleagues, I will not take up that kind offer. It is an
honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.
I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield,
Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) for securing the
debate and to everybody who has contributed to it—the
hon. Members for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake),
for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for York Outer (Julian
Sturdy), and my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn
(Chris Evans). We have heard some powerful and moving
speeches. To say that I enjoyed listening to them would be to use the wrong word, but certainly I have been moved by every speech I have heard today.

Let us take a moment to imagine someone we love dearly—a family member, spouse or child—going missing without a trace; how frantic and traumatised we would feel at losing them overnight and how we would cling to the hope that they might return, even as days, months or even years went by, all the while swinging between hope and fear of the worst. Let us imagine having to experience that rollercoaster of emotional turmoil while simultaneously battling with legal and financial institutions to save the home we shared, watching the life that we hope that loved one will return to fall apart. Let us imagine being stuck in legal limbo, unable even to grieve the loss of the missing loved one, who we still hope will return, unable to manage the finances and practical affairs of the absent family member, feeling helpless.

That is the reality for families of missing people, who are still waiting on Ministers to move on this vital legislation and allow them the legal right to become guardians of their loved one’s affairs 90 days after they have been declared missing. Without the legal authority to act on a missing relative’s behalf, families can face great difficulty engaging financial and legal institutions to keep their loved one’s affairs in order. Whether it is banking, mortgages or insurance, benefits or utilities, the list of foundational elements of their relative’s life that they are unable to manage due to bureaucratic barriers is endless.

Families find themselves unable to make changes to missing relatives’ mortgages or cancel direct debits that are clearly no longer needed. The worst-case scenario is that the missing person’s finances are damaged beyond repair and that their home is lost altogether, which, unless a presumption of death certificate is gained, is the only option for some families.

However, quite understandably, many people do not want to believe that their loved one is deceased. While the presumption of death route suits some families, it does not suit many others. Imagine having a missing person declared dead when firmly believing, or at least hoping against hope, that they are actually still alive. Forcing families to declare their loved one dead just so that they can take control of a spiralling financial crisis seems an almost dystopian level of cruelty. Where is the humanity in such a system? There are examples of people who have been missing for years later returning. Who are we to deny suffering families the hope that their loved one will one day be back to resume the life they left behind?

The simple solution, as laid out in the 2017 Act, is similar to arrangements that exist for appointing people guardian of the affairs of someone who is mentally incapable of managing their own affairs. This is a humane and practical route to giving families the peace of mind and the autonomy to deal with financial quandaries that they would otherwise face.

The Government have dragged their feet on implementing the 2017 Act, to the extent that they are still consulting on it, despite the Act receiving Royal Assent and the support of both sides of the House. This totally unnecessary consultation finishes today, with weary families watching as we continue to engage in a talking shop about the blatantly obvious and already agreed solution to their ongoing trauma. The legislation has been debated and agreed and has received Royal Assent. Why on earth are we making traumatised families wait any longer? Charities that work with the families of missing people are seriously concerned by the continued delays. Missing People says that families it works with currently face increased financial hardship, despite hoping that they would now be able to manage their missing relative’s affairs.

Claudia Lawrence is still missing after nearly 10 years. There is no evidence of any crime being committed against her, nor of her having made any contact with those close to her. Her father, Peter Lawrence, has spearheaded the campaign for changes to guardianship laws and has come so far, seeing Claudia’s law grow from a ten-minute rule Bill into a fully formed Act thanks to his brave campaigning. However, he and the rest of Claudia’s family still have no closure or ability to manage her affairs.

More people are going missing, and the latest figures show that fewer people than the Government expected have been declared as presumed dead, meaning more families being forced to face unnecessary challenges due to the Government’s slow progress on implementing the legislation. Claudia’s law passed its Third Reading in the House of Lords on 27 April 2017. It was welcomed in both Houses by all parties and passed through Parliament unamended in just over three months. It should have been fully enacted in May 2018, when we expected families of missing people to be able to start applying for guardianship powers.

However, despite initial assurances that the law would be brought into force one year after Royal Assent, in April 2018 the Government made the heartbreaking announcement that delays would ensue, preventing the necessary secondary legislation from being enacted. We are still waiting, nearly two years down the line, while families watch their finances fall apart and the burden of stress mount ever higher. All Members who have spoken have made the same plea: that we must not drag our heels any longer. Why do these delays persist? When will the Minister give these families the reassurance they need of a solid, inmovable implementation timetable, and what does he have to say to them by way of apology for their prolonged pain and suffering?

10.13 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) on securing a debate on this important subject. He and many other Members of both Houses, some of whom are here today, have campaigned long and hard for the implementation of the Guardianship (Missing Persons) Act 2017. The hon. Gentleman spoke very movingly, with his customary decency and power, on behalf of his constituent, whose brother went missing in the Galapagos.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who is my friend, for his work on and success with his private Member’s Bill. He mentioned that parliamentary time is hard to come by and that getting a private Member’s
Bill through is harder still. I have to say that he has exceptional skill in doing so, having done it not once but twice. I commend any colleague wishing to succeed with a private Member’s Bill to seek his wise counsel and guidance, or indeed his golden touch, in this space.

My hon. Friend rightly highlighted not only the support for the 2017 Act across the House, but how he got it across the line just in time. I have to declare an interest: I was proud to be in the Chamber that day to hear his speech. On that occasion he highlighted the case of Claudia Lawrence, who has been missing since 2009. Her father, Peter, is here today. While tributes to colleagues are important, I must pay the greatest tribute to him for his bravery and dedication in securing action by Parliament on this important issue.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero), made a powerful speech, as ever. It is always a pleasure to work with her. As she knows, when I say that I will do something, I tend to stick to that, and I intend to do so today. I know that she, with her customary courtesy but firmness, will hold me to account on that—she has today administered polite but firm prods to Her Majesty’s Government along those lines.

I am conscious that Members are frustrated, as they have expressed courteously but clearly, that the Act has not yet come into effect. As a Member who was in the Chamber that day, I share that frustration. I am pleased to reaffirm on the record the commitment made by my ministerial colleague, Lord Keen, that the Government are determined to implement the Act in July this year. The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate asked what will happen should there be any delays or problems. First, should there be any, I will ensure that Parliament is fully informed. However, it is my determination to make sure that there are none and that we bring the Act into operation in July.

Julian Sturdy: The Minister is making a genuine point, and I know from speaking to him and from asking questions of him in the House that he is determined to drive this forward. I am absolutely delighted about that, but will he give a commitment to all Members in the debate—looking around, they are the same ones who have been involved in these debates for years—that he will write to us to keep us updated and to make sure we deliver on that July timetable?

Edward Argar: I am very happy to give that assurance and to write to all Members who have participated in the debate, as well as to others who could not be here today but who have taken a close interest in this issue. My hon. Friend pre-empts my mentioning him, but I put on the record my appreciation and, I know, everyone else’s, for his work in furthering this important cause.

Today is a significant marker on the route to implementation, not only because of our debate, but because it is the end of the consultation period, which began on 19 December last year with the publication of our consultation paper on the implementation of the Act. While I hear the shadow Minister’s points on that, I think it was right that we consulted. We are taking a novel approach to a new area of law, and it is important that we get it right.

I emphasise that the Government recognise and fully support the need for this legislation. I think it was the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) who put it very clearly, saying that, prior to the Act, the law and provisions in this area were essentially a bit like crazy paving. He is absolutely right. The need for the legislation was therefore clear.

We understood that several families each year had no legal process to turn to in order to resolve urgent property or financial affairs for a family member or friend who had gone missing with no evidence of what had happened to them. That was set out by the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate and, indeed, by my friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who set out with his customary passion, determination and detailed research the vital need for this legislation to come into force. As ever, his constituents and the House are lucky to have him.

We understand that the terrible emotional distress and anxiety that families are already going through is increased as they seek to deal with everyday financial issues regarding their missing loved one. They cannot access bank accounts, savings or property transactions to intervene as they see those financial affairs potentially spiralling out of control. The creation of the new legal status of guardian of the property and financial affairs of a missing person will provide a structured way of dealing with financial affairs and property in the missing person’s best interests, under a legal process that builds in safeguards for all involved.

The consultation paper, to which I referred, set out the Ministry of Justice’s proposals for implementation of the Act. The Government are grateful for the comments we have received—both formally, in writing, and in numerous meetings that officials have convened in the past few months with a wide range of interested parties following the commitment in the consultation paper to engage fully with stakeholders. Of course, we must now consider the views expressed to us. We intend to do that quickly and to publish the Government’s response to the consultation in early April, setting out the detail of the proposals for implementation.

As the consultation paper set out, there are several aspects to implementation of the Act, and all of them need to be completed successfully for it to come into force and work as intended. As I have mentioned, guardianship in this context is fairly novel; indeed, it is a significant change, so it is important that we get it right, with safeguards, but also ensure that the raft of complex legal and regulatory changes work as intended.

The first aspect is developing the rules of court and related practice directions for guardianship proceedings. Guardians can be appointed only by the High Court. Their appointment will be by a court order setting out the scope of their authority in relation to the property and financial affairs of the missing person. As I have said, the court to be designated for the process is the High Court. The decision on the court was made by the Lord Chancellor, following the required statutory consultation with the Lord Chief Justice.

Our intention is that applications to the High Court for a guardianship order will be made to the chancery division or the family division. This arrangement is modelled on the Inheritance (Provision for Family and Dependants) Act 1975 and the Presumption of Death Act 2013. This approach enables many of the existing rules of court and practice directions to be followed, so guardianship proceedings can be commenced under existing part 8 of the civil procedure rules, and applications
after a case has started can be made via part 23. We will decide where to draw the line between the different rules over the coming months in considering the response to the consultation. However, although we can follow precedent, we are not obliged to do so, and if there are good reasons to create a new provision to cater for a particular feature of guardianship—for example, its limited duration—we are willing to look at that.

I can give an update: the work on the draft rules of court and practice directions is progressing well and efficiently, particularly through consultation with members of the judiciary and court officials who will be handling cases. The draft rules and practice directions will of course have to be considered and approved by the Civil Procedure Rule Committee. We intend to submit the drafts to the meetings of the committee in April and May. Once the committee has signed off the rules, they will be made and laid before Parliament for approval under the negative resolution procedure. The rules will be given effect through administrative procedures that will have to be created by Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service. Work is already under way in preparation for that.

The second major aspect of implementation is the making of regulations to enable the Public Guardian to register and supervise guardians. These regulations will be made under section 58 of the Mental Capacity Act 2005. We expect that they will be similar to those applying to deputies who are appointed by the Court of Protection to manage the property and financial affairs of individuals who lack the mental capacity to do so themselves. These regulations will provide a legal framework, but the Public Guardian will also have to develop procedures to provide a supervisory and registration service. That work is also well under way, and good progress is being made.

This Act provides for the Public Guardian to establish and maintain a register of guardianship orders. The Public Guardian will also be responsible for supervision of guardians. We propose that a guardianship order will specify when the guardian is to report to the Public Guardian. The Public Guardian will deal with complaints about the conduct of guardians, including safeguarding concerns, but will also be able to offer advice and guidance, which we think will provide considerable assistance to guardians, as the equivalent advice and guidance does for deputies at the moment.

Deputies usually have to provide a security or surety bond or proof of adequate professional indemnity insurance to the Public Guardian. We anticipate that there will be similar arrangements for guardians under this Act. The Public Guardian will receive the bond and hold it against any risk of a missing person’s estate being misused and facing financial loss through the actions of the guardian.

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the Public Guardian and his office for their work to date in preparing for implementation of the Act. More broadly, ahead of his retirement later this year, I pay tribute to the Public Guardian, Alan Eccles, as an exemplary public servant who has done much to bring this issue to the fore and into greater public consciousness during his term of office.

The third aspect on which we have consulted is the fees for the new service. These are of two types. The first is court fees, and the proposal in the consultation is to adopt the existing fees in the High Court’s two divisions for the procedures concerned. This mirrors the approach taken for fees under the Presumption of Death Act 2013. The second type of fee is that levied by the Public Guardian for registration and supervision of guardians. These will be new fees, but the expectation in the consultation is that the approach will follow that taken by the Public Guardian in relation to existing fees for deputies. For both these types of fees, we expect that there will be the usual exemptions and remissions.

I have to say that this is not a simple process, because the fees are currently calculated to strike a balance between being affordable and covering the costs of operating the system. Obviously, for something new, it is difficult to estimate both what the costs will be and what the volume of cases will be, but it is important that we strike the right balance between ensuring that costs are covered and not allowing a situation whereby, in the initial months, when there may be only a few applications, people face a prohibitive fee. We need to strike an appropriate balance.

The fourth and final aspect on which we have consulted is the content of a draft code of practice offering guidance to guardians and those considering whether to make a guardianship application. The Act requires the Lord Chancellor to issue a code of practice, and we intend to do that when the Act comes into force. In drawing up the draft code, we have been at pains to make it as accessible as possible to the layperson, and it features a glossary of terms and a number of examples of scenarios that may be faced by the family and friends of missing people. However, we know from the comments that we have received that we can make further progress towards that objective.

The draft code explains key concepts underpinning the Act and goes into some detail on the broad range of duties that guardians will carry out. The aim is that it will assist guardians to understand their responsibilities and equip them to meet their duties. It also aims to explain their powers and the limitations of those powers, as well as where guardians can turn for help. Once the content of the rules and regulations has been settled in the light of the consultation responses, we will include them in the code of practice. The code will be an important resource for guardians and people dealing with them. We intend to lay a draft before Parliament at least 40 days before it is issued, but in the meantime we intend to publish a revised draft in response to the consultation.

I will now address one of the points made by the hon. Member for Islwyn—my pronunciation of the name of his constituency will get better one of these days—in respect of relationships with financial institutions, both in the lead-up to the Act and once the Act is fully in force. Financial institutions are already getting engaged with this process and getting on board with these changes. Officials are ensuring that there is strong engagement directly with financial institutions to discuss setting up new systems for the process in guardianship cases, to ensure that it is as simple and efficient as possible for those who have to go through the pain of this situation.

The designation of the High Court, which I mentioned, will require a statutory instrument.
Jim Shannon: I want to refresh the Minister’s memory about one the requests I made to him, on the back of which the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) came in as well. The Police Service of Northern Ireland has a statistical central catalogue of all the missing people, and it periodically publishes their names in the provincial press to remind people. I know it is not the Minister’s direct responsibility, but could he ask the correct Minister about having a central location for a catalogue of those who have gone missing across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland? That would ensure that people could look at it whenever they want. Would he also take on the idea suggested by the hon. Member for Islwyn about having copies of a photograph of these people? That could be done in conjunction with a person’s family. It would highlight missing people on a regular basis, and may jog people’s memories to give a bit of evidence, which may make a difference.

Edward Argar: The hon. Members for Strangford and for Islwyn—if I keep saying it, I will get it right—have both made powerful points, which I am happy to explore with ministerial colleagues.

The designation of the High Court will require a statutory instrument. I hope that when we get to the stage of having to lay those pieces of delegated legislation, we preserve a bipartisan and non-party political approach, to ensure that we get the regulations right and get them through as swiftly as we can.

Before finishing, I place on record my thanks to the charity Missing People, which has had to engage with the Ministry in the preparation of the consultation and the draft legislation, and which has kindly acted as an intermediary to collect and collate responses to the consultation from families it knows who have been directly affected by people going missing.

In conclusion, I thank the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate for bringing the topic of guardianship of missing persons before us today. I thank all the hon. Members who have taken part and who have pursued the issue, both today and over many months and years. I also thank you, Mr Hollobone, for chairing the debate. The Act is not only needed and practically important, but quite simply the right thing to do. There is still more work to do to implement the Act in July, but I and the Government know how important this legislation is to many families, who do not have any legal recourse at the moment, and I will do everything in my power to ensure that, in July, we make the ambition and intent of this Act a reality for our country, our communities and those who suffer the dreadful pain of a loved one going missing.

10.31 am

Bambos Charalambous: I will be brief in my remarks. I thank the Minister for giving details about the next steps and how the matter will progress from here. I look forward to getting updates in the near future about how things are progressing. He has given a commitment that the Act will be fully implemented in July, and I look forward to that. I thank him for being so candid.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered missing persons guardianship.

10.32 am

Sitting suspended.
Non-surgical Cosmetic Procedures: Regulation

11 am

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered regulation of non-surgical cosmetic procedures.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I am grateful to lead this debate on an issue that I believe affects all our constituents.

We live in a time when there is a certain desire, especially among the young and impressionable, that one must always look one’s best, or in fact look different to how we may really be. There is nothing wrong with that; we live in a country that gives all citizens the ultimate freedoms over their choices and their own bodies. However, we in Parliament have a responsibility to the people, and our responsibility includes ensuring that those who wish to change their appearance and their bodies have all the information they need to make a fully informed and rational decision and, importantly, are able to trust those administering treatments and to have peace of mind that those treatments will be carried out correctly, with minimal risk to their health.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Does this matter not come down to a fundamental issue, namely that if something goes wrong, who do we sue? Is that not the nub of what my hon. Friend is trying to get at?

Alberto Costa: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Yes, that is one of the core issues that I wish to raise today. The mark of a professional in our society is somebody who is regulated, who is trained, qualified and licensed, and who has ongoing regulation and development. However, in addition to that, in the private sector they must carry professional indemnity insurance, so that people do not sue men or women of straw and so that they have someone to sue when things go wrong.

My experience of non-surgical cosmetic procedures does not extend to Instagram celebrities or Kylie Jenner. Instead, I wish to inform you, Mr Hollobone, of the case of my constituent Rachael Knappier. First, I thank Rachael, her mother and her friend, who are all attending this debate here in Parliament. I also thank Rachael for her tremendous bravery and willingness to talk openly about the terrible injury that she sustained as a result of a botched non-surgical cosmetic procedure. I think Rachael has been a role model for hundreds, if not thousands, of people across the country who have read the articles in the British media about her trauma. They responded with sympathy, but most crucially an understanding of her experience, because—sadly—experiences such as Rachael’s are not confined to the few. Many hundreds of our constituents have suffered such botched procedures.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and I congratulate him on bringing this issue to the House. This debate was supposed to be held a few weeks ago, Mr Hollobone, but unfortunately it did not take place then, so I have looked forward to this opportunity today.

Very recently, I was contacted by one of my local councillors on behalf of a registered nurse in my constituency who is asking for regulation of non-surgical cosmetic services to be made compulsory and not voluntary. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we must understand the belief of someone who sees the terrible effects of these treatments carried out by those who are not medical professionals, and that we should put legislation in place to address this grave concern? Whenever nurses or my councillors come and tell me their concerns, there is a real need for legislative change.

Alberto Costa: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I agree that regulation is required and that legislation should underpin that regulation; there should not be voluntary regulation. Indeed, I would go further and say that, although I do not profess to know what type of expertise somebody should have to carry out these procedures, the regulator should identify the training, the expertise and the qualifications required and what products should be permitted in the market.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I am sure my hon. Friend will be aware that Sir Bruce Keogh conducted a review of the cosmetics industry and its unregulated nature earlier this decade, and he made exactly the points that my hon. Friend is making. Sir Bruce also made the point that if someone is going to perform operations on the human body, they should have the requisite knowledge and training to understand the anatomy involved and the consequences if something goes wrong. Far too often, unregulated practitioners do not have the skills or knowledge to understand what can go wrong, or indeed the skills or knowledge to advise people about the potentially adverse consequences of a procedure. I therefore agree with my hon. Friend that it is time for proper regulation of what are sometimes cowboy practitioners in this sector.

Alberto Costa: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. The idea that anyone who is wholly unregulated and without any medical expertise whatsoever can inject people with foreign substances is shocking, to say the least. Again, however, it would be for a regulator to determine what type of qualifications and expertise one should need, whether that is medical expertise or otherwise. I would leave that matter in the hands of an appropriate regulator.

Several hon. Members rose—

Alberto Costa: If hon. Members do not mind, I will make some progress and then give way again.

My constituent Rachael told me that a beautician had attended a party intending to administer some treatments to those in attendance. The beautician in question did not have any medical training, nor, to the best of my knowledge, did she have any formal recognised training in administering this type of injection. Rachael received, as many thousands of our constituents do, a lip filler injection while she was attending a social engagement with friends. As a direct result of the beautician’s mistake—it was not Rachael’s mistake—lip filler was incorrectly injected into Rachael’s artery, causing her lips to swell severely, requiring her to seek urgent medical attention, before being treated privately after the NHS was unable to help. Again, I commend Rachael’s
bravery in talking so willingly about her experience, providing a multitude of younger people and others with a message of understanding and empowerment.

These types of procedures, which have been popularised by Instagram celebrities and reality stars such as the Kardashians, have experienced a huge rise in popularity, with more and more people seeking them.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that although the vast majority of beauticians undertaking these procedures do so in a professional setting and manner and are concerned about the reputation of their businesses, maintaining that professionalism requires some form of regulation, which would stop these Botox parties where things go horribly wrong and people have no redress, and would improve the whole industry?

Alberto Costa: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She is right to use the word “professional”, but the mark of a professional is somebody who is regulated, and in the private sector it is somebody who has professional indemnity insurance behind them. It is easy for someone to call themselves a professional, but a real professional is someone who is regulated. I am a solicitor and I am regulated by the Solicitors Regulation Authority, and behind me there is professional indemnity insurance. If I give advice negligently, a consumer has redress against the insurance product. We want a healthy, thriving industry in non-surgical cosmetics, where people can freely choose these procedures, but we have a duty as MPs to protect the health and safety of consumers, enabling them to make informed choices when seeking treatment from professional beauticians.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. Regarding the training that those administering these sorts of treatments need, I recently spoke to a father whose 19-year-old daughter had received Botox injections, to which she had suffered a severe allergic reaction. This is the realm of medical practice. Anyone administering Botox should be aware of the possibility of those receiving it having an allergic reaction and should know what to do if they do. That is an area that regulation needs to address.

Alberto Costa: The hon. Lady is exactly spot-on. It is beyond belief that somebody can inject someone else with a foreign substance and have no medical expertise whatsoever. That is the nub of the problem.

We see more and more young people seeking these types of procedures, and at younger ages. It is incumbent on the Government to act swiftly and decisively to ensure that proper regulation and protection are in place for our constituents, of all ages, before the situation spirals out of control.

According to data from Save Face, a Government-approved voluntary register of accredited practitioners, there has been an alarming rise in reports of botched cosmetic procedures in the UK. The number of complaints about non-registered practitioners of treatments such as lip fillers and Botox reached almost 1,000 last year, showing that there is a large gap in safety and proper process that must be bridged. Further, there is a separate but inextricable link between the rise of non-surgical cosmetic procedures and the pressures that young people in our society feel. Members may have seen Sky News this morning about social media, selfies and changing one’s image. That is clearly a major issue, particularly among the younger generation. Social media also has a responsibility regarding advertisements for non-surgical cosmetic procedures that are particularly targeted at minors. Although it is a person’s prerogative to undertake any treatment they wish, they should be able to do so through the prism of an informed decision, and with the peace of mind that the treatment they receive has been tried, tested and regulated by a professional body.

Colleagues might have seen the news about Superdrug a week or so ago, in which NHS England’s medical director strongly criticised the trusted high street retailer for not conducting “medically responsible” checks before customers receive their treatment. Similarly, NHS England’s chief executive sternly warned ITV about screening advertisements for these types of treatment in breaks during programmes such as “Love Island”, which is hugely popular with young people. Many colleagues will be shocked, as I was, to find that anyone can carry out non-surgical cosmetic procedures, with no regulation or expertise whatsoever.

A multitude of small businesses, and even individuals, spread across Facebook and, especially, Instagram, offer their services to impressionable young people. Many of them have no corporate responsibility or regulation and there are therefore absolutely no safeguards for consumers. Although I appreciate that many colleagues may have never seen an episode of “Love Island”—I confess to being in that category; I do not even have an Instagram account—

Jim Shannon: That makes two of us.

Alberto Costa: Dreadful, shocking. [Interruption.] Resign? With immediate effect. Members may also inexplicably not even know the different between their Kylie and Kendall Jenners, but there can be no doubt that most of our young constituents do. Those things are staples of the young generation, and are prevalent reminders, and in some cases advocates, of these types of non-surgical cosmetic treatment.

The Times recently conducted an investigation in which an Instagram account was created purporting to be that of a 13-year-old. Almost instantly after the account had followed social media influencers and celebrities, posts promoting such procedures appeared in the app’s “explore” feature. That reveals the shocking ease with which our younger constituents can be exposed to these types of treatment, under the guise of their being the new norm in today’s society.

In addition, young people’s physical access to the treatments is of tremendous concern. Although the law rightly restricts tattooing and the use of sunbeds for those under 18, there is no age-related restriction for either surgical or non-surgical invasive cosmetic procedures. The Nuffield Council on Bioethics recommends that children and young people under the age of 18 should not be able to access cosmetic procedures unless there is a medically relevant reason to do so. With the prevalence and exposure of the procedures specifically aimed at the young and impressionable in our society, action is required to protect children.
Turning to the industry itself, I have repeatedly said that non-health professionals who provide non-surgical cosmetic procedures are not regulated in an appropriate statutory manner. There is, however, an independent voluntary Joint Council for Cosmetic Practitioners, which has launched two new registers, one for practitioners who meet the clinical standards required to provide the treatments and another for accredited education providers. In the absence of an obligatory statutory register, as a minimum there should be clear public information about the need to seek a practitioner who is, at the very least, registered with that independent voluntary regulator. Nevertheless, a voluntary independent register, however laudable, does not go far enough. Dermal lip fillers, as one of the more popular non-surgical cosmetic treatments, are a good case in point regarding the total lack of standards in respect of the administered products.

I am mindful of time, so will make a few closing remarks. It was mentioned that the Keogh review, undertaken by the coalition Government, expressed huge concern that nothing prevented entirely unskilled practitioners from offering invasive treatments using unregulated products. The review stated that “dermal fillers are a crisis waiting to happen.”

Despite the Minister at the time of the review’s publication advocating that its recommendations be taken forward, sadly this is, apparently, not happening. I therefore ask both the Minister, who I know has been a champion of ensuring appropriate health and safety standards for consumers, and the Government to at least consider setting out a cohesive and comprehensive plan to properly regulate the non-surgical cosmetic industry.

My constituent Rachael has been forthcoming, and willing to discuss her experience, but many hundreds out there have suffered botched treatments and are embarrassed or unable to come forward. As Members of Parliament, we have a duty to our constituents, and indeed to all others who may consider these treatments, to provide public information and to ensure that the procedures are administered by trained, qualified and regulated individuals. We also must ensure that, yes, those individuals are able to work in a thriving and competitive industry, but also that consumers have choice and that professional indemnity insurance is obligatory, so that our constituents are protected when things go wrong and the taxpayer is not burdened through the impact on the NHS.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) for introducing this extremely timely debate. It is good to see so many colleagues showing an interest. I am delighted to see my hon. Friend. He is absolutely right: the priority for us in the Department of Health and Social Care has to be the safety of people undergoing these procedures. Aligned with that, I was pleased to see in the challenge to Superdrug a recognition of the fact that people’s seeking these sorts of treatments can be an indication of dysmorphia and an underlying problem. We need to make sure that all practitioners in this field have the ability to recognise those problems.

Liz McInnes: I also wanted to raise the issue of dysmorphia, which strays into the area of mental health. I am concerned that we seem to be accepting that it is okay for people to want to change their appearance. The issue of body dysmorphia illustrates that people may be asking for these procedures for the wrong reasons, and I question whether someone on the high street, who is not a qualified mental health practitioner is able to determine whether somebody is suffering from body dysmorphia.
Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Lady goes to the nub of this issue. We need to achieve an appropriate balance between allowing consumers to choose to embark on procedures that will enhance their appearance, and identifying whether the issue is something deeper. Again, it comes down to how we regulate those practitioners, the codes of conduct that they will sign up to, and the policies that they will put in place themselves. To an extent, the hon. Lady is right: dysmorphia can only be diagnosed by a medical professional. However, there are signs that can be taken into account, that can lead to the person’s being asked, “Do you really want to do this? Is this an appropriate procedure for you?” Perhaps there should be cooling-off periods, with bookings being made properly, and customers being advised about the risks that such treatments involve, so that they can make an informed choice. The hon. Lady is right to highlight the growing issue of dysmorphia, which we need to take very alive to.

Melanie Onn: This is a really important point. Even in the realm of plastic surgery, which is a regulated industry, we see grotesque transformations of people’s bodies and faces: people having ribs removed, leaving their external organs exposed, or having their entire appearance amended to make them look like a human Ken doll. We know that regulation in that sector is not really working, so can we make sure that in the currently unregulated sector of Botox injections and dermal fillers, we keep a closer eye on such things?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Lady makes an extremely good point. The worst thing is that the media representation of those quite grotesque transformations encourages us to look on them as entertainment, yet the person we are looking at has no idea, because those transformations are symptomatic of dysmorphia. The media have to be a lot more sensible about their portrayal of these things. My hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire mentioned the adverts during “Love Island”; these artificially enhanced images of people are becoming entertainment. I am delighted that in this country we have banned the Brazilian butt lift, which aims to make external organs exposed, or having their entire appearance amended to make them look like a human Ken doll. We know that regulation in that sector is not really working, so can we make sure that in the currently unregulated sector of Botox injections and dermal fillers, we keep a closer eye on such things?

We can discuss regulation and ensuring that consumers understand the risks, but there is a wider challenge to society in how we celebrate learning to love ourselves. We have talked generally about the pressure that social media creates, which is becoming much more intense, the media have to be a lot more sensible about their portrayal of these things. My hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire mentioned the adverts during “Love Island”; these artificially enhanced images of people are becoming entertainment. I am delighted that in this country we have banned the Brazilian butt lift, which aims to make people look like one of our friends the Kardashians, but even so, people still aspire to look like that.

We can discuss regulation and ensuring that consumers understand the risks, but there is a wider challenge to society in how we celebrate learning to love ourselves. We have talked generally about the pressure that social media creates, which is becoming much more intense, but there is a hell of a lot more to do. Sadly, we could probably debate this issue for quite some time—we do not have the opportunity to do so today—but the debate about cosmetic regulation and making cosmetic procedures safe brings out these questions, which we as a society need to be better at addressing. If we do not address them, these issues about dysmorphia will only get worse, because our young people are faced with an intensity of images that make them want to change their bodies. It is just not good for them.

As there is limited time left, I will bring hon. Members up to date about what has happened since the Keogh review. Sir Bruce Keogh’s report identified several areas for change: the principles that underlined it were those of high-quality care, using safe products, administered by skilled professionals and responsible providers to an informed and empowered public. We still have a long way to go in both empowering the public and ensuring that all such procedures are administered by skilled practitioners. I wholly endorse the demand by my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire that such practitioners should have professional indemnity insurance. It is important that the NHS has the opportunity to recover the costs of repairing procedures carried out by those practitioners, who should bear the risks. As I say, this is not like going to the hairdresser’s for a haircut: there are risks associated with such procedures, and those engaged in them should bear those risks.

Updated guidance for doctors about this area has been issued by both the General Medical Council and the Royal College of Surgeons. We have introduced a voluntary certification scheme for surgeons working in the cosmetic sector, and Health Education England is developing a training and qualification framework for providers of non-surgical interventions. A key outcome of the Keogh review was setting standards that anyone who wishes to perform non-surgical cosmetic procedures should meet. To that end, the Joint Council for Cosmetic Practitioners was established, and in April 2018 it launched a register for both medical and non-clinical cosmetic practitioners. That register will provide a framework for regulation, but we need to do much more to encourage non-clinical cosmetic practitioners to sign up to it.

Alongside the Cosmetic Practice Standards Authority, the JCCP released an updated competency framework last September, and launched its education and training register. To receive accreditation on that register, providers offering education and training in these procedures must meet rigorous standards set by the JCCP. We need to work closely with the JCCP to develop hallmarks that people who wish to undergo these procedures can look for, so that they can be sure that they are obtaining treatment from a regulated practitioner. We have heard references to Save Face, which also holds a register for clinical cosmetic practitioners who provide non-surgical cosmetic treatments. Some 600 practitioners are currently covered by these registers, but I am sure that hon. Members from across the House will appreciate that significantly more than 600 practitioners offer these treatments. There is some way to go in ensuring that all those involved in this industry perform to the standards that we can legitimately expect, and that those who are not doing so exit the industry. However, I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire will agree that those registers are major steps forward in enabling consumers to make informed choices about cosmetic procedures.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend’s constituent for coming forward and telling her story, because probably the best way of helping consumers protect themselves is to have a visual illustration of the risks and someone who can demonstrate their experience. I am very grateful to her for her courage in sharing her story. We need to do much more in the area of public education, to ensure that consumers fully appreciate that there are risks involved in injecting substances into one’s face, and to ensure that the person doing so has appropriate qualifications. Botox is obviously a prescription drug, but the person doing it does not have to be the person who obtained the prescription. That is another thing that we need to address. I can also advise my hon. Friend that we will be making dermal fillers a regulated
medical device, which will remove some of the risks associated with them. However, as I have said, there is plenty more to do.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am
Sitting suspended.

2.30 pm

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Before I call Sir Vince Cable to move the motion for this important debate on special educational needs and disabilities funding, I can report that 12 colleagues have put in to speak from the Back Benches. Therefore, after Sir Vince’s speech, there will be a voluntary time limit of three and a half minutes. Please try to contain yourselves a little in interventions; otherwise, we will go well over time.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered special educational needs and disabilities funding.

It is a privilege to speak on this subject, which is of immense concern to a large number of us and to our constituents, and that is reflected in the demand to speak. It is rare that we get a Brexit-free zone in Parliament at the moment, but this is one, and it is right that we pay attention to it. Far too many Government problems have been squeezed out by the attention given to a single issue, but how we treat children with special educational needs will have enormous implications for decades to come.

Essentially, I will speak about the conflict between two sets of pressures: an irresistible force and an immovable object. The irresistible force is, of course, the demand of parents of children with special needs, who have been led to believe, by the very progressive Children and Families Act 2014, that their children’s needs will be met and their full potential realised through education, health and care plans. The immovable object is money, manifesting itself now in a serious financial crisis for local authorities, which are expected to meet statutory obligations, but find that demand is rising and becoming much larger than the funding available through the special needs block. In some cases, those local authorities are in extreme difficulty.

I will introduce the debate by quoting a parents’ group called Richmond SEND Crisis, which wrote to me yesterday, describing the problem from the parents’ point of view. The group said:

“The crisis in funding has consequences. It means more stress and mental health issues for both parents and children, parents being forced to give up work, increased levels of family break up, increased levels of children being disruptive in school, failing in school or not being in school at all. It means that schools and the wider school community suffer, as children without proper support tend to absorb a disproportionate amount of time from school staff and may be disruptive in class.

All of these consequences inevitably hit the most vulnerable… families the hardest.”

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that one significant change is the growth in home-school education? Given the amount of
time it takes to get an assessment, parents are now just taking their children out of school. That cannot be a good thing.

Sir Vince Cable: Indeed. That is happening on a growing scale, and is augmented by the fact that many children are being excluded because of the lack of support. That, in turn, contributes to home education, which may be inferior.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the crisis in funding is about not only the overall sum of money but the distribution? Government policy means that schools have to absorb up to £11,000 of the cost of meeting an EHCP. Schools that do the right thing and accept children with special educational needs are therefore punished, and those that do not are rewarded. Does he agree that that is an unfair and wrong distribution?

Sir Vince Cable: Indeed. In addition to the problem facing local authorities, schools in effect pay a £6,000 penalty. Many schools that were committed to inclusion now find that increasingly difficult and are shying away from their obligations.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I fully agree with him about funding for special needs schools. Hereward College in Coventry has struggled with funding for a number of years, and does an excellent job. Another dimension is that children who have mental health problems often go home to a disruptive family life. That is not conducive to their education or mental health. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that something should be done about that?

Sir Vince Cable: Yes, I do. By mentioning mental health, the hon. Gentleman reinforces the point that I will go on to make. When we talk about special needs pupils, we are talking about significantly different classes of people with fundamentally different problems. Of course, they are all individuals, but we are talking about 1.2 million people altogether in the SEN system—up by about 0.5 million since 2014. About a quarter of them, according to Mencap, have learning difficulties. That actually understates the problem, because Mencap estimates that about 40% of children with learning difficulties are never identified at school.

About 120,000 children are on the autistic spectrum, which is the most rapidly growing and difficult group to accommodate. About 300,000 have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Others have a physical disability. I have had correspondence with those with visual impairment problems, who lack equipment, and other groups such as deaf children, who are not included in the SEN categories at all.

We are dealing with large numbers of very different categories of people, but what they have in common is that demand for EHCPs is growing rapidly: it has grown by about 35% over the four years since the legislation was enacted, which is about three times the growth of the school population. It is also three times the amount of funding available through the Government grant allocation.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): I thank my right hon. Friend for securing this important debate. He will be aware that one of the successes during the coalition was our insistence that disabled children need to be educated up to the age of 18. That has been a real game-changer; however, the Government did not make it clear that transport for those children should be paid for; they left it discretionary—some county councils pay for the transport, and others do not, which essentially means that those children have to stay at home. Does he agree that that is an anomaly that the Government need to rectify? Otherwise, thousands of disabled people aged 16 to 18, who should be going to school or in training, because that is what we want them to do, will not have that chance.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that interventions should be brief.

Sir Vince Cable: My hon. Friend is right; that is one of many anomalies. Many such issues were not properly accounted for and are not being fully funded. I will come to others in a moment.

The consequence of the growing demand is that many local authorities, which are genuinely trying to do their best in most cases, are accumulating large financial deficits. The Local Government Association, which has done lots of research on it, believes that there will be a gap of about £1.6 billion at the end of the next financial year. That is unaccounted for at present.

Some London authorities—I speak as a London MP, but I know that other parts of the country have similar problems—have a shortfall from the high needs block of about 7%. For about six boroughs in London, it is more than 10%. For my borough, Richmond, it is 20%, and I think three others are in an even worse position, including the borough of my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey). For his borough, I think it is 40%.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): My right hon. Friend is right that the situation for Kingston is the worst of any London borough. We are spending more than 40% above our allocation, with a potential knock-on to the budgets of schools across the board, and potentially even the solvency of the local authority. Given how serious that is, does he agree that Ministers need to take action now and that we need to talk to the Department of Health and Social Care? The health service is often not paying for the health part of EHCPs.

Sir Vince Cable: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: those are both key parts of the solution. For example, I have discovered that there are children whose need for wheelchairs—clearly a health requirement—is treated as an educational need. There are many such cases in which the finance sits in silos and is not sensibly dealt with.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): My right hon. Friend is being very generous with his time, and I congratulate him on securing this debate. My constituent Sally Foulsham, who runs a parent group called SHIFT, is in contact with more than 100 parents. She reports that what most frustrates them is the lack of funding for child and adolescent mental health services,
which is a major block to unlocking the funding that should be available for EHCPs in the first place. Does my right hon. Friend agree?

Sir Vince Cable: Yes. The decline in CAMHS has led to a lot of children not being properly helped at an early stage and requiring greater special needs provision as a result.

To conclude my point about finance, a large number of local authorities are in serious financial trouble, and not just in London—even those that are doing their best and are perfectly competent. Consequently, they have a large financial deficit sitting on their balance sheet. One of their main sources of anxiety is what will happen with respect to Government legislation that treats them as requiring special measures if they do not sort out the problem. At the moment, they are not sure whether to deal with the problem immediately. Perhaps the Minister could advise us what conversations her colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government have had about how to deal with the problem.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. My council, Hartlepool Borough Council, will have a shortfall of £621,000 in its high needs block funding for 2019-2020. Does he agree that our children and schools need a dedicated schools grant that is sustained and reflects local need?

Sir Vince Cable: I am sure that that would be sensible. The hon. Gentleman represents Hartlepool—a very different kind of community from mine in Twickenham—but his helpful intervention illustrates that the problem is felt across the board.

Why has the problem arisen? Why is there such rapid growth in demand, and why is it not being met? There are good reasons and bad reasons. One of the good reasons is that the 2014 Act extended entitlement to special educational needs provision from 18 up to 25. That was a progressive step, but nobody thought about how it would be paid for. Another big biological change is that has been a great step in medicine, but it means that many local authorities are pushing parents to tribunal, although perhaps “win” is not the right word—in some ways it is a lose-lose situation. Nevertheless, that is an extraordinary figure. It indicates that many local authorities are pushing parents to tribunal, knowing that they themselves will lose, incurring significant costs—about £34 million a year, I believe—simply as a way of holding off demand that they are legally required to meet.

The main consequence of the conflict between supply and demand is that more and more parents are having to go to tribunal. There has been a 20% growth in tribunals in each of the past few years, and 86% of parents win them, although perhaps “win” is not the right word—in some ways it is a lose-lose situation. Nevertheless, that is an extraordinary figure. It indicates that many local authorities are pushing parents to tribunal, knowing that they themselves will lose, incurring significant costs—about £34 million a year, I believe—simply as a way of holding off demand that they are legally required to meet.

My concluding section is about solutions. How do we deal with this? First, there is a broad acceptance that children should be kept, as far as possible, in mainstream and maintained schools rather than in more demanding provision elsewhere. That is true for educational reasons— inclusion is a good philosophy and has good results—but it is also more economical. The figures are striking: in mainstream and maintained schools, the cost is about £6,000 more for SEND pupils than for non-SEND pupils, while for maintained special schools the cost is about £23,000 more, and for private special schools it is about £40,000 more. In many cases, the private special schools perform a very important function and are of very high quality, which is clearly why people seek them out, but there is certainly some evidence that those schools are exploiting many of the weaknesses and the advantages of local authorities. In some cases, they should be referred to the Competition and Markets Authority.
Notwithstanding that issue, the differential suggests an enormous demand for specialist provision that the maintained sector should cater for, but the trend is in the opposite direction. Last year, for the first time, the majority of special needs pupils were not catered for in mainstream maintained schools—a big backward step that reflects the pressures that I have described.

The second clearly undesirable mechanism being used is shifting the burden to other schools, which unfortunately is happening in my own borough. The council is deeply regretful, but it has had to ask the Department for permission to raid the schools budget because the special needs block is grossly insufficient. That is bad not just in itself, because schools are under financial pressure, but because it sets mainstream pupils against special needs pupils. It is quite wicked, actually—it creates resentment in an area in which we should be united in compassion.

Layla Moran: Is my right hon. Friend aware that the practice is now ubiquitous throughout the country? In Oxfordshire, we have a bizarre situation in which the heads board has refused the extra transfer of money, yet the council is now going to the Secretary of State to override what the heads of local schools believe is the right thing for everyone else. There is an inherent tension around where the money will come from. In the end, it should just be more money.

Sir Vince Cable: Indeed. My hon. Friend graphically highlights the dilemma that I am describing: people acting with very good intentions are now being forced into conflict, in a very damaging way.

That point brings me to the crux of the problem: the Government’s role via the high needs budget. I acknowledge that the Government have taken some action—I do not want to be completely grudging. There was an increase of £250 million in the 2018-19 and 2019-20 budgets, part of the special provision announced last year, and that is welcome. However, the LGA has run its ruler over that and has computed that it accounts for about a quarter of the deficit. It is a small step forward. A much bigger step is required.

The second thing the Government can do within existing budget constraints was raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton. Some money should be diverted to special needs school provision from within the large increase in cash that is being made available to the health service.

We cannot avoid the conclusion that, in the spending review ahead, the Government are simply going to have to review the weight they give to special needs provision as opposed to the normal school funding block, and to be substantially more generous in respect of special needs provision. They have announced that we have come to the end of austerity. Some of us are a bit sceptical, but this is one area where they can prove it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. I see a few more people here indicating that they wish to speak, so I remind Members of the three-and-a-half minute speaking limit. I call Priti Patel.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Thank you, Sir Gary. I commend the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) on securing what is a really important debate. It is a real privilege to be here today among colleagues to cover the issues of funding. Local authorities, including Essex County Council, are facing real pressures in meeting the needs of pupils, especially those with special educational needs and disabilities. There is no doubt that all of us who visit our local schools and engage with parents and pupils understand where the real pressures lie.

It is important to recognise that the Government have announced additional funding for high needs of £125 million, which is welcome. For Essex, that means another £3.3 million for this and next financial year. The reality is, however, that that is not enough, because of the new pressures caused by the increase in pupils who have additional needs, adding greater burdens and pressure to a local authority that is in a budget-setting cycle at this very time, as all local authorities are. With that comes the challenge of the overspend in special needs funding that Essex County Council is experiencing. A new banding matrix for funding pupils with SEND in special schools is causing a £2.3 million overspend. Increased growth in education, health and care plans is driving an overspend of more than £700,000. In addition, the number of young people in the EHCP category has gone up by 22%.

Local authorities are of course desperately trying to meet their statutory obligations and to find innovative ways of doing so. That obviously includes working across health budgets, which is the right thing to do, and looking at ways in which they can integrate support for care and educational provision.

In total, Essex County Council anticipates a £15 million overspend on the high needs block by the end of 2019-20. The council is investing through its capital programme in new schools, including planning a new autism special school in Witham, which we all welcome and support. In addition to plugging some of the funding gaps, the council has recently asked the schools forum if it would agree to transfer 0.5% of the schools block allocation—approximately £4.3 million—to SEND. Quite understandably, that is going to cause tensions and is causing concern among local schools, and the council has asked the Secretary of State to approve the transfer. Rather than encouraging tensions and anger within our local schools, and leaving the schools and council at loggerheads, I encourage the Minister to take the opportunity to intervene and review the situation, not just by encouraging more financial support, but by encouraging a better way of working so that we can address some of the long-standing issues.

I hope that the forthcoming comprehensive spending review can support local authorities to come together and look at how we can invest in new provision, join up networks and increase integrated provision, so that we can bring education and health more closely together, wrapped around the needs of each pupil. While more funding is needed and is absolutely welcome, we want to maximise the benefits through greater integration of working across local authorities and Government Departments, so that we can give young people the best start in life and so that they can fulfil their potential.
Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): When I was elected to Parliament in June 2017, the problems of children with special needs and the struggles that their parents face became one of the major issues in my casework almost immediately. The problems are with the system, which has been framed around funding that does not meet its needs.

In High Peak in Derbyshire, the county council will not look at applications either for graduated response for individual pupil, or GRIP, lower-level funding or for EHCPs until children are at least two years behind academically. Parents and schools who struggle as best they can to support children are punished for doing so if those children achieve and make progress. By the time they get two years behind, they are usually in year 4 or year 5, and then the process of trying to get additional funding from the county council starts. In Derbyshire, that process is taking up to two years, largely because of a lack of educational psychiatrists, who have been cut and cut again.

Schools have to put an enormous amount of time into preparing applications, often for very small amounts of funding. They have to put in £6,000-worth of funding themselves before they even start. One secondary school in my constituency says it has 125 children with special needs who should qualify. They would have to find three quarters of a million pounds from their budget to apply for additional funding for all those children. The school cannot find £7,000, let alone £750,000, after four years of school funding freezes and increases in its costs. Parents are becoming increasingly distraught, seemingly caught in a fight against schools, which are reluctant to put in applications for funding because they know that the majority are refused even after days of a school trying to put a case together as best it can.

In Derbyshire, there is a £727,000 shortfall in our high needs block funding. Our Conservative county council suggested that the funding it got for road mending, at the end of the winter, when it could least be used, would have been more helpful for the children’s services budget and education. That might be a case that the Minister could make. Ultimately, we need more funding.

I pointed out earlier the number of exclusions that children with special needs are facing. This is a system that is failing them, as well as schools, teachers, and parents.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) on securing this important debate. In my three minutes, I will touch on school funding, school choices and another area that I passionately support.

On school funding, I ask the Minister to focus particularly on recent changes to the allocations between school block, early years block and high needs block. Previously, it was a notional figure that could be switched across blocks, and now the limit is just 0.5%. I am concerned about the knock-on effect, as it creates a perverse incentive for mainstream schools to see children moved out of mainstream into specialist schools. I have heard from schools in my constituency that they would have complained that they would be salami-sliced and would have to pay for that—now, they would not have to. I ask the Minister if it would be possible to see data on whether that is actually forcing more young people out of mainstream into specialist schools. Mainstream should be where we start. It is where these young people will return to after they have finished school, in their communities and workplace. Anything that creates an incentive away from that is a concern to me.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Balcarras School in my constituency takes a number of SEND children—more than 20—but because of a quirk of the system that means it has to pay the first £6,000, it is disincentivised from doing the right thing. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be helpful if the Government looked constructively at changing that funding arrangement?

Huw Merriman: I do indeed. My constituents living in east Sussex are less likely to be in a maintained mainstream school than children living in any other county around us, so I absolutely agree. The difficulty is that we have received a 3% real-terms cut to school funding in my constituency of Bexhill and Battle. We are at 4,334, whereas the figure is 5,157 in Birmingham, Edgbaston, and 5,123 in Nottingham North. I am afraid that my constituents are worse off living in my constituency. I have some fantastic primary schools that do an amazing job with young pupils with EHCPs, but in reality they are now reaching into a deficit. If it costs an extra £8,000 to £10,000 for those schools to educate those pupils, the incentive is moving away from their doing so.

On school choice, I absolutely support the belief that mainstream is best, but I am very concerned that my constituents are reporting that they almost have to fail in a mainstream in order to get to the school of their choice. As I think has been touched on, there is real difficulty in having a system in which the local authority is incentivised financially to put the child in a mainstream school, the mainstream school is incentivised financially to put them in a specialist school, and independent schools are incentivised to have the pupil in that particular setting. It is no wonder that we end up in a tribunal system as a result. Surely through reform we could have more independent assessment at the very outset, perhaps more informally, rather than waiting for a tribunal.

Finally, I am grateful to the Department for Education for accepting the recommendations of “Autism and education in England 2017”, the report of an inquiry that I co-chaired last year. We made some recommendations, and the Government have listened and announced that they will extend the autism strategy to young pupils in education. That is a great step forward—it is all about the training of staff. My last ask is whether it is possible for every new specialist school to be built within a mainstream perimeter, rather than having the apartheid system that we have at the moment.
There are two things that I want to bring to the Minister’s attention—things that I have raised before, but to which I have not had satisfactory responses. First, we have heard about the £6,000 that needs to be found once the educational plan is in place. Secondly, there is a bizarre situation in which a school will be counted—the register will be taken after 1 October, and this will settle the funding for the following April. For a time, a school that has taken in new children will not have any funding for those pupils, but will still have to find the £6,000. If children arrive after 1 October, there will not be any funding for them until up to 18 months later, and the school will still have to find the £6,000 as well as pay for the normal education costs that are incurred. I have asked the Department over and over again to look at how that funding follows the individual child, whatever their needs might be, so that schools really can provide the very best education and the best start for their children.

There are arrangements in place with local authorities and with those who support the funding of academies, but schools are not fully aware of them. I know that schools are not getting the funding to which they are entitled when new children arrive. We must simplify the way that school funding is distributed, particularly for children with special needs. Despite tremendous effort from our schools, I fear that we are at risk of failing many children. They will not be able to live full lives, and their life chances will be curtailed. As others have said, funding for schools and for this aspect of school education should be addressed properly and enthusiastically by the spending review when the opportunity arises.

I want briefly to mention some positive signs of movement towards a proper, sensible approach to the education of children with SEN. Ofsted recently launched a consultation and said that it is now prepared to look more at teaching rather than school results. The consultation finishes on 4 April. I encourage everyone to take part, so that Ofsted can genuinely recognise good schools, even though their attainment might not be quite as good as it could be, in view of the children that those schools support.

The 10-year health plan commits to accelerating assessments for children with SEN. Can the Minister provide us with more detail about that? We would appreciate more detail about how it can be delivered. The 10-year plan also says that there will be the right care for children with learning disabilities. Again, we would appreciate a bit more detail from the Minister about how the 10-year plan will be able to deliver that and what resources can support it.
health and care plan is needed at all. When it is finally put in place, too often the plan is not delivered in full because the school has funding pressures elsewhere. The situation is distressing for all parties. Parents feel like they have to fight to get a plan for their child and then, once it is in place, fight again to ensure that the funding and support is adequate to meet the needs of their child, which is simply not right. It worries me even more that there are probably other parents out there who do not have the time, money or information that they need to keep fighting for the support for their child, which means that there are vulnerable people across this country who are simply not getting the support they need.

Not every child with SEND has an EHCP; the proportion of children with SEND who have an EHCP remains low. Hon. Members have already talked about Ofsted. I do not always agree with everything that it says, but given that the chief executive acknowledged last year that something was deeply wrong when parents were repeatedly telling inspectors that they had to fight to get help for their children, we know that we have to act. Ofsted concluded that support for children with SEND was too disjointed and too inconsistent, and that diagnoses were taking too long and were often inadequate.

As we have heard, the number of exclusions among children with SEND continues to rise, with the Department reporting that pupils with SEND are up to six times more likely to be excluded, accounting for almost half of all permanent exclusions. That should be a mark of failure. The number of pupils with SEND without a school place has more than doubled in recent years, up to 4,050, whereas it was only 776 in 2010. Perhaps that is why, as Members have asked, more children are being home-schooled—up by more than 40%. Are schools perhaps suggesting that a particular child should be home-schooled to avoid an exclusion or that the school environment might not be the best place if the child has SEND? In short, are parents being forced down that route because they have no real choice? It is a serious question because we now find ourselves in a situation in which many parents of children with SEND feel that the only way to ensure that their child receives the specialist education that they are entitled to is through legal action.

Thousands are taking their local authority to tribunal. In a staggering 89% of cases, the tribunal found in favour of parents, costing local authorities around £70 million since 2014. Such a high success rate at appeal throughout the country ought to send a warning to the Government that something is fundamentally wrong. The situation has got so bad that one group of parents has now launched a High Court legal challenge against the Government’s SEND funding policy, demanding that children have access to the specialist educational provision that current budgets are simply not able to fund. There can be no greater indictment of the crisis than the fact that legal action has been sought and a judicial review commenced.

Education is a fundamental right for every child. We should not aim for anything less and should not accept anything less, but I fear we are doing that by default. When will the Government take action and ensure that all our children are able to benefit from a full and inclusive education?

3.11 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I will start with my four recommendations to ensure that I get them out in time. This is my first request to the Minister: when the Department looks at the high needs block formula, can it look at the historical element, because there is no justification for the allocations? They have simply come from history. Some of them are clearly unfair and my local authority has certainly been hit. Secondly, can the Minister speak to her education colleagues to ensure that capital funding is provided for a new special school in Kingston when the announcement is made shortly? Thirdly, as I said in my intervention on my right hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), can we look at the way the NHS contributes to the cost of EHCPs? I have spoken to many headteachers and Achieving for Children in Kingston and it is clear that the health component is coming out of the education component to deal with things such as physio, testing for diabetes, and members of staff in the classroom dealing with the child’s health needs, not their educational needs. The bills that the NHS is not meeting run into hundreds of millions of pounds across our country.

My fourth recommendation relates to looking at special needs education and health again in a cross-party way. I speak not only from the experience of looking after my constituents and their children, but as the father of a special needs child who has attended two special schools, and who we now educate at home. In my experience of dealing with the schools and with EHCPs and the process, there is a huge amount of waste, which is a scandal when children are not getting the service that they should, such as CAMHS and so on.

I speak as a governor of a local school. I am very impressed by how maintained state schools are properly held to account for their budgets; but some of the voluntary or private schools, which might be very good, are not properly held accountable for the money that they spend. This might be controversial, but in my experience some of them do not provide the quality of care with the money they are given, partly because special needs are extremely difficult to look at. It is much more difficult to get a proper distribution and proper comparisons because special needs are so broad and heterogeneous, and it is difficult to get a proper statistical analysis, unlike with mainstream schools. It is also difficult because Ofsted does not analyse well enough what special needs schools are doing, so I urge the Minister to look at that problem.

In my constituency in the Royal Borough of Kingston we have a crisis in special needs schools. If I could show the Minister the graph of the London boroughs and their overspending on their allocated formulas, she would see that we are a long way to one end—more than 40% above our allocated funding. If we do not bring that overspending under control—it is partly our job to do so, but we need patience and help from the Government—it will call into question the solvency of the council.
3.15 pm

**Vernon Coaker** (Gedling) (Lab): The love and care of parents and families with special needs children is humbling; we have all seen that. However, it has come to something—and we have to question ourselves as to how it has come to this—when, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) mentioned, in December’s Ofsted report the chief inspector said that something was deeply “wrong when parents repeatedly tell inspectors that they have to fight to get the help and support that their child needs.”

I get told that regularly; there is no need to be an inspector. All hon. Members present today, without exception, will have taken up cases for constituents. Sometimes we get improvement, sometimes not. I say to the Minister that as a country and as a society, it cannot go on: it simply is not good enough.

By the end of 2020, Nottinghamshire County Council will have a £9.2 million shortfall in its high needs budget. I can cite that. Other hon. Members have quoted other figures, and those figures are real in balance sheet terms. But what does it mean for each and every family and each child? I am fairly articulate, as are all the Members here, but finding one’s way through the system and finding the person responsible for making a decision is sometimes an impenetrable task.

There is a funding issue, so the Minister needs to go and bang on the door of the Chancellor, supported by every single Member, and tell him that it is not acceptable for any Government of any colour to be in power with every single Member, and tell him that it is not acceptable and bang on the door of the Chancellor, supported by every single Member, and tell him that it is not acceptable. It is not the sort of situation that we have at the moment, when so many families across this country cannot access the support that they need for their child. It is not the sort of country that any of us want to be a part of. We need to do something about it.

3.18 pm

**Julia Lopez** (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I thank the right hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) for securing this crucial debate. I very much echo what the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) has said, particularly about trying to navigate through such complexity when it comes to special educational needs. I appreciate that time is short, so I shall simply echo many of the points raised by other hon. Members about the pressures on mainstream schools in terms of financing and classroom support, the time it takes to obtain education, health and care plans, and the tensions that can be created between schools and councils in meeting statutory obligations to SEND children.

Since my election I have made it a priority to visit each of the 42 schools in my constituency to get to know the school community and its needs. The pressures on special educational needs services have been one of the most consistent themes in my conversations with parents and teachers, and I have highlighted those concerns to the Education Secretary and to the borough’s lead for children’s services. In Havering we have had the fastest-growing number of children of any London borough for the past few years, and funding has simply not kept up with that changing demography. Redden Court School in Harold Wood, for instance, has three times the national average of students with special educational needs and disabilities. That is more than 50 children with an education, health and care plan. The schools in my constituency are doing a fantastic job at ensuring that SEND children can be educated in the mainstream, but we must take into account the pressure that that can place on classroom staff and resources.

I was pleased by the announcement, before Christmas, of an additional £250 million of high needs funding, of which my borough will get more than £600,000. It is also welcome that the Secretary of State has allocated a £100 million top-up fund for new high needs school places and improved facilities, as well as removing the cap on the number of bids for free schools with special and alternative provisions. However, we must also look at the strain on third sector organisations at pre-school level, which often rely on diminishing local authority funds. Pre-school can be a critical time for getting the right support, and the right diagnosis of any condition, for SEND children before primary education begins. First Step, in Hornchurch, provides many fantastic services to local families affected by autism and other special educational needs. The Prime Minister has indeed promised that charity’s work on my behalf on her own Twitter account. However, pre-school support for autistic children can be patchy, and new difficulties can arise, within the school environment and beyond, as those children grow older. I should be most grateful if the Minister would advise on what she is doing at pre-school level to ensure that parents and schools are equipped with the right support to help children to make the transition into primary education.

3.20 pm

**Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), but I take issue with him on one point: there is something Brexit-related about the debate, because Brexit is masking a crisis in special educational needs. If it were not for the focus of the media and politics on Brexit, issues such as the crisis in special educational needs and disability would be to the fore. More people would be talking about it, and there would be more pressure in Parliament—particularly on the Treasury—to give the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care the funding they need to make things work.

Frankly, kids are being failed by a system that does not have enough money in it, that is too complex for people to navigate, and that is taking too long to get the support kids need. Councils and child and adolescent mental health services need more money, and I support the call for an increase in the high needs block funding. We need to make that case in the comprehensive spending review, as well as to the Minister here, and to make sure that the fantastic staff in mainstream and specialist schools get the support they need.

We should also support parents. In a debate on children’s social care, my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) told most powerfully a story about one of her constituents, who said:

“I am a warrior, but I just want to be a mum.”—[Official Report, 17 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 1416.]

Parents are fighting every day to get their kids with SEND the support they need. They are struggling with it, and that is why so many kids are now home-schooled. The support is not there in mainstream education—not
because teachers do not work hard enough to deliver it, but because there is not enough funding. That is why we need it.

Constituents come to my surgery nearly every week to talk about the difficulties. I imagine that the story in Plymouth is no different from the story across the country. There is a crisis in SEND support, and we need to restore the safety net that these kids deserve. If we do not invest in them now, not only will they cost us more in the short term as taxpayers, but we will lose the potential of these young people to deliver benefits in the future; we risk paying more for them throughout their lives. That is why it makes good economic sense to invest in these children and their families now and to make sure they get the wraparound support they need and deserve. We must restore the safety net, and that means funding services properly.

3.23 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): I too want to thank the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) for securing this important debate. Every one of us in the Chamber is here because we want to fight for children with special educational needs we have met during visits to schools, and for their parents, as the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) pointed out. Throughout the country every day parents fight for the best for their child, and we want to help them in that fight.

The situation of special educational needs funding in my constituency is particularly acute. West Sussex has a higher percentage of SEN pupils than the national average. For instance, 25% of the children at Chichester Nursery School have special educational needs or disabilities—a huge figure, considering that just 6% of young children in the general population are identified as having them. Meeting those additional needs has been tough on the council’s budget. For 2018-19, West Sussex has an estimated £4.9 million deficit in its high needs block. The one-time transfer of 0.5% from its dedicated schools grant has helped plug the gap. I think we all welcome the additional funding, as has been mentioned, but one-off payments cannot be the remedy for the funding pressures that schools face.

West Sussex wants to switch to a long-term invest and save model for its high needs block. Provision in the county—particularly for autism-related support—is chronically lacking. Because of this, the council spent more than £1 million last year sending children outside the county to specialist schools with the right resources. That is an expensive short-term response when the right long-term solution is needed closer to home. It is natural that parents want the best possible education for their children. We have all met constituents who battle to get that and to get the council to fund their child’s out-of-county school place. The aim of investing to save is to improve the standards of in-county provision and to avoid costly tribunals and out-of-county referrals. The average cost out of county for West Sussex is just under £44,000 per pupil. The in-county cost is £3,000 to £9,000 per pupil, so the business case is simple. The new centres of excellence will of course incur an initial up-front cost, but that will be offset by the decline in spending on out-of-county provision, which is not even the best provision, as it is so far from home.

West Sussex MPs have already had meetings with the Chancellor and the Education Secretary to discuss a fairer funding settlement for the authority, as well as the benefits of securing additional funding for long-term gains. We look forward to the upcoming spending review, and hope that they will listen to the invest to save plan. It is essential that the funds are available for schools and authorities to support the children who need the most support within the school system. Like many Members, I want sustainable funding, and I hope that the spending review can deliver that.

3.26 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Sir Gary. It is a pleasure to speak in this Chamber on every occasion, as it has been to hear the wonderful contributions made so far by right hon. and hon. Members. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) on obtaining the debate and giving us the chance to participate.

I am taking part because I take an interest in school budgets and in children. Having been consistently cut, school budgets are unable to deliver in the way they have previously. Classroom assistants are losing hours, and the wait to get a statement for a child is getting longer. Instead of treating the meeting of special needs as an obligation, we should look at it as an opportunity to give such children the best possible education to enable them to overcome difficulties and meet their potential. If that is not something that requires additional ring-fenced funding, I do not what does. I look to the Minister to see what she can do about releasing that funding.

There are 49,000 babies, children and young people with life-limiting or life-threatening conditions in the UK, and the number is rising. Most of those children have complex health needs. They need constant care and support 24 hours a day. Most will also have a special educational need and/or a disability. The success of the system depends on whether there is equitable and sustainable funding for children’s education, health and social care provision. With great respect, that does not seem to be the case.

In the short time I have available, I want to mention a briefing from Together for Short Lives, which says that respite breaks are a part of the system that is not working. Seriously ill children and their families rely particularly on frequent short breaks for respite, which is provided by skilled people, who can meet the children’s often complex health needs. It may be for only a few hours, but it can be overnight or for a few days at a time. It is important because the 24/7 pressure on parents of having a child with a life-limiting condition is immense. Social care is vital to help them relieve the stress, catch up on sleep, spend time as a family and do the things that other families do. Frequent short breaks for respite for seriously ill children combine health and social care. They help to maintain children’s and families’ physical and mental health. Respite care is immensely important. The short breaks provided by children’s hospices can help to reduce stress and mitigate the risk of parental relationships breaking down.
There are some incredible statistics from research involving 17 children’s hospices in England and Scotland: 64% of divorced or separated parents cited having a child with complex needs as a reason for the breakdown of their relationship. Furthermore, 75% had had no access to short breaks, and 74% rated short breaks as having a direct, positive effect. Short breaks are necessary to help families regain some balance in their lives. Couples whose relationships were identified in the research as “non-distressed” were found to have received 43% more hours of short breaks on average from a children's hospice than those who were in distressed relationships. Quite simply, respite care makes a difference. The facts are clear. If we deal with children's needs in this way, there will be a lifelong benefit not simply to the child but to the entire family.

Just as they did for adult social care, will the Government review how social care for disabled children in England is funded? Will they address the £434 million shortfall in funding for social care services for disabled children that has been identified by the Disabled Children’s Partnership, by setting up an early intervention and family resilience fund? Intervention at that stage will provide benefits at later stages, and if we invest now to improve the quality of life of those who are most vulnerable and struggling the most, it will be worth every penny.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): I thank colleagues for complying with the voluntary time limit. It is now time for the Front-Bench speakers, but let us remember to leave Sir Vince Cable one minute at the end to respond to the debate.

3.30 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship yet again, Sir Gary, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) on securing this important debate. Hon. Members will not be surprised to hear that I will not reiterate what others have said or mention individual Members, but I will give the Scottish perspective on this issue.

In Scotland, like here, we believe that all children and young people deserve to receive the support they need to reach their full learning potential. The Scottish system focuses on overcoming barriers to learning and on “Getting it right for every child”, known as GIRFEC. Children and young people should learn in the environment that best suits their needs, whether that is a mainstream or special school setting. Some 97% of children in Scotland who need additional support are educated in mainstream schools, and the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 places a duty on education authorities to identify, provide for and review the additional support needs of their pupils, including those with dyslexia. The Scottish definition of dyslexia has been developed by the Scottish Government, Dyslexia Scotland, the cross-party group on dyslexia in the Scottish Parliament, and a wide range of stakeholders.

Members have mentioned autism, and in 2018 the Scottish Government published “The Scottish Strategy for Autism: Outcomes and Priorities 2018-2021.” That document sets out the priorities for action to improve outcomes for autistic people, including support for improved educational outcomes for children and young people with autism. The SNP understands the importance of autistic people and their families being understood and welcomed within their communities.

The budget passed recently in the Scottish Parliament helps with concessionary travel schemes that allow disabled people to access education and employment opportunities, and Companion Cards are given to parents or carers to help with that.

With new powers over disability benefits coming to the Scottish Parliament, a Scottish social security agency—Social Security Scotland—has been established, with dignity and respect at its heart. The Scottish Government will maintain disability benefits, not cut them, and ensure that they remain universal, rather than means-tested. In Scotland, the carer’s allowance supplement is available to those who care for people who are sick or disabled, and it puts an extra £442 into carers’ pockets, which is important for parents who have children with special needs. I received an interesting briefing from the Association of Educational Psychologists, which is concerned that local government funding and changes to school funding arrangements are preventing it from doing its job as well as it would like.

I am a member of the Education Committee, and we are conducting an inquiry into special educational needs and disabilities. I have listened to the concerns raised by hon. Members this afternoon, including on issues that have been considered by the Committee. We have taken evidence from children and parents, local authorities, schools and other interested parties, and we look forward to more input from hon. Members here today. I look forward to the eventual publishing of the Committee’s report and recommendations, and to an effective Government response. In that regard, I urge the Minister to look at the good work being done in Scotland.

3.35 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary, and I thank the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) for securing this debate, and all hon. Members who have spoken today. Children and adult learners with special educational needs and disabilities are being failed by this Government. Competition instead of collaboration has harmed our education system, and the fragmentation and marketisation of education has
left gaping holes in provision, accountability and support. The crisis in our education system of recruitment, retention and cuts across the board is impacting everywhere, but nowhere more starkly than in the arena of special educational needs and disabilities.

That view is shared by an army of parents, carers, children, learners, schools, colleges, universities, teachers, healthcare professionals, local authorities and a number of cross-party groups in the House. The reforms that led to this shambolic and damaging situation are rooted in the early years of the coalition Government, and summed up well by the then Education Secretary, who stated that the aim was to remove the “bias towards inclusion.” In other words, it was a move no longer to consider special educational needs as an intrinsic part of every learning environment—even though that has been proven to improve learning outcomes for disabled and non-disabled learners alike—but to start treating them as an add-on.

It is little wonder that in 2016 the United Nations expressed concern that for the first time in 25 years, more children with special educational needs and disabilities are being educated outside the mainstream, and that the Government have developed a dual education system that unnecessarily segregates children with disabilities to special schools, rather than providing for them sufficiently in mainstream schools. The following year the United Nations stated that this Government were guilty of “grave or systematic violations of the rights of persons with disabilities.”

The cultivation of that hostile environment has had dire, lasting effects on children and learners with SEND. The rushed reforms introduced in the Children and Families Act 2014 have created a postcode lottery of variable provision, and many children with SEND continue to be let down. During the passage of that Act, Labour Members warned that unless the proposed reforms were properly funded and proper demographic modelling carried out, the reforms would fail—and fail they did.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), Her Majesty’s chief inspector of education, children’s services and skills concluded last year that overall provision remained “too disjointed and too inconsistent”. That inconsistency comes from the lack of adequate funding. Schools have had £1.7 billion cut from their budgets since 2015. In a recent survey by the National Education Union, 94% of respondents confirmed that the cuts were having a negative effect on the support that schools are able to give to SEND pupils. The £365 million announced in December 2018 to help local authorities create new places or improve facilities for SEND pupils is a one-off cash injection, not the sustainable funding that people are crying out for, and it does not close the shortfall in local authority funding for SEND support that the Local Government Association identified at £472 million.

Recent steps to ring-fence SEND funding represent an inflexible policy, as the strict rules mean that only 0.5% of a school’s overall budget can be transferred from the high needs block. The policy isn’t working, as evidenced by the 43 local authorities that have appealed, asking for it to be relaxed to meet their local need. Can the Minister explain why a large majority of the successful appeals have been in Conservative-led authorities? This is a toxic combination of a misguided policy direction and savage cuts across the board to myth and other support services. A recent survey from the National Association of Head Teachers found that 83% of heads are not receiving any funding from health and social care budgets to support pupils with SEND statements, and 94% have reported that they are finding it harder to resource the support required to meet the needs of pupils with SEND than they did two years ago.

The best intentions, will and desire of parents, local government, teachers and health professionals to do the best for learners with SEND are not being matched by the Government. In 2017, more than 4,000 children with SEND were left without a school place. Nearly 9,000 children have had their existing statement or education and healthcare plan taken away from them—not because they have moved school or have left school, but just because they have been denied the support that they were previously deemed in need of. The number of children with SEND statements in alternative provision has increased by more than 50%, and the number of children facing fixed-period, permanent or even illegal exclusions remains disproportionate compared with their peers. They account for half of permanent or fixed-period exclusions.

Some are lucky enough to get a plan, often at the end of a difficult and fraught process for them and their parents—a point made articulately by my hon. Friends the Members for High Peak (Ruth George), for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) and for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard)—but many of those plans are flawed or substandard. Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission found that access to therapy for children in adolescent mental health services was poor, and progress was minimal in implementing a co-ordinated service for those with SEND.

After the SEND reforms, the number of costly appeals against education, health and care plans rose to more than 4,000, and the number of tribunals almost doubled to 1,600, but that is likely to be only the tip of the iceberg. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) noted, many parents do not have the time, energy, financial support or the opportunity to navigate that difficult legal action. The fact that almost nine out of 10 appeals are successful at tribunal confirms that there are serious flaws in the system. It is not just children who are being short-changed. College principals have also warned the Government that support for learners over 19 is now being met by already stretched college budgets and is completely unsustainable. Some 16 to 19-year-old students with SEND are being charged up to £1,500 a year for their transport. Since 2015, university students have been required to pay a £200 contribution towards the cost of essential equipment for their study.

Behind all those statistics and figures are children and learners who just want access to education, which should be a fundamental right for all, no matter who they are, where they are from or what their circumstances are. Hopefully, when the Minister answers my points and those that other hon. Members have made, she will explain why, under her Government, that fundamental right does not apply to those with special educational needs and disabilities.
3.43 pm

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) on securing this debate, and I thank him for the constructive tone that he adopted in his opening remarks.

Provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities, and the support available for their parents and families, has been a particular concern for me since I was elected in 2005. Governments of all political persuasions have struggled to get it right.

The right hon. Gentleman spoke about the success of the Children and Families Act 2014, and pointed out some of the issues that have arisen. I was a Minister in the Department of Health when we were doing the early work on it. Much of what was done at the time was the right thing to do, but we must now resolve some of the issues that have arisen from that. Many—but not all—of the issues relate to funding. Many local authorities and schools are having to work very hard to make the best use of the resources available, particularly in supporting those children and their families.

I want to put on the record some of the things that we have done. We have prioritised funding for schools, and increased funding for high needs from £5 billion in 2013 to £6 billion this year—a 20% increase over five years. In December we allocated an additional £250 million funding for high needs, and in the next financial year we will ensure that every local authority will get a share of that additional funding. Across England, funding for high needs will rise to £6.3 billion in 2019-20. We have also announced an additional £100 million of capital funding to create new places and improve facilities for children and young people. That will take our total investment between 2018 and 2021 to £360 million.

We will invest in more of the new special schools that are needed locally. Sixty-five local authorities have applied for funding to build special and alternative provision free schools. We are currently looking carefully at those requests and will go ahead with all bids that meet the criteria and are of good quality, so that local authorities have the specialist provision they need. We are hoping to notify local authorities before Easter. We are preparing to notify local authorities before Easter. We are preparing for the spending review with that in mind.

We have reformed the funding system and have introduced a new formula allocation to make the funding for those with high needs fairer. We introduced the national funding formula after extensive consultation. It marks an historic change to the way that we distribute education funding—one that previous Governments have long avoided. The formula that we use to allocate high needs funding uses a range of factors, including low attainment, deprivation and health factors, to direct funding to where it is most needed.

The formula ensures that the funding changes from year to year and takes account of changes in the overall population of young people and children, which the system did not. The formula also includes a funding floor to guarantee an underlying increase in high needs funding from this year to next year, subject to population and pupil or student number changes. Although the national funding formula is a significant improvement in the way that we distribute high needs funding to local authorities, we will keep it under review.

Sir Edward Davey: Is the Minister able to tell me, either today or in writing, how the historical spend factor in the formula was set? I understand what history is, but it needs a justification.

Anne Milton: I will make sure that the right hon. Gentleman gets a letter on that point.

We want to ensure that the design of the funding system works in mainstream provision. The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) raised the issue of perverse incentives, as did my hon. Friend. The Members for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) and for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), who has raised this issue with the Secretary of State. There is an expectation that mainstream schools pay for the cost of SEND support—up to £6,000 from their core budget—before accessing additional top-up funding from the local authority. We are very aware that that arrangement is deterring schools from meeting the needs of pupils with special needs.

A number of issues were raised in this debate. My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) talked about the life chances of those young people and referred to proposed changes in Ofsted inspections, which are very important. I am the Minister with responsibility for post-16 further education, and I know what a brilliant job further education colleges do. As the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) said, getting education right early in a child’s life saves money and, in some instances, much heartache further down the line.

I point out to the shadow Minister that discretionary bursaries are available for transport, although I know that that is an issue for some local authorities. I do not recognise all that the shadow Minister said, which is disappointing, bearing in mind the consensual tone of the debate. I think that we all share and acknowledge the problems that families and their children face. There is no one system that works for every child. I remember that when I was elected in 2005, the whole issue of inclusion was much debated. Inclusion is positive, but it is not always the right answer for children or their families.

Home schooling is without doubt the option that some parents choose if their child’s needs are not being met. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) mentioned increase in demand for EHCPs and the issue of transport costs, while the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) raised the issue of the NHS not paying for the health part of the EHCP. When I was a junior Minister, bringing health care together was at the heart of discussions. My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) talked about wraparound provision, which is exactly what the changes to the 2014 Act were meant to ensure.
The hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) talked about the fight that parents face—as if they do not already have enough to manage. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley, talked about navigation of the complex system. It is a complete nightmare for parents who, as I said, already have a lot on their plate. There are right hon. and hon. Members present who are members of the Government—my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt) is one—and who have an interest in this subject. If House convention had allowed it, they would have raised particular points, because this issue is shared by many.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education—

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Will the Minister give way?

Anne Milton: I will finish because I do not have much time. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education indicated that, alongside our announcement of additional funding for high needs in December, we will shortly launch a call for evidence to build our understanding of the current arrangements and the problems that they create. Money matters, but how it is spent matters as well.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Will the Minister give way very briefly on that point?

Anne Milton: I do not have time, sadly.

We have established a new special educational needs and disabilities system leadership board. Effective joint commissioning is key to meeting some of the challenges of high needs funding, and the board will focus on improving local joint working and strategic commissioning to help address some of the problems highlighted in Dame Christine Lenehan’s review into the experiences and outcomes of children in residential special schools and colleges.

Drawing on good practice, the Local Government Association has done good work and has published a report from the Isos Partnership that highlights how local authorities can work collectively and collaboratively with families, schools, colleges and others to make the best use of the available resources.

As the term suggests, children with special educational needs are indeed special, as are their families. I have dealt with some very poignant and tragic cases in which the family simply felt unable to continue to care for their child. The impact of care can often be very difficult for siblings in those families, and we have heard that marital breakdown often ensues. There is additional investment, but the call for evidence is much needed, and I am sure that hon. Members will want to contribute to it. The Secretary of State is determined to get this right. The invitation from the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton for cross-party work is well made and much welcomed, particularly in the light of his personal experiences of caring for a child with special needs.

The hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) talked about the humbling experience of hearing stories from parents. Before I leave the remainder of the time to the right hon. Member for Twickenham, I would just like to say that I feel exactly the same. It is humbling to hear the stories of parents who struggle to navigate the system and who often have to fight local authorities. We know that in some areas provision is better, and that local authorities are doing a good job.

Finally, collaboration and joint working between health, care and teaching is what will make this work. There will always be funding constraints, so it is extremely important that we make sure that those collaborations are in place, to stop the parents of those children from facing such a terrible fight.

3.55 pm

Sir Vince Cable: I thank the 13 Members who have contributed to the debate, which was very rich in content. They all pointed in pretty much the same direction, regardless of region of the UK or political party. We heard plenty of examples of the extreme tensions that parents face because of the pressures of special needs, and how so many of them have been disappointed.

I was struck by the example that the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) cited of children being kept waiting and falling two years behind in their learning before they are even assessed. There are many similar cruelties and disadvantages of that kind. We also heard many examples of the pressures on schools. The Minister acknowledged the point raised by several hon. Members about the £6,000 hurdle—the perverse incentive—and although I did not hear in her speech whether she was going to change that, she at least acknowledged the problem and recognised that much of it is hidden by home schooling, which is growing rapidly.

Several Members from different parties mentioned how their councils—of different kinds—are being put into serious financial difficulties as a result of the problem. Worst of all, councils, schools and parents are reduced to fighting and blaming each other for what is actually a collective problem. The aim of the 2014 Act was to deal with all this in a consensual way, and to focus on the needs of pupils, but the issue has become a cockpit of conflict—manifested in the tribunals system—which is growing rapidly and becoming increasingly costly, both emotionally and financially.

To conclude, I wish to acknowledge some of the constructive thoughts in the debate. The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) talked about creating an intermediate triage system for picking needs up early before the formal assessment process is completed. The hon. Member for High Peak and others suggested that we could focus on getting more information to parents about their entitlements, to avoid their missing out or finding out too late in the day, and on changing Ofsted’s terms of reference, so that it incentivises rather than penalises inclusion, as is very often implicitly the case in its rating system. We also heard suggestions from my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) and others about how the funding formula should be changed and how we could make more use of flexibility between health and education.

All that ultimately comes back to—I know that the Minister is painfully conscious of this—more money and the spending review. I know just how fraught that process is because I have been the head of a spending Department, but I can do no more than wish the
Minister well and say on behalf of us all that we basically want a significant enhancement of special needs provision—alongside schools, not at their expense.

Finally, I will quote what I thought was one of the more memorable phrases. The hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) said that parents just want to stop fighting and get on with being parents. I thought that was a very good way of summarising what we are all trying to say.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): May I break a few rules by saying from the Chair that I strongly support the broad thrust of the debate? I very much hope that our Government will sort this out in the next 12 months. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] That is the end of me chairing.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved, That this House has considered special educational needs and disabilities funding.

Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme

[ALBERT OWEN in the Chair]

3.59 pm

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

That this House has considered the seasonal agricultural workers scheme.

I represent a particularly urban part of one of the UK’s biggest cities, so why do I want to talk about agriculture? That is because the issue, as much as it is about food and food security, especially after Brexit, is about slavery.

Since my election in 2017, I have been proud to play my part in highlighting, combating and working to eradicate the appalling scourge of modern slavery. I work alongside Members from all parties on the Select Committee on Home Affairs, hon. Friends from the Co-operative party, colleagues from the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, and friends at FLEX—Focus on Labour Exploitation—the Human Trafficking Foundation and the rights lab at my alma mater, the University of Nottingham. I have been proud to use my place in the House of Commons to do so.

I am joined in the Chamber by my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), the chair of our all-party parliamentary group on human trafficking and modern slavery. We will continue to raise the issue, because slavery is a disease, pure and simple. It is much more widespread than people would ever countenance, it is appalling and it impacts on and blights lives throughout our communities, but all too often it is hidden from view by a deadly combination of fear, shame and circumstance.

Nevertheless, despite the scale of the challenge, I remain confident that we can achieve the goal of stamping modern slavery out in its totality by 2030. That will necessitate identifying, challenging and eradicating sources of slavery at home and abroad. It is also vital that, as we fight existing sources of slavery, we do not unwittingly create new opportunities through decisions that we make. That is why I am in the Chamber today.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the immense amount of work that he and our hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) do on modern slavery and preventing it in this country. Does he agree that the seasonal agricultural workers scheme proposed by the Government could, because of the way it is set out, create greater opportunities for modern slavery to exist, and that one way to tackle that properly would be to ensure that every worker brought into the UK under a seasonal scheme is given access to a trade union, and clear and comprehensive knowledge of what their rights are and how to enforce them?

Alex Norris: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and for his commitment to this agenda. I share his view, and it will not surprise him to hear that I will address that shortly. As he said, it is vital that we do not inadvertently create new opportunities.
As formulated, the seasonal agricultural workers scheme, or SAWS, presents a significant risk of creating slavery. In theory, SAWS offers fruit and vegetable farmers a route to alleviate labour shortages during peak production periods by employing migrant workers for up to six months—but that is a tale as old as time, frankly. The pilot will start this spring and run until the end of 2020. For migrant workers, it represents a chance to improve their lives, but it carries the risk of workers being treated as a disposable asset, creating a recipe for exploitation.

Alex Norris: I have never been so popular.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): My constituency has a large agri-food sector, which has a real need for agricultural workers coming in to bring in the vegetables so that the factories can process them, selling them throughout the United Kingdom and further afield. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need some sort of scheme in place to provide that important protection and, in doing so, enable the factories in my constituency and others to do the job that they want to do and export their products?

Alex Norris: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. After Brexit, we have a chance to reform our migration system, but we have to ensure that we still meet the needs of our growing industries. I am about to highlight the fact that the soft fruit production industry has doubled in size over the past two decades. We have to move and to keep pace with that, building in the regulation to make things work.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. He is right to express legitimate and long-standing concerns about modern-day slavery. Wilkin & Sons is an outstanding soft fruit production company and manufacturer in my constituency. Does he agree that other businesses, and in fact the Government, could learn best practice from how such businesses have conducted their own seasonal agricultural workers schemes in the past?

Alex Norris: I very much recognise what the right hon. Lady is saying. Only this morning, during Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions, I mentioned the example of Hermes and the GMB which, while untangling the difficulties in the so-called gig economy, have gone ahead of the Government and this place by building their own regulations, which work for both employer and employee. That is wonderful and where it happens, such as in the example she suggested, we should highlight and be proud of it.

To be clear, I do not wish to prevent the seasonal agricultural workers scheme from running—it is important—but I want to ensure that we get honesty in the debate and that the workers who will be at the heart of the scheme get a fair deal and are heard. I feel that I ought to use my place here in support of that.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making a hugely significant point. I agree with him that the scheme has great benefits, but does he agree that, as well as risking potential slavery, a six-month scheme is so restrictive that many people will simply choose to go underground? The Government are setting themselves up for that to be a serious problem. Does he also agree that for many other industries—the 10,000 people working in hospitality and tourism in Cumbria, for example—that kind of option is neither available nor even proposed? That will have a huge impact on the economy in communities such as mine.

Alex Norris: Many of the technical points about the scheme, such as those that the hon. Gentleman has made, will be seen in the pilot. We will have to test that and see the evaluation. I am interested to hear from the Minister how much that evaluation will be shared with all of us, so that we can have a say. Moving beyond agriculture, I know that other Members have an interest in the tourism sector, so if they wish to intervene at any point, I will be happy to accept.

There are real dangers in the scheme. Looking at history, a seasonal agricultural workers scheme ran from the second world war until only six years ago. It was not perfect: there were examples of abuse, the minimum wage being dodged, workers being misled about available work and recruiters purposefully over-recruiting. I have pressed the Home Office on this, so I know that “ensuring the protection and wellbeing of participating migrant workers is of primary importance”, but part of this debate is about wanting to know how that will be so and what safeguards and accountability will be in place.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I agree with what the hon. Gentleman is saying about workers’ rights, but is he aware that in 1961 this country signed a treaty produced by the Council of Europe to give all workers the proper rights within their countries? That is still in force, despite the wealth of European Union legislation that has come in since. Will he hang on to that as a hope for the future?

Alex Norris: Those protections are in place, although we have seen that they have not been enough in the past. In the 50 or so years since, it is important that we have built on them.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): The hon. Gentleman might be aware that I have a significant soft fruit industry in my constituency. When I visit my farmers, I see migrants who have come over year after year. I met someone in a packhouse who had been there for nine years consecutively, working their way up into their role. If the conditions were particularly hard, people would not come back year on year.

Alex Norris: I thank the hon. Lady for highlighting that and for adding to the debate with her experience back home. Those are exactly the sort of things that we should weave in to how we proceed in future.

To put ourselves in the place of people who wish to enter the scheme, and so seek insecure and relatively low-paid work in this country, it is reasonable to expect that they would not have ready access to funding or the hard cash to pay for, for example, a visa, their flights, any recruitment fees, medical costs and other associated
fees. The likelihood is therefore very high that, in order to get a better income for themselves and their families and to start a better life, they would be forced to seek a loan—

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way—although I did not mean to interrupt him mid-sentence. I have one point to make. Those of us with significant soft fruit farmers in our constituencies are calling for a seasonal agricultural workers scheme to ensure sufficient labour. At the moment, one of the challenges for the industry is that workers have choices of where to go, so we are competing with other countries to attract them. Workers will therefore only come to this country if there are good opportunities and working conditions for them. It is important for us to offer good working conditions and extend the hand of welcome to seasonal workers who come to the UK.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Order. The Member in charge is being very generous in allowing interventions from a number of people, but I warn him that I want to give the Minister the chance to give a comprehensive response to the debate. Could he please bear that in mind? I notice that he has a number of papers in front of him that he may wish to go through.

Alex Norris: A couple of them are just for you to autograph to put on eBay, Mr Owen. I am sure the Minister will not mind my gobbling a little of his time so his colleagues may make interventions.

The point raised by the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) makes my heart bleed a bit. By raising our standards—whether on pay, accommodation or the nature of work or management—to ensure that we attract those workers, we would make Britain a beacon that would attract the best. That can be only a good thing. It would mean the market was working well, and I would be keen for that to happen.

I worry about sources of money. People like us go to banks to get loans; too often our constituents go to loan sharks. The people we are talking about are likely to enter debt bondage. A recruiter offers the chance to enter the scheme and says, “Don’t worry about the upfront cost and your flights,” but that turns into an inflated or artificial debt that people never actually work off. That happens around the world, but in our country, too, there is a very live risk. It cannot be right that about half the victims of forced labour in the country, too, there is a very live risk. It cannot be right that about half the victims of forced labour in the country, too, there is a very live risk. It cannot be repeated, because workers in the scheme rely on their employers for all their necessities: accommodation, transportation, food and information. They will not have access to public funds. People may face a choice between remaining in an abusive situation and becoming destitute. None of us would want to be in that situation. The Government need to ensure that individuals who enter the scheme will have access to support to leave their situation if they are being exploited.

Debt bondage and entrapped workers are the two risks that I am most concerned about, but there are other issues, too. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) said that, because migrant workers by definition are here for a short time, they are less likely to know their immigration and employment rights. Therefore, they are less likely to be able to identify abuses. We will all have heard extraordinary stories of car washes, where individuals who are liberated from their slavery find out that the minimum wage is three or four times what they are paid. They did know they were being exploited; they just thought that was what happened. The only information they had access to led them to think that was the case.

We should draw on the trade union movement. I thank Unite for its support in preparing this speech; it has proposed a series of things to work well alongside the scheme to help to organise these workers. I hope the Minister will look at that. Not speaking English puts people at risk of abuse, and those who are not here for long are not likely to develop language skills. Let us make sure that rights advice and support is available in the UK beyond the current limited multilingual support.

Matthew Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Very often, the people who abuse workers are from the workers’ own communities. This is as much about ensuring that police have access in the ways the hon. Gentleman describes, as it is about talking to those communities.

Alex Norris: Slavery operations are incredibly sophisticated, while also being simple: people from the same place who speak the same language take a person
from home and exploit them, cutting out all the other links in the chain, so that they do not know that they are in an exploitative situation. As constituency MPs, we all know that our labour inspection regime in this country is predominantly reactive and relies on workers’ complaints. How would a catchment of workers who have not identified their own abuse be able to say that is the case? We ought to be mindful of that.

I have laid out a number of real challenges in the scheme that none of us would design legislation to support—quite the opposite. We know that after we leave the European Union we will face a defining moment for our country, when we decide where we want to be. We have heard a lot in the Chamber in recent weeks about being a high-standards country, especially when it comes to workers’ rights. Now is a good time for that. I want that for my constituents, neighbours, friends and family. I also want that for the people who come here and make sure we have food on our table. Those high standards must apply to them, too. We cannot use strong language in this place while allowing gaps in our system where abuse prevails.

I am pleased that, through my engagement with the Home Affairs Committee, I have received a commitment from the Home Secretary that slavery will be given due regard as part of the evaluation of the pilot. I would like to know what that looks like, when we will start to understand that, and what Ministers will be doing about the agents used as intermediaries. The breadth of contributions from Members from every corner of the UK shows the strength of feeling. I hope that we can work collectively to get this right.

4.17 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen.

Hon. Members may wonder what the Minister of State for Policing and the Fire Service, who is also the Minister with responsibility for London, is doing here responding to a debate on seasonal agricultural workers. In truth, the Immigration Minister is tied up in a Public Bill Committee and cannot be here. Since we operate in the backdrop of Brexit, we have set out clear transitional arrangements that will enable UK growers to continue meeting temporary labour needs in the agriculture sector is a long-standing issue. We totally appreciate that farming is a long-term endeavour and that UK growers, like most businesses, place great emphasis on certainty when it comes to workforce planning.

Priti Patel: Will the Department write to me and to colleagues about the need for certainty for rural and agricultural businesses, and in particular about looking at examples of other companies and learning from best practice? Can the Minister say how the Department would respond to support the needs of rural businesses should demand exceed the 2,500 places?

Mr Hurd: I am certainly happy to look at giving that undertaking, and I totally accept the point my right hon. Friend makes about the opportunity to learn from best practice. Clearly, she believes strongly that that exists in her constituency.

Let me say this about how the Government have risen to the challenge of supporting some of our fastest growing industries with their employment needs: against the backdrop of Brexit, we have set out clear transitional arrangements that will enable UK growers to continue to recruit from the European Union for up to two years after the UK’s exit. It is important to note that those arrangements will apply regardless of whether we leave with or without a deal.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The Minister mentioned some of our fastest growing sectors. Will he join me in recognising that the tourism and hospitality sector also has a great need for seasonal workers? We must ensure that we make provision for that sector as well as for agriculture.

Mr Hurd: I certainly note that point, and I quite understand where it comes from, given the constituency my hon. Friend represents. I will ensure that the Immigration Minister takes that on board.

As the House knows, we have published an ambitious White Paper, setting out proposals for our future skills-based immigration system. That includes introducing, as a
transitional measure, a new temporary short-term workers route to ensure that UK businesses, irrespective of sector, have the staff they need, including seasonal workers, and to help employers move smoothly to the future system. However, this debate is principally about the two-year seasonal workers pilot, which allows non-EU migrants to work on UK farms for six months, specifically in the edible horticultural sector, and I will use the time remaining to focus on the concerns the hon. Member for Nottingham North raised.

We are very clear that we want to support UK businesses, but it is just as important to us that everyone working in our economy is safe and is treated fairly and with respect. Exploiting people for their labour, subjecting them to horrific conditions such as those we have seen in the past, and denying them basic employment rights is of course a form of abuse.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): That is the fundamental point. We must give people not only the right to complain but the confidence to come forward. Will the Minister consider talking to the Immigration Minister about how to give that confidence to people who come to work on these schemes, both when they arrive and before they leave their countries?

Mr Hurd: I certainly take on board that point and give that undertaking. We are determined to protect workers from abuse and to crack down on employers who try to profit from exploiting people. The Modern Slavery Act 2015 is a world-leading landmark that gives law enforcement agencies the tools to deal with offenders and provides enhanced protection for victims, but we recognise that the nature of labour exploitation continues to evolve. We believe we are keeping pace with that, having introduced further measures to tackle exploitation through the Immigration Act 2016. We have widened the remit of the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority, giving it new powers under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 to investigate serious labour market offences, including modern slavery offences, in all sectors. Those principles underpin all our immigration employment arrangements.

Let me turn to the clear and robust protections we have built into the design of the pilot, which were central to the line of inquiry from the hon. Member for Nottingham North. At the heart of those protections is our sponsorship system, which will be used to manage the licensing of the organisations—the scheme operators—selected to manage the pilot. The sponsor licensing system places clear and binding requirements and obligations on scheme operators, including robust responsibilities to ensure the welfare of participating migrant workers. Critically, it also gives the Home Office clear powers to revoke an operator’s licence if it falls short in its duties. That will be underpinned by a robust monitoring and compliance regime, which will include site visits by Home Office sponsor compliance teams.

On the point raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), the Home Office is working closely with the GLAA to share best practice for conducting such compliance visits and to share intelligence about our respective findings. We are absolutely determined to get this right. We have no desire to go backwards. We need to learn from the past.

The tier 2 and tier 5 sponsor guidance published by the Home Office on 11 January sets out organisations’ full responsibilities towards their seasonal workers. Those include ensuring that the work environment is safe and complies with all relevant health and safety requirements; that workers are treated fairly by their employer and are not threatened with or subjected to violence; that workers are paid properly, with time off and proper breaks; that workers are housed in hygienic and safe accommodation, although it is not mandatory for workers to live in accommodation provided by their employer; that workers’ passports are not withheld from them; and that procedures are in place to enable migrants to report any concerns and to move to another employer.

Should either of the selected operators fall short in those duties, action will be taken, up to and including the revocation of their sponsor licences. As a prerequisite for becoming a scheme operator, each organisation must hold and maintain licencing from the GLAA. Should a scheme operator lose its GLAA licensing at any point, its sponsor licence will be revoked with immediate effect.

I understand that the issue of debt bondage is of particular concern to the hon. Member for Nottingham North. Placing someone in debt bondage would constitute a failure to comply with the licensing standards and lead to the revocation of the operator’s licence. That in turn would lead to the revocation of its licence to act as a scheme operator. We therefore believe we have the sanctions in place to tackle that unacceptable practice. It is, however, important that we are alive to that risk and remain vigilant to any risk of exploitation.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the GLAA requires additional resources as a result of the pilot. I reassure him that the pilot is very much business as usual for the GLAA. We believe that an additional 2,500 workers will not place a significant additional burden on it, especially at a time when the sector tells us the overall number of seasonal workers is decreasing.

The Immigration Minister and I would be happy to look at any proposals put forward by Unite, as the hon. Gentleman suggested. I hope he is reassured by the range of protective measures we have put in place and by the clear requirements on scheme operators. We are confident that we have designed the scheme in a way that addresses his concerns.

Question put and agreed to.
Young Carers Support

4.29 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered support for young carers.

It is a privilege to move the motion with you in the Chair, Mr Owen. One of the special things about being a Member of Parliament is the opportunity we are given to find out more about the extraordinary people in the communities that we represent. Following my election back in 2010, there are few more extraordinary people who I have come into contact with than the young carers I have come to know.

John, for example, is 17 years old now and started caring for his mum when he was 10 years old. She has fibromyalgia. John says:

“This causes her muscles and bones to become weak and most of the time she is unable to walk or even get out of bed. As a young carer, I help my mum with shopping and things inside and outside of the house. I don’t get much time to go out with my mates or have much time to myself. My life is different because I am looking after my mum, making sure she is taking her tablets and eating and drinking.”

John was one of eight young people from Sheffield who I took to meet the Prime Minister last May. I thank the Prime Minister—she has one or two other things on right now—for finding time to sit down for half an hour with us. Another one of the group was Holly. She is now 14 years old but she started caring for her mum and her sister around the age of four or five. Her mum has an underactive thyroid and her sister has a reflux in her right kidney. Holly says of their life:

“I don’t get much time to be a child or to spend time with friends. I don’t mind, but it sometimes gets really frustrating if I can’t sit down for five minutes or so. My life is different to young people who aren’t carers, because I struggle a lot with life and have people to care for. They get to be kids and live their life. I still get to live my life but I have to be an adult and I have to be very careful. The highs are that I get to spend lots of time with my mum and my sister. The lows are that I have no other family around, so it is just the three of us. It is very painful for me and very emotional to have to watch my sister screaming in agony.”

Holly and John are the lucky ones, because they have made contact with Sheffield Young Carers, of which I am proud to be a patron. They are getting tremendous support and the opportunity to meet and share their experience with others in the same position, but most young carers are hidden from view. One in 12 children and young people is taking on mid to high-level care for a family member. Their average age is just 12 years old, the average annual income for their families is £5,000 lower than others, 68% are bullied at school, 26% are being bullied about their caring role, 45% report a mental health problem, they achieve nine grades lower at GCSE and they are four times more likely to drop out of further and higher education. The right support is vital, and we owe them nothing less.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): This is such an important issue, and I am glad that my hon. Friend is raising it. He has said, quite rightly, that in many cases young carers are unidentified within the system. Does he agree that it is important that schools and GPs, who will have contact with the people the young carers are caring for, do all they can to try to make sure that young carers are flagged up in the system, so they get the support that they need?

Paul Blomfield: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. She anticipates my next point, which is how important it is that we as a society identify young carers. When I sat down with our young carers in Sheffield and asked them what their priorities were, typically selflessly they put that at the top. They were not thinking of themselves but of the others who had not come into contact with the local group. As she points out, schools and GPs are in the best position to play that role.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on calling this important debate. There is a charity in my constituency called Be Free Young Carers, which represents over 3,000 young carers in south Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse. One of its concerns is that once young carers are identified, the assessment process takes about six months and the help they receive can often be superficial—for example, simply being directed to websites. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the assessment and support for young carers is still inadequate?

Paul Blomfield: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and that is a point that I will return to.

The lives of young carers are divided between home and school, so schools can make a huge difference. In their recommendations to the Prime Minister last May, our young carers made two main points. The first was that schools should be required to have a young carers lead. There is nothing special about that—it is there for children with special educational needs and disabilities, and for looked after children, so we would just be following the same approach. The second recommendation was that Ofsted should inspect schools on what they are doing to support young carers and whether they have a young carers lead. In a press release after the meeting, No. 10 said:

“The Prime Minister recently met with a group of young carers who highlighted issues with identification and support in schools and NHS settings and the Government will be undertaking a review to identify opportunities for improvement in these spaces.”

Will the Minister say, eight months on, what progress his Department has made with the review?

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. Will he join me in commending Megan McGarrigle from Glasgow North East Carers Centre, who has been doing a lot of work, going into schools in the east end of Glasgow and talking to young people? That work has identified young people who probably do not even realise that they are carers. The hon. Gentleman is right to touch on the collaboration between local authorities, because in my experience it has been a bit piecemeal.

Paul Blomfield: I certainly congratulate the group that the hon. Gentleman mentions for its work, and indeed groups across the country for their work, but that work is very patchy, and it is patchy in our schools, too.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this crucial debate. I was a young carer in a lone parent family between the ages of
and reliance on short-term funding streams is holding and Leigh Young Carers. The problem of sustainability relayed to me by an amazing charity in my area, Wigan of our young carers are met? That is something that was and grant funding is essential in ensuring that the needs does my hon. Friend agree that extending commissioning challenges. It needs to be tailored for individual need. a young carer. I agree with his point about the flexibility intervention and for sharing his personal experience as and grant funding is essential in ensuring that the needs does my hon. Friend agree that extending commissioning and support, does he agree with me and my local Oxfordshire Friend is making some excellent points. In relation to consistency of commissioning and support, does he agree with me and my local Oxfordshire support, does he agree with me and my local Oxfordshire charity, Be Free Young Carers, that charities are often relied upon to deliver all of this support, and that there is little support from other actors, such as local authorities? We need to have that.

Paul Blomfield: My hon. Friend is right. She is reaffirming the point that has been reflected in a number of interventions about how patchy provision is. Charities play a tremendously important role, but more needs to be done by the statutory sector as well.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that point, does my hon. Friend agree that extending commissioning and grant funding is essential in ensuring that the needs of our young carers are met? That is something that was relayed to me by an amazing charity in my area, Wigan & Leigh Young Carers. The problem of sustainability and reliance on short-term funding streams is holding many charities back.

Paul Blomfield: My hon. Friend makes an important point about consistency of commissioning and support for work in this area.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a crucial and powerful speech. I have been working as part of the cross-party parliamentary taskforce on kinship care to try to join all the dots and find a way forward in supporting kinship carers, young and old, through the system. Quite frankly, they save the state a fortune. Does he agree that Parliament needs to take a good look at this problem and start supporting these people in a proper manner?

Paul Blomfield: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The response to today's debate is extremely encouraging, and shows that there is clearly concern across Parliament, so I hope the Government will pay full attention to that.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): My hon. Friend is being very generous with his time. Two weeks ago, I was giving out awards at the inaugural Eleanor Marx awards ceremony in Lewisham. Schools were asked to nominate young women for their achievements, and the winner of the award was a young carer, in recognition of the work she did in supporting her mum and younger brother. She was overwhelmed by the recognition she got at that awards ceremony. Does he agree that more needs to be done to recognise the tremendous work that young carers are doing?

Paul Blomfield: It is brilliant that that award was allocated in that way. That sort of recognition is certainly something we should all be looking to, and maybe we can all seek out opportunities in our own areas to help to secure it.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Taking the hon. Gentleman back to the schools situation, does he think that the power that Ofsted is given to look at what the school is doing on this is very weak, and that strengthening Ofsted's power in that respect would be a great help in identifying those young carers and ensuring that they are looked after?

Paul Blomfield: The hon. Gentleman anticipates my very next point. We will never see consistently good practice across schools until they are measured and assessed on it, and Ofsted’s role in that is crucial. I ask the Minister, in his winding-up speech, to say whether we can look forward to the Government’s requiring schools to have a young carers lead and requiring Ofsted to include the issue in its inspections.

Returning to some of the other points that our young carers from Sheffield made, there were two recommendations for the national health service, which have begun to be addressed in the NHS long-term plan and the commitment to carers, for which I am grateful. I have shared their recommendations and my questions with the Minister, so I hope he will also be able to confirm that the commitment in paragraph 2.33 of the long-term plan, which says:

“We will continue to identify and support carers”,

will include young carers and recognise the special nature of their needs. Will he say whether general practitioners will be required by the Care Quality Commission to hold a register of young carers in their practices and be inspected on it?

I welcome paragraph 2.35 of the commitment, which says:

“The NHS will roll out ‘top tips’ for general practice which have been developed by Young Carers, which include access to preventive health and social prescribing, and timely referral to local support services.”

It goes on to say:

“Up to 20,000 Young Carers will benefit from this more proactive approach by 23/24”,

but does the Minister recognise that that number falls well short of the estimated 700,000 young carers across the country?

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and fellow Sheffield MP for securing this debate. In a previous life, when I was a councillor, I was privileged to chair the children, young people and families scrutiny board, and met every year with Sheffield Young Carers, to whom I say thank you once again for bringing the young carers down to Parliament and letting their voices be heard. It is a shame that we do not celebrate the work they do, because they save the NHS hundreds of thousands, even millions of pounds. I was a young carer. My mother was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis when I
was about six, so I had the opportunity to look after her. That was good, but at the same time you are not the same as your mates; you are somebody a bit different. The ask from the Sheffield Young Carers is very small, so will he join me in hoping that the Minister will give those young people hope for a better future? The statistics that we have seen show a high risk of their becoming NEETs—not in education, employment or training—with 67% of young carers being bullied and 45% of young adult carers reporting mental health issues. This is a small group of people who really go the full mile and need some care themselves.

Paul Blomfield: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I thank her for sharing her personal experience and for the work that she has previously done with Sheffield Young Carers. Our young carers also have some fairly modest recommendations on financial support, which is an issue she touched on, recognising that their families are poorer, that they have higher costs and that, unlike their peers, they cannot get part-time jobs. I would welcome the Minister’s comments on their proposal that they should get some form of carer’s allowance, which is being introduced in Scotland, and free bus passes, for which my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) is spearheading a local campaign. Specifically with relation to his Department, does the Minister agree that young carers should be one of the named groups eligible for the 16-to-19 bursary?

I have one final question, relating to implementation of the Care Act 2014. A key principle of the statutory guidance issued under that Act is:

“Children should not undertake inappropriate or excessive caring roles that may have an impact on their development...their emotional or physical wellbeing and their prospects in education and life.”

Clearly, the evidence demonstrates the impact. In 2016, the Children’s Commissioner published a report revealing a very patchy service across the country, with many young carers remaining hidden and unsupported. One problem is that there is no guidance to define what is meant by “inappropriate or excessive”. Does the Minister agree that there should be national guidelines defining what is inappropriate or excessive care, to better support professionals in assessing and providing for the needs of young carers?

Fourteen-year-old Phoebe, who also joined me to meet the Prime Minister, has been caring since the age of eight. She probably spoke for all 700,000 young carers in the country when she said:

“I never get much time to myself. I worry a lot. I do panic that I can’t look after myself as much.”

She also said:

“This affects my own well-being.”

Should we not be doing everything to ensure that the caring that contributes so much to the family and saves the country so much does not affect the wellbeing of our young people, and that those young carers get the support they need to make the most of their lives?

4.47 pm

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing the debate and on the eloquent way in which he outlined the issues.

I will not repeat the catalogue of personal experiences that my hon. Friend has witnessed at first hand. I think anybody who has had any experience of working with young carers in any part of the country would be able to repeat them. My own local authority, Sandwell Council, was one of the pioneers investigating this particular social problem, and published an early piece of work on child carers in 1989 with the specific objective of identifying the number of potential young carers in the borough and supporting charitable initiatives to address the problems they had. Certainly, first as a councillor and then as a Member of Parliament, it has been my privilege to work with the Sandwell Young Carers organisation, which has enabled me to see at first hand the inspirational young people we have in the borough and the work they do not only on behalf of their own families, but in relieving pressure on public services locally.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): As in my hon. Friend’s area, we have Gloucestershire Young Carers, which has just won a tender to remain as the organisation representing young carers in Gloucestershire. Does my hon. Friend agree that a tendering process is the most improper way to encourage those organisations to function properly in representing young carers? It just seems the wrong approach.

Mr Bailey: Absolutely. In fact, there was an earlier remark on the almost haphazard way in which young carer organisations can access funding. The fact is that to provide a proper, long-term service with the capacity to meet an area’s needs requires long-term, assured funding. The continual tendering process does not provide the degree of certainty necessary to plan services effectively for the long term.

In addition to the inspirational young people that I mentioned, there is the chief executive of SYC. Tracey Hawkins, whom I have known for many years. She brings absolute passion to the job—often in very trying financial circumstances—to sustain that service within my local authority. SYC has a record of raising awareness for professionals across the board within the borough to help them identify and support young carers, and it has a contract with the council to do so.

SYC provides lottery-funded academic support—through homework clubs—and educational support for young carers who, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central outlined, often face very difficult home circumstances, resulting in their low attainment, and sometimes low aspiration. It also provides publicity and communicates with other community groups and clubs to broaden young carers’ activities, which again is lottery-funded. The problem is that SYC has to continually try to find new or repeat sources of funds to go on providing those services.

The initial survey in Sandwell identified 2,000 potential young carers as needing support, but SYC has the funding and capacity to deal with only about 520 at any one time. SYC also makes an enormous contribution to supporting other public services in the area.

Julian Knight: As a fellow West Midlands MP, I concur with many things the hon. Gentleman says, including on the hand-to-mouth existence that these
organisations seem to lead. Does he also recognise that this is not so much about social deprivation or the area of the country where someone lives? I understand from Solihull Young Carers that the wealthier south of my constituency has as many cases of young people in this plight as the north of the borough, which is much more economically deprived. It is actually a nationwide problem.

Mr Bailey: I certainly agree that this problem is not confined to what were historically called deprived areas. By its very nature, the role of a young carer is often so hidden from general view that it is very difficult to make accurate assessments and comparisons. Although I cannot speak up for Solihull, I can say that it is very important that a uniformity of service should exist around the country, because this problem is not confined to specific geographical areas.

I am conscious of time, so I will quickly come to my concluding questions. To repeat the thrust of the comments by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central, I ask the Minister what is being done to ensure that GPs and other health professionals identify, recognise and register young carers within their practice. The Department of Health and Social Care needs to take a more proactive role in raising awareness of this particular responsibility and ensuring that it is carried out. Similarly, what is being done to ensure that local authorities have pathways for young carers to access care and suitably trained, child-friendly staff with knowledge of the Acts covering young carers? What role do we envisage the voluntary-sector young carers projects playing in that pathway?

My hon. Friend also mentioned transport. Many young carers cite difficulties in accessing school transport and transport to young carers’ facilities, which are put on by charities and other community organisations to relieve some of the pressure of their everyday caring responsibilities. There is little point in having those facilities if the young carers who need them have not the wherewithal to get to them and enjoy them.

There is also an issue around the very welcome transitional arrangement policies for carers over 18 now being devised through a joint initiative of the Children’s Society and the Department of Health and Social Care. The 18-year-old barrier is often a sort of cliff-edge for carers and, certainly, a cliff-edge for young people. We do not want this to be regarded only as a transitional arrangement. What is being done to ensure that young people over 18, with a long history of providing this service for young people, are given the opportunity to build on that expertise and to develop it for the post-18 cohort of young carers.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Before I call the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), I remind Members that I will begin calling the Front-Bench spokespeople at eight minutes past 5. That will give the Opposition spokespeople five minutes each, will protect the Minister’s 10 minutes and will also give two minutes at the end for the sponsor of the debate to respond.

4.56 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I echo the sentiments already expressed in both interventions and speeches, including the excellent speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield). If I may say so, responsibility for the questions he posed to the Minister does not sit only in the Department for Education but across Government. If we are serious about this issue, the need to break out of those silos, and perhaps to have a cross-departmental take on all this, is really important.

I will speak principally on the excellent and enormously positive work done in Blackpool, often by our carers centre, which is of long standing. I have had the privilege to work with the centre over my 22 years as the local Member of Parliament, and particularly with its young carers. Over the past 12 months, the centre has supported 666 young carers. Let us bear in mind that this is—I will not say that it is the tip of the iceberg—certainly not the actual number of young people caring for a parent or family member in Blackpool. Various surveys over the years have suggested that the figure is anything between 2,000 and 3,000, which gives some sense of the scale of it.

The other thing about Blackpool, which is also an issue for many inner-city areas and other seaside and coastal communities, is the degree of double transience—of families coming into the town and of people moving within the town, often because of family break-ups or economic hardship. That means that the ability of people who need care to latch on to a local community is much reduced on what it might be in other parts of the country, which puts even more pressure on the work of those young carers.

Nevertheless, the good news from Blackpool is that there has been tremendous progress in the last few years. I have been privileged and very proud to be part of that. In 2016 we all got a little bit of BBC showbiz dust sprinkled on us, because the BBC’s “DIY SOS” programme, which some hon. Members may be familiar with, descended on Blackpool to transform a building, Blenheim House—which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), but which serves the whole of Blackpool—into a young carers centre. Literally hundreds and hundreds of volunteers came from across the community, and I, along with some of my councillor colleagues, lent my hod, as it were, by clearing rubble and doing general labouring tasks in the morning. I also pay tribute to the Beaverbrooks Charitable Trust—the local charity and local business that provided the property and has supported the centre very strongly ever since. It is invidious, when one thinks about the work that is done by young carers and the carers associations that support them, to single out lots of individuals, but I do particularly want to single out Michelle Smith, who has done extraordinary things with the centre and everything that has been taken forward from it.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is paying fitting tribute to the organisations in his constituency. Will he join me in recognising the work of volunteers, particularly the volunteers who assist to support the constituents, Gloucestershire Young Carers, because it is their contribution that means that the work can reach so much further and change so many more lives?
I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) wholeheartedly on securing the debate. He does an enormous amount of work in championing young carers from Sheffield and across the country. Like him, I have met many of the young carers that he mentioned, in part because of the fantastic work of Sheffield Young Carers, which is such an effective voice for those young people, but also because the young people themselves are such excellent advocates, who need absolutely no prompting in describing their experiences and making an impassioned case for change to support the needs of this hidden army of young people, who contribute so much yet receive so little.

I employ a young carer in my constituency office. Gabby has cared for her family since she was four years old and still cares for them now. As a result of that experience, she is an absolutely amazing young woman, who I believe is genuinely capable of anything, but who just needed a chance and some recognition of the obstacles that she faced while growing up that other young people did not have to. That is really at the heart of what young carers are asking for—recognition. I am talking about recognition of the incredible work that they do day in, day out; recognition that as a result of caring for siblings or parents, they struggle to get to school right on time, and that when they are at school, they are really tired; recognition that as a result of their caring, they are much more likely to have mental health problems of their own and risk burnout. Some services do recognise that, but nowhere is the recognition more important than in schools, and I am sorry to say that young carers’ experience in schools is patchy at best. In the words of Sheffield Young Carers, some schools help young carers, but some still do not at all.

It is incumbent on Government to ensure that schools treat young carers consistently and with the respect and recognition that they deserve, so I should be grateful if the Minister would respond explicitly to the recommendations made on education by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central—that schools should be required to have a young carers lead that Ofsted’s inspection framework should cover support for young carers, and that the teacher training curriculum should include information about identifying and supporting young carers.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, I have been working with a lot of young carers over the past year to campaign for free travel for young carers in Sheffield, both while they are in school and outside term time. Understandably, young carers travel much more than their counterparts, going to and from health appointments, collecting shopping and perhaps visiting those they care for. It is absolute common sense that we should recognise that by providing them with free travel.

Just last week, the young carers presented our petition to Sheffield City Council, where they received a standing ovation. Last summer, South Yorkshire passenger transport executive conducted a pilot, but we now need to see it rolled out. If the Minister could commit to raising that with his counterparts in the Department for Transport, we would appreciate it.

These young people ask so little of us, but give so selflessly to their loved ones and save the Exchequer and society so much. It is the very least we can do to make their voices heard in this place and to ensure that sufficient support is in place in their communities.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I am grateful to the hon. Lady.
5.7 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing the debate. Like several other hon. Members, I declare an interest as a former young carer. I would like to thank both the organisations in my constituency and the other organisations that I worked with across Scotland as a volunteer with young carers services in later years. This issue is close to my heart, and I think it is of paramount importance that we should be having this debate.

Lanarkshire Carers Centre in my constituency works with, and for, carers to develop and deliver services that make a positive difference to the lives of carers in Lanarkshire. The services that it provides include one-to-one carer support, carer support groups, short breaks for carers, and carer training opportunities. South Lanarkshire Carers Network empowers carers with knowledge and information that will allow them to make informed choices about available services. It also aims to identify unpaid carers, develop and maintain a network for those carers and identify gaps in service provision.

Carers not only perform a vital role for the people whom they look after, but ease the strain on our public services, as we have heard from many hon. Members. In fact, this point was well made by the hon. Member for Sheffield Central. I recognise his incredible work and passion as a patron of Sheffield Young Carers. He rightly gives a voice to John, Holly and all the other young carers, who deserve to be heard in this House.

Other hon. Members from across the House talked about their personal experiences, which were heartfelt and touching. It is worth recognising the words of the hon. Members for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) and for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), who have done a great deal of work in their constituencies over many years. That commitment is recognised here, as well as by their constituents, I also recognise the work of Michelle Smith, whom the hon. Member for Blackpool South mentioned, and the work she has done in his constituency. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) rightly identified that she has employed someone in her office who is a young carer. That recognition and opportunity is vital. Every young carer hopes for a chance and we should ensure that they get one.

Young carers provide a vital service to our economy, taking a huge burden off public services, and addressing the constraints of an already decreasing budget. In Scotland’s case, they save the Scottish economy £10.3 billion, which is close to the cost of providing the NHS service in Scotland. There are approximately 759,000 carers in Scotland, which is 17% of the adult population. When we think about carers we assume that they are adults, but there are an estimated 29,000 young carers in Scotland, which is 4% of under-16-year-olds. Being a young carer has a big impact on a young person’s life.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): The hon. Lady is making an important point. It is difficult to know the exact figures, but substance abuse and mental health issues are on the rise. We have not mentioned the number of young people who are out there caring but are not recognised, even by themselves, as young carers. How do we identify those young carers going forward?

Angela Crawley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that salient point. From my point of view, growing up, I did not recognise myself as a young carer. A poster in school reminded me of the kinds of responsibilities that a young carer might have, which make that young person different from other young people in school. The Department for Education should consider an awareness-raising campaign around the responsibilities of young carers. If they are taking on additional responsibilities, they might not necessarily assume that they are caring for a parent or younger sibling. We need to raise awareness of that.

Many young carers find it difficult to balance their caring responsibilities with their education and social life. It can negatively impact their health and the financial difficulties can impact their stress levels. It is vital that young carers are supported, so that they can not only continue to care, but have a life and childhood of their own and not feel different from their non-caring peers at school.

The Scottish Government are leading the way on supporting carers. They have invested around £122 million in a programme for support for young carers. That carer’s allowance is the same level as jobseeker's allowance and has been backdated to be paid from April 2018. From this autumn, the Scottish Government will introduce the young carer grant, worth £300 per year, which will be granted to 16 to 18-year-olds who have at least 16 hours of caring responsibility. I hope that the Minister will take that into account when he speaks to his colleagues across all Departments, because this issue is not reserved to the Department for Education.

I am conscious that I do not have much time left. I call on the Minister to consider carefully the important role of young carers, and do more to recognise them and support them financially.

5.13 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) for securing this debate and for his powerful contribution, which set us off on the right footing.

The latest figures identify close to 200,000 young carers, but it is likely that the real figure is much higher, because many child carers, some as young as four years old, do not identify themselves as carers. All too often, young carers go about their lives managing their caring responsibilities as best they can, unseen, unheard and unsupported. I want to thank the young carers who have allowed their stories to be shared here today, especially the Sheffield carers.

I was a young carer and I know it is not easy. Being a young carer can be a very isolating experience. All chances of childhood are lost. It is hard to laugh with so much responsibility. It is hard to be carefree when you are coming home from school worrying about what you will find, worrying about household bills, because there is no one else to worry about them, and worrying about siblings. Balancing school and caring responsibilities is, to say the least, difficult. There is no time for homework and it is hard to concentrate at school. There are few chances to have a life of one’s own and few chances to socialise; it is difficult.
Children have rights. The United Nations says that all children have a right to education and a childhood, and the right to be protected from the demands of excessive and inappropriate caring. Too often those rights are denied, and children and young people are suffering. One third of all carers aged between 11 and 18 experience mental health problems of their own. Research shows that one in 20 carers miss school because of their caring responsibilities. Young carers are far more likely to have lower educational attainment, less likely to stay on at school and more likely to be out of work in adult life.

There is some support out there. I pay tribute to the Carers Trust for the work it does supporting 32,000 young carers. I recognise and thank Carers UK and organisations such as Rainbow Trust Children’s Charity, which remind carers. I recognise and thank Carers UK and organisations such as Rainbow Trust Children’s Charity, which remind us that the siblings of children with life-limiting conditions are also young carers, who deserve the right to regular short breaks. I also thank the all-party parliamentary group on carers for shining a spotlight on these issues.

We are here today because Government support is urgently needed. The Care Act 2014 placed the duty on local authorities to consider the needs of children and young people living in a household where there is an adult with a disability or an impairment. That has not been fully implemented, because of a lack of funds. The Children’s Society worryingly reports that in the last four years the number of young carers has soared by 10,000. It suggests that this may be due to young carers picking up the slack from a shortage of adult social care. It is certainly a fact that adult care budgets have been cut by £7 billion since 2010, and cuts have consequences. Fewer people are now eligible for publicly funded care. Consequently, young family members have to take on more caring responsibilities.

Those young carers need and deserve support. Various promises have been made along the way. Eight months ago, the Prime Minister met some of these brilliant young people and promised to help them. The Government’s carers action plan promised a cross-departmental approach, “to increase the timely identification” of carers, to improve access to sport for general health and wellbeing, and to improve educational opportunities and outcomes.

Hon. Members relayed specific and sensible steps that could be taken to support young carers. In terms of health, GPs need to be aware of the caring responsibilities of their young patients. Social prescribing needs to be an option for these young people. In education, every school needs to have a designated lead for young carers. The Government must recognise that funding support is needed. Many young carers live in low-income households, and too often are left to shoulder financial worries. Costs associated with the caring role can be burdensome. Teenage carers often have little time to take on part-time work. Making carers eligible for the vulnerable bursary and free travel arrangements will be a welcome step. Again, I make the plea for funding short breaks for young carers.

Will the Minister go beyond warm words and give us a guarantee on some of the specifics? It is astonishing that the Department of Health and Social Care has published a 10-year plan for the future delivery of services, but does not outline a plan for social care. These issues are so fundamentally interconnected that it is hard to believe that they have not been dealt with in the 10-year plan. When will the long-awaited Green Paper on social care be published? Will the Minister assure us that the understanding of the needs of all carers will be at the heart of not only the Green Paper on social care, but all Government strategy going forward? Will he guarantee that the Government will ensure that young carers are never forgotten or left behind?

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I thank the Front-Bench spokespeople and Back Benchers for keeping to the time constraints. I call the Minister.

5.18 pm

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing this debate. I apologise on behalf of the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), for whom I am deputising. He is unable to be here due to prior departmental commitments.

Young carers do heroic work. They provide vital support to those they look after. We all recognise the enormous contribution that young carers make. The number of hon. Members who have turned up to make interventions or contributions is testament to that. We heard contributions from the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey), for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) and for Burnley (Julie Cooper). They have all made excellent points.

Young carers are likely to need additional support to develop and thrive, and there are many voluntary sector organisations doing inspirational work to support them. The hon. Member for Sheffield Central talked about John and Holly coming to meet the Prime Minister in May. She was impressed by the good work of Sheffield Young Carers, which provides respite and support with education and employment training.

Although I am the Minister with responsibility for higher education, I visited Kingston University earlier this month to see first hand how the university supports young carers to access and succeed in higher education through its dedicated KU Cares team. We recognise that many organisations provide similar services across the country, and we applaud the work they do.

It is important that young carers feel able to have the same aspirations as any other child and that they are supported to meet them. The Government are committed to ensuring that young carers have access to services that support and encourage them to achieve the best educational outcomes.

Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): Will the Minister join me in congratulating Surrey Young Carers, which supports 2,300 young carers in the county? It has been pointed out that young carers are 40% more likely to have mental health problems if they are not identified
and supported early. That is important, because it is only fair to them and the public purse that they are supported.

Chris Skidmore: I thank the organisation my hon. Friend mentions for its work. I will return to that critical point about mental health. The Department thanks all the organisations that hon. Members have mentioned for the work they do. The time and dedication they give is much appreciated.

On identification, many young people wish to help their loved ones, and find reward in doing so, but young carers often go unnoticed and hidden, and perhaps do not even recognise themselves as young carers, as the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East said. That can put their education, training or health at risk, and prevent them from enjoying their childhood in the same way as other children.

The consistent identification of young carers is challenging, and there are many complex reasons for that, which is why the Department has made sustained progress to tangibly improve identification and support. I was asked about the progress in the past eight months. The Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care have commissioned the Carers Trust to undertake a review of best practice in identifying young carers. That work is ongoing, but its conclusion should give us new insights into how schools, health services and other providers can best achieve that in practice.

Recommendation 3.2 of the cross-Government carers action plan, which was published in June 2018, identified that the two Departments would conduct a review of best practice in identifying young carers. That review will work alongside the Carers Trust work and will involve experts to look at existing best practice and identify what can be done to spread it. It will report back shortly.

We recognise the points that were made about mental health treatment and improving school support for vulnerable pupils. Young carers should receive mental health support if they need it. As part of the NHS long-term plan, there is a commitment to increasing the funding for children’s and young people’s mental health services to improve the support for 345,000 more children and young people to access NHS-funded mental health services in schools and colleges.

NHS England, in particular, is working with the young carer health champions programme to support confidence in using health services. It also focuses on improving support to enable young carers to make a positive transition from children’s to adults’ services. The Department of Health and Social Care will fund a project to identify and disseminate effective practice on that.

On the points made about children in need and about support for them as young carers, when it comes to looking at the impact, which we recognise, we know that statutory support for young carers’ needs is necessary. For that reason, we have implemented the legislative changes that have been touched on, so that young carers have an automatic entitlement to assessment by children’s services. Changes to the Care Act 2014 and the Children and Families Act 2014 have been implemented. The consolidation and simplification of legislation relating to young carers’ assessments has made the rights and duties clearer to young people and practitioners.

There is, however, still work to do on children in need. The Department collects only limited data on young carers through the annual children in need census, which had about 16,100 assessments that identified young care as a factor that contributes to children being in need. We want to do more, which is why the children in need review is identifying how to spread best practice on raising educational outcomes.

Support through social care is reflected in the statutory guidance “Working together to safeguard children”, which clearly states that the specific needs of young carers should be given support, recognition and priority in the assessment process. That process needs to take a whole-family approach to assessment and support.

Like the hon. Member for Sheffield Central, we strongly believe that young people should be protected from inappropriate and excessive caring responsibilities and that we should take that whole-family approach. Local authorities have an overarching responsibility for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of all children in their area. They are best placed to assess the needs and priorities in their area, and thresholds are set locally to allow for the specific needs of local children and families. We agree on the need for consistent, high-quality decision making, which is why Ofsted assesses whether local thresholds are set appropriately for children.

We want a system that responds to the needs and interests of children and families, and not the other way around. In such a system, practitioners need to be clear about what is required of them individually and how they can work in partnership with others. That is why the Department is working with the wider charitable sector to improve access to the support that young carers deserve. We have provided the Carers Trust with half a million pounds to develop and run the project “Making a Step Change for Young Carers and their Families”. Improving access to support for young carers is championed across Government through the NHS England young carer health champions programme, which aims to improve confidence in using health services.

There are clearly benefits for schools in identifying and supporting young carers, but changing the law to make them do so is not the best way forward. It is important that headteachers and governors are allowed the freedom to exercise their wealth of responsibilities in the most appropriate way, according to the individual needs of their pupils. Programmes such as those delivered by Suffolk Family Carers, the Carers Trust and the Children’s Society are important, and the more schools that complete them, the more that other schools will not want to be left behind.

Guidance such as “Keeping children safe in education” asks school and college staff to be alert to the potential need for early help for young carers. That support is evaluated by Ofsted inspections that take into account how schools and colleges meet the needs of the range of children and young people that attend them.

The issue of the financial burdens on young carers was raised. Young carers over 16 can be entitled to a carer’s allowance and carer’s credit to support the financial
Chris Skidmore

burden and help with gaps in their national insurance record. They can receive discretionary help from the 16 to 19 bursary fund, which is available to education and training institutions. It is the role of those institutions to determine which young people need bursaries and the level of financial support required to enable those students to participate.

The Department for Education provides schools with about £2.4 billion a year through the pupil premium, which provides £1,320 for primary schools and £935 for secondary schools. Eligibility is based on children receiving free school meals, but roughly 60% of young carers are on free school meals, so we know that they will receive that benefit as well.

When it comes to schools making effective use of their pupil premium budgets, we do not seek to tell them how to use the premium, as they will know best how to spend the grant according to their pupil needs. Crucially, however, schools are held to account for their use of the pupil premium through Ofsted inspections and information in performance tables. Most schools are required to publish details online about the impact of that funding.

On bus passes, it is up to local authorities to decide how they wish to allocate their discretionary budgets, including on providing free transport. The Government have made more than £200 billion available up to 2020 for councils to deliver on the local services that their communities want. I note the South Yorkshire pilot, and I will make sure that the Department looks into that.

I thank the hon. Member for Sheffield Central again for securing the debate—I am sure we could have spoken for at least another hour—and it has highlighted a crucial issue. Regardless of which side we are on, we are all determined to help those young carers who do so much for our local society.

Paul Blomfield: I am delighted by the number of hon. Members from both sides of the House who have contributed, and I thank them for that—I am sure the young carers they represent will be grateful too. I am also grateful to hon. Members for sharing their personal experience, which underlines the point about recognising only the tip of the iceberg. Four hon. Members described their experience as young carers, which makes an important statement about the number who go without recognition.

The point was made that good work is done by volunteers, and that is absolutely right, but we should not have to depend on them. Their work should be underpinned by good statutory provision, which needs to be consistent across the country if young carers are not to burn out.

I thank the Minister for the answers that he did provide, although I was disappointed by some of them. He spoke quickly and quietly, so I did not catch everything that he said—I will be reading Hansard. I gave the Department four days’ written notice of every question, so I had hoped that I would get fuller answers. In some cases, where he did answer, he tried to shift responsibility away from the Government and on to local authorities and others, which was disappointing.

Finally, I pay tribute to Sheffield Young Carers, which was the inspiration for the debate. I hope that it recognised, in all the contributions, how strongly hon. Members feel about these issues and how far we will not let them go.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered support for young carers.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.
9.30 am

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the health implications of sunbed use.

It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Hosie, and I thank my good friend the Minister for responding to this important debate.

The motion asks the House to consider the health implications of using sunbeds, but I would go as far as calling for a ban. Who needs sunbeds? No one. Many people in the UK believe that they look healthier with a tan, but that could not be further from the truth. Bronzed skin was a trend first popularised by Coco Chanel in 1923, and it has never gone away. From St Tropez to Derbyshire, a suntan continues to be a desired accessory. Over time, people have sought to maintain their tan using artificial means, including the sunbed. In the '60s, sunbeds were developed for the first time, and in the '80s they began to be used in large numbers. The industry continued to grow throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s. Today, an estimated 3 million Britons use sunbeds to keep themselves tanned.

According to the World Health Organisation, sunbeds are as dangerous as smoking—many people do not realise that—and in 2009 it classified them as carcinogenic to humans. Worryingly, statistics show that people who have used a sunbed at least once, in any stage of their lives, have a 20% higher risk of developing melanoma than those who have never used a sunbed. The first use of a sunbed before the age of 35 increases the risk of developing melanoma by 59%.

Dr Andrew Birnie, a consultant dermatologist and dermalogical surgeon, supports the World Health Organisation classification of sunbeds as carcinogenic. He notes that "it has been shown that the biggest cause of melanoma is high-intensity bursts of ultraviolet light on skin not used to being exposed to UV.”

The World Health Organisations has recommended that countries either ban or limit the use of sunbeds. In reality, there is no such thing as a safe tan unless it comes from a bottle or a can. Indeed, one trainee beautician, Kimberley Platt, said:

“I’m a trainee beautician and part of the course is being taught to spray tan. Our course tutors tell us to steer clear of sunbeds, I wonder why. Has anyone ever looked on Instagram at sunbed burn photos? Horrific. It seems as if to burn, either artificially or in the sun, is somehow a funny thing to do. Dealing with skin cancer is not funny though. Think about the cost of treating skin cancer, not to mention the cost of a life.”

Chris Bryant: Is this particularly an issue in this country because so many people are genetically made for British weather? We have freckles, fair hair and fair skin, which is far more prone to some of the dangers that the hon. Lady mentions.

Mrs Latham: Again, the hon. Gentleman makes an important point. We are not built for the sun; otherwise we would be black. That is why people in Africa do not have the problems that we have. We tend to go on holiday for a couple of weeks, burn like mad, come back and think it is great, but it is damaging to the skin. One need only look at people who spend a long time either on sunbeds or in the sun. When they get older, they look like dried-up prunes, and nobody wants to look like a dried-up prune. People think that they are making themselves look healthier, but they are not; they are deeply damaging their skin, and we must try to persuade the Minister that a ban on sunbed use is the only thing we can do.

Frighteningly, over the past 30 years cases of malignant melanoma have more than quadrupled in the UK, and the scary truth is that it is now the second most common form of cancer in those aged 15 to 34. A melanoma is not easy to treat unless caught early. There are around 15,400 new melanoma skin cancer cases in the UK every year—42 every single day. Every 24 hours in the UK, six people die from a melanoma, and in 2016, 2,285 people died of the condition.

In the United States of America, Europe and Australia, combined sunbed use is estimated to have been responsible for more than 450,000 non-melanoma skin cancer cases and more than 10,000 melanoma cases every year. It is no coincidence that the rise in aggressive form of skin cancer aligns with the popular use of sunbeds. The current updated body of scientific evidence strongly suggests that indoor tanning significantly increases the risk of melanoma. A large amount of data from observational studies provides enough information to infer that sunbed use causes melanoma, using all the epidemiological criteria for causality.

Dr Nicole Chiang, a consultant dermatologist who treats skin cancer patients on a regular basis, has noted that the risk of melanoma more than doubles when sunbeds are used at a young age of below 35 years. Sunbeds cause three times more DNA damage than natural sunlight, and it has been estimated that 20 minutes on a sunbed could be equivalent to approximately four hours in the sun. Just one sunbed session can increase someone's risk of developing squamous cell skin cancer by 67%, and basal cell skin cancer by 29%. Even more important is the increased risk of melanoma, which is the deadliest form of skin cancer.
I was concerned to learn that data from Cancer Research shows that more than 25% of the UK’s 3 million sunbed users are unconcerned about the dangers that sunbeds pose. Indeed, I was on the radio today and I heard some people talking about this issue. They said, “Well, so what? It doesn’t matter. It will be okay.” I believe it is important to dispel the fake news, often used in the marketing of sunbeds, that they provide a “controlled” way of getting a “safer” tan. Sunbeds are no safer than exposure to the sun.

A 2008 study published in the journal “Pigment Cell & Melanoma Research”—that sounds like something from “Have I Got News For You”—came to the conclusion that to achieve a tan, the skin must be exposed to ultraviolet radiation, and therefore “safe tanning” is a physical impossibility. It is also important to dispel the myths perpetrated by the sunbed industry about vitamin D benefits from sunbeds. Due to the carcinogenic risk associated with sunbeds, their use cannot be justified. We can take a tablet in the winter to ward off vitamin D deficiencies. A further myth is the idea of the base tan—the dangerous and fanciful assertion that getting an initial tan from a sunbed will protect the skin from the sun. Guidelines from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence explain that getting a tan provides little protection against later exposure to sunlight, and the resulting skin damage outweighs any later protective effect.

Throughout my time in Parliament, I have focused on the prevention and treatment of skin cancer as a result of personal experience. I have had the privilege of working with a cancer charity, Melanoma UK, which I thank for its support in gathering evidence for this debate. I know only too well the devastating effect that cancer can have on people’s lives. What is most insidious about melanoma in particular is that it is impossible to treat in its late stages, and it often results in a draw-out, very painful death. Last year I had my own personal scare. I found a mole, which was malignant. After a tortured three weeks waiting for the results I found out that, luckily, the tumour had not spread—but it was malignant. The fear was magnified by the fact that my own brother died from a melanoma when he was only 54. I have therefore always taken a close interest in that type of cancer and its causes.

My brother went to his GP three times in a year before the GP eventually said, “There’s nothing wrong with you, but I will refer you”—just to get him out of his surgery, I think. By that time it was far too late, and my brother died from his melanoma a few years later; but he was never able to work again, because muscle and lymph glands had to be taken away, so he could not do his job. Neither I nor my brother used sunbeds, but given my experience of the awful disease of melanoma I cannot comprehend why anyone would want to increase their risk of contracting it. Research shows that many people who contract it probably would not have done, if they had never been able to use a sunbed.

I want to refer to some case studies highlighting the horrific effect that sunbed use can have on individuals and their loved ones. I thank the House of Commons outreach team for helping me to collate a vast and wide-ranging response, obtained thanks to the power of social media. I am so grateful to those who participated in the initiative. There were some interesting and informative discussions. I was taken aback by the significant number of responses from people who said they regularly used sunbeds in their youth and today have, or have had, a melanoma. One such lady, Jade Luelle Cope, said that she used sunbeds often between the ages of 15 and 32, and was diagnosed with malignant melanoma at 38. She stated that she does not think that it was a coincidence.

Beverley Chesers passionately advocated a ban. Describing her experience, she said, “without a doubt these killing machines”—as the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) called them earlier—”need to be banned in a heartbeat!” She used sunbeds in her late teens and early 20s, when “it was the norm for everyone to walk about with the supposed ‘healthy glow’. How very naive I was. I cannot recall ever any health warnings regarding sunbeds, and yes a pair of goggles given for eye protection and that’s it! Now all these years later I have malignant melanoma, first diagnosed last August...since then I have 2 more separate melanomas, and also waiting for results of 2 further biopsies. I would not wish this horrible disease on anyone. If only I knew then what I know now I would never ever have put myself in that position of risking my life, all for a tan. My body looks like a patchwork quilt.”

Similarly, Vicki Brennan noted that she used sunbeds and now has a malignant melanoma. Tragically, she comments:

“If I knew the statistics back then I would have made an informed decision not to use them, it scares me to think how many people are putting themselves at risk. And as for banality...Tell this to the thousands enduring treatment and those who are dying. You don’t just cut skin cancer out and carry on as normal. Please ban sunbeds.”

A lady who came to a meeting that I was chairing had four young children, and was only in her 30s. She knew she was not going to survive, because she had a melanoma. She was going to leave the four young children for her husband to bring up, and they would not know their mother at all because they were so young.

The heartbreaking consequences of melanoma, aligning with sunbed use, were highlighted by Elaine Broadhurst. She said she and her brother used sunbeds as teenagers.

“We had one in our own home. There was no legislation or advice on the dangers. My brother was diagnosed with melanoma and died from it two years ago aged 46, leaving a wife and two young children. I’m convinced that the sunbed use contributed to losing my brother to this deadly disease and that sunbeds should be banned.”

Hundreds of people wrote similar testimonials, which illustrate the huge personal impact that the condition has on people’s lives, and the regret that many feel, having used a sunbed repeatedly and contracted the condition as a consequence. I encourage Members to take the time to read through some of the comments on the House of Commons Facebook page.

It is important to stress that it is clear that the majority of people use sunbeds purely for cosmetic reasons and vanity. The significance and dangers of cosmetic tanning are supported by many case studies and scientific research. It is said that people feel more confident, and sometimes even slimmer, when they are bronzed. However, in reality, over time when people over-use sunbeds their skin can age prematurely, making it look coarse, leathery and wrinkled—prune-like. In the worst-case scenario sunbeds can cause burns, scars.
and ulcers known as basal cell carcinomas. Dr Birnie observed that there has been rising incidence of the condition in younger people, and especially in women who have been using sunbeds in the past 20 years. I am sure that that is not the aesthetic that young people craving a tan are trying to achieve.

I am particularly concerned to learn of a trend towards sun tanning addiction, where people use the sunbed for a quick and lasting tan. Some research suggests that as many as one in 50 sunbed users are addicted to them. There are stories of people using a sunbed daily for a long period of time. I was on Radio Sussex this morning and a lady said she had for three years used a sunbed at home for an hour a day. She now has a melanoma. That is excessive use, but lower use is still deadly. Scientists from Germany and the US recently published a study showing that almost 20% of indoor tanning users have addictive symptoms.

I would like high street tanning salons that offer sunbeds to raise awareness of the potential health implications of using sunbeds, as happens with cigarette packets. I understand that the British Association of Dermatologists has explained that many tanning salons fail to provide adequate information. However, I should prefer an outright ban to the use of nasty pictures of people with burns.

There is work to be done outside the legislative reach of Parliament. I would encourage the fashion and beauty industry to take an active role in discouraging the use of sunbeds. I commend initiatives previously adopted by the fashion industry, such as when in 2012 Kate Moss and her then modelling agency, Storm, aimed to raise awareness of the dangers associated with sunbeds, to put heavy tans out of fashion. At the same time directors from 11 UK model agencies including Elite, Premier Model Management, Storm and Next signed up to a zero tolerance policy on sunbed use, to protect new and established models from the health and cosmetic effects of using ultraviolet tanning beds. It would be good to see such work continue and perhaps go further. Perhaps there should be more articles in girls’ and women’s magazines to explain the dangers of tanning in that way. We all know that models are generally young and thin—that is another issue—but they do not need a tan way. We all know that models are generally young and thin—that is another issue—but they do not need a tan. Twiggy, in the 60s, was pretty beautiful, and she has continued to be. I doubt whether she uses a sunbed.

In 2003 the World Health Organisation responded to the serious public health challenge and published a guidance document on sunbed legislation. Since then, a number of organisations and individuals in the UK have called for an outright ban on the use of commercial sunbeds. We should also look at the practice of selling them privately, because there is no control over how people use them. The Sunbeds (Regulation) Act 2010 banned the use of sunbeds by under-18s, but many people feel that the ban did not go far enough. It was a start, but only an all-out ban is acceptable. That idea is being explored by our European partners. France’s health watchdog says that the risk of cancer from sunlamps and sunbeds is proven and authorities should act to stop people being exposed to artificial ultraviolet rays. France is one of a number of countries that have already limited their use.

I know that many members of the public support the banning of sunbeds. I was very pleased that Melanoma UK’s recent petition to ban sunbeds in the UK received in excess of 15,000 signatures. While I received a mixture of responses on both sides of the argument from the parliamentary outreach exercise, I was struck by the support from some people in the beauty industry. I am pleased that some individuals in the industry have recognised the dangers of sunbeds and champion the safe alternative of a spray tan.

One such example is Tonina Healey, a beauty salon owner who took the decision to ban the use of tanning beds in her salon and instead has promoted a spray tan. She said: “I have always been very uncomfortable at the use of sunbeds. I took the decision to stop the use of tanning beds in my salon, I think one of the things that should be of major concern to all salon owners, is the issue of control. I have seen articles relating to tanning addiction and of clients going from salon to salon in order to achieve ‘double’ sessions. No one in the beauty industry can legislate for that and I for one, do not want to invite a lawsuit my way—does anyone in this industry really need that kind of hassle? I do believe that that will come one day, a salon in the UK will be sued when someone develops melanoma. I don’t want that on my plate and I certainly don’t want the illness of a client on my conscience. We trained in beauty to make our clients feel good, not to watch them die horrific deaths. We support a ban.”

Brazil and Australia have already banned sunbeds commercially. Brazil was the first to ban sunbeds in 2009, the only exception being where doctors prescribed their use for health reasons. In the same year, the World Health Organisation classified exposure to UV sunlamps, sunbeds and tanning booths as carcinogenic to humans. Australia followed Brazil’s ban in 2013. Annual rates of malignant melanoma in Australia were 10 times the rate in Europe for women, and more than 20 times for men. Professor Grant McArthur stresses the success of the ban in Australia, saying:

“The Sunbed ban in Australia has been highly effective. We estimate that one unnecessary death per week has been prevented by the ban. The greatest burden of deaths from Sunbeds falls in people aged 20-40. I plead that the UK save their young people by banning sunbeds”.

To conclude, it is my view that there should be an outright ban on sunbeds, and I hope I will receive the support of colleagues in that. While the temptation to achieve that sun-kissed glow is understandable, risking contracting such a devastating disease is not. The unnecessary exposure to UV is nonsensical, and I implore anyone to get a fake tan through a bottle or can, not the sunbed. It seems wrong that people should have the option of damaging their health so greatly, purely in pursuit of cosmetic gratification.

The evidence is clear: for over three decades, deliberate sunbed exposure to UV for cosmetic purposes through sunbeds has been driving up the incidence of skin cancers and driving down the age of their first appearance. I stress again the shocking figures that people who have ever used a sunbed are 20% more likely to develop melanoma later in life than people who have never used one, and those who started using sunbeds before the age of 35 were 87% more likely to develop melanoma than people who have never used a sunbed.

I also believe that action needs to be taken to further raise awareness of melanomas and what causes them, including over-exposure to UV through sunbeds. That action should include providing stronger and clearer warnings about the consequences of sunbed usage. Being aware of the possible consequences of the sunbed should lead to a cultural and generational shift, with
people avoiding exposing themselves to UV unnecessarily. It is vital that people are conscious of the impact that this awful condition can have on one's health and personal life—something that I myself have experienced through my own personal circumstances. Please may we have a ban on sunbeds?

9.54 am

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Hosie. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) for securing this important and emotive debate.

Good health is a precious gift, which most of us will hopefully be able to maintain throughout our life by ensuring that we have a balanced diet, take regular exercise and make appropriate lifestyle choices. However, one lifestyle choice that appears not to be beneficial is the frequent use of sunbeds, which give out potentially harmful ultraviolet, or UV, rays.

According to Cancer Research UK, “sunbeds are no safer than exposure to the sun itself.”

The damage to the DNA in our skin cells builds up over time, possibly resulting in skin cancer, of which melanoma is the deadliest form. NHS research illustrates that people “who are frequently exposed to UV rays before the age of 25 are at greater risk of developing skin cancer later in life.”

Over the last decade, the number of people diagnosed with melanoma in the United Kingdom has increased by almost half, and it is the fifth most common cancer in the United Kingdom. However, not only have UV rays been linked to the increased risk of developing melanoma, but they may result in premature ageing of the skin, and eye damage may occur if proper and effective eye protection is not applied.

Sadly, some people continue to put body image before their personal health, perhaps inspired by the media coverage of celebrities and models they seek to emulate. That is despite the fact that the risk of cancer is constantly being highlighted by the NHS throughout the UK, with various charities giving the same advice; indeed, the issue was the subject of a debate in the main Chamber only nine days ago.

In recognition of the potential dangers, it is illegal for people under 18 years to use sunbeds at commercial premises, including beauty salons, leisure centres, gyms and hotels. Use is controlled in England and Wales by the Sunbeds (Regulation) Act 2010, and Northern Ireland has passed delegated legislation in the form of regulations, providing a health warning with information that must be imparted to sunbed users. That information explains that those who use sunbeds for the first time before the age of 35 increase their risk of developing malignant melanoma by around a staggering 75%. Scotland has similar but less specific information in the Public Health etc. (Scotland) Act 2008 (Sunbed) Regulations 2009.

In 2009, the Health and Safety Executive was so concerned that it issued revised guidance on sunbed use in the UK. It is clear about the health risks associated with using UV tanning equipment such as sunbeds, sunlamps and tanning booths. However, any legislation is only as good as the enforcement, and that needs to be extremely robust. I would welcome any measures from the Minister that further protect the public from what is in effect a form of self-harm, emanating from the unnecessary pursuit of that perfect appearance. One measure he may wish to consider is raising the age limit from 18 years or consulting on a ban. Equally importantly, however, I ask those using or considering using sunbeds to weigh up the risk that it might present, not immediately but in later life. I said at the start that good health is a precious gift: why, oh why, would we as individuals put that gift at risk?

In closing, it is worthy of note that, properly utilised by experts in the field, and particularly medical staff in the NHS, light rays and phototherapy have a place in the treatment of skin conditions such as psoriasis and eczema, but they are not the same as tanning sunbeds.

9.58 am

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie.

One of the great pleasures of being in Parliament is that I learn new things on a regular basis. I must confess that, prior to coming to this debate, I had, as a peely-wally, fair-skinned, red-headed Scotsman, always avoided the sun and had no experience of sunlamps. It was fascinating to learn about them, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) for securing this debate and for her informative presentation, taking us through the history and many of the health problems. She presented some fantastic statistics, including the fact that sunbeds are used by 3 million people and that they cause three times the DNA damage of sunlight. Her case studies brought home the very human nature of this problem.

There is no doubt that UV rays from sunbeds can damage DNA in skin cells, which, building up over time, can cause skin cancer. The International Agency for Research on Cancer—ICARC—accepts that there is enough evidence to show that sunbeds cause melanoma skin cancer, and further states that sunbeds provide no health benefits. That is a fundamental point. It also highlights that sunbed use before the age of 35 significantly increases the risk of melanoma; both earlier speakers used statistics, and the statistics I found last night put the range at 59% to 79% more likely. I do not know the actual figure, and I am interested to hear whether the other Front Benchers have a firmer handle on it. Either way, those figures are frightening.

Those figures are, however, hotly contested by the sunbed industry, which points out that, when professional sunbed use is separated from home use, it has no increased melanoma risk. The industry also highlights the benefits of UVB radiation in treating vitamin D deficiency. While I have no doubt that professional sunbed use will be safer than home use, it is no safer than exposure to the sun. The World Health Organisation classifies sunbeds as a group 1 carcinogen. A WHO director, Dr Maria Neira, says:

“There’s no doubt about it: sunbeds are dangerous to our health”.

I certainly take that warning very seriously.

The Scottish National party recognises the potential harmful effects of sunbed use—or misuse—and has taken action. The Public Health etc. (Scotland) Act 2008,
implemented under an SNP-led Government, contains provisions to regulate sunbed use, as well as measures that include prohibiting unsupervised use, banning the use of sunbeds by under-18s and banning the sale and hire of sunbeds to under-18s.

It is imperative that people using sunbeds realise the health implications and risks of doing so, so that they can make an informed decision about their use. The 2008 Act has provisions requiring all sunbed premises to display a health notice visible to anybody entering them and to provide information to customers on the risks, allowing them to make an informed choice.

A Scottish Government leaflet highlights those risks, and reading it earlier in the week gave me my first pieces of information about sunbed use—I have to say that it ticks quite a few of the boxes that would frighten me off ever going on a sunbed. I encourage the public to have a serious look at it. In addition to the higher risk of skin cancer, it highlights the risk of eye damage—including the higher risk of cataracts if appropriate eye protection is not worn—and of accelerated skin damage, including premature ageing of the skin, which was well covered by the earlier speakers. The leaflet concludes:

“These health risks outweigh any potential benefits in using sunbeds to supplement vitamin D.”

There we have it. There are plenty of warnings about sunbeds, and I will certainly avoid using them. Indeed, I slap factor 50 sun cream on if I walk along Princes Street on a slightly cloudy day. I will leave my remarks at that. I thank hon. Members for an informative debate. I have learned a considerable amount about this issue.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) for her passionate and excellent speech and for so bravely sharing her own experience with melanoma, which makes it all the more delightful that she is with us in such fine health this morning. I am very sorry to hear about her brother, but I am pleased that her diagnosis was found early and was successfully treated. I also thank the hon. Members for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) and for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for their excellent contributions.

It is fair to say that the health implications of using sunbeds once dominated public consciousness. Almost 10 years ago, when the Sunbeds (Regulation) Act 2010 was introduced by the former Labour MP for Cardiff North and passed by a Labour Government, the health risks that came with using sunbeds were well known and well talked about. I remember a parliamentary reception with celebrities such as Nicola Roberts from Girls Aloud speaking out loud and clear about the dangers of sunbeds.

Roberts spoke as someone in the public eye who felt compelled to be tanned—despite being of ginger complexion and very fair skinned—and to constantly use tanning products. She bravely said that she was coming to a point in her life where she wanted to be her natural colour. However, that was 10 years ago, and we should have come a lot further, but owing to vanity or whatever, everyone still goes in search of that elusive tan. As the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire says, we do not need a tan; it should not be something that we desire.

The issue has certainly not been talked about in a long time, not least in the House, where between January 2011 and February 2019—more than eight years—the word “sunbeds” has been said only 16 times. It is therefore very welcome that the hon. Lady has brought this issue to the fore once again, because there is a generation of young people who will not really understand the risks of sunbed use. They will not know that the short, high-intensity exposure to UV radiation provided by sunbeds is dangerous and can dramatically increase the risk of skin cancer. Looking tanned might seem desirable when we are young, but I doubt, as the hon. Lady said, that looking aged with skin damage several years along the line will be as desirable. I invoke the dried-up prune analogy once again: we have all seen them on the beaches, haven’t we?

It is important that we get the message about the health risks across to young people, particularly because people frequently exposed to UV rays before the age of 25 are at a greater risk of developing skin cancer later in life. I have to admit that that statistic greatly worries me. I confess that, as a young woman in the 1980s, before we knew what we know now, I used sunbeds, although not as often as some. It was obvious that they could not be good for me, but I did not realise how bad they were for me. I often used them to get a base tan before going on holiday, because we all believed that we would look after our skin better if we got a base tan before going abroad. As the hon. Lady said, that is a total fallacy. Has the Minister therefore made any assessment of how many young people know the risks of sunbed use, and does he have any plan to address the issue?

All the Government information on sunbed use dates back to 2009 and 2010, despite more relevant information being published since. For example, the WHO published a 2017 report entitled “Artificial Tanning Devices: Public Health Interventions to Manage Sunbeds”. The IARC also assessed UV-emitting tanning devices as “carcinogenic to humans” based on consistent evidence of a positive association between their use and the incidence of melanoma.

As we have heard, melanoma is on the increase in the UK, and it is estimated that the NHS will spend £465 million on treating skin cancer patients by 2025. I pay tribute to charities such as Melanoma UK and MelanomaMe., which was set up in my constituency in 2017 when opening an awareness event for them in Sunderland—after one of them suffered from melanoma in 2017 when opening an awareness event for them in Sunderland—and does he have any plan to address the issue?

The Minister knows how strongly I feel that the Government have an obligation to prevent cancers, and I know he is passionate about doing so. That is why I believe that the Government must look at sunbed regulations again, to assess whether they need to be updated almost 10 years on since they were first published. It must be a priority for the Government to ensure that people know the risks of sunbed use before using them, as well as during and after their use. For example,
people are told that smoking is harmful before they take it up, but guidance does not disappear once they have started smoking or even once they have stopped. Even though they may carry on smoking, everyone who smokes will admit to knowing the health risks. We are not at that stage with sunbed use.

It is easy to shrug off health warnings when it comes to sunbed use, because the symptoms of skin damage may not appear for up to 20 years. However, skin damage can have very serious implications, as we have heard, so the warnings must not be shrugged off. The hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire called for a ban on sunbeds across the UK, like in Australia and other countries. Although I can see why she calls for a ban, I feel that we must first allow the Government to look at all the most recent evidence and make an assessment. They should definitely update the regulations if necessary and ensure that younger generations are made aware, at the earliest stage, of the risks of sunbed use.

As I said at the beginning of my speech, this issue was very much in the public consciousness almost 10 years ago, and perhaps it is time to ensure that it is again. I am sure the Minister will take on board all that he has heard this morning, and I look forward to his response.

10.10 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hosie. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) very much. We use the term “hon. Friend” a lot in this place, but she knows that she is my very good friend as well as my hon. Friend. Well done to her for securing the debate.

I was interested to hear the word search statistic from my shadow, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson). It was very interesting, but not all surprising. The hon. Lady and I spend a lot of time in Westminster Hall, but this is not an issue that we have covered before, although we have obviously covered cancer a lot. This issue affects so many people’s lives. We heard from my good and hon. Friend about her family and the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West said, it was very good to hear that she herself has managed to deal with it successfully.

I do not know about other hon. Members, but sunbeds feel very 1980s to me. As someone who was at secondary school in the 1980s, I thought that they had been left behind there, because we do not hear much about them these days, but it occurs to me that there is a large sunbed salon in my constituency of Winchester. There is a reason why the 1980s came into my mind. Hon. Members may remember an episode of “Only Fools and Horses” called “Tea for Three.” The infamous character Trigger has a niece whom Del and Rodney set out to remember from her much younger years and who comes to stay with Trigger for a period. The niece, Lisa, is now 25 and—well, let’s just say that she has matured into a very attractive young lady. Del and Rodney set out to impress her, both thinking that they have a chance. I remember the episode well, and the reason why it is relevant to the debate is that Rodney decides to lie on the sunbed in the flat at Nelson Mandela House to improve his look for young Lisa and falls asleep. Del then turns up the dial, and Rodney spends the rest of the episode with a bright red face—in many ways. It is interesting that tanning was portrayed in that sitcom as a technique to attract the ladies. It backfired, as everything seemed to, on poor Rodney, but it was interesting how it was used and it explains why I connect sunbeds with the 1980s. As we have heard today, however, sunbeds and their impact are very much current phenomena.

As my hon. Friend is keenly aware, there are huge health consequences from exposure to both natural and artificial ultraviolet radiation. The most significant is of course skin cancer, which we have talked about, but there are other impacts, such as sunburn, which is very unpleasant and uncomfortable, accelerated skin ageing—the “prune” factor that we have discussed—eye inflammation, which my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) mentioned, and temporary immunosuppression. Importantly, though, there are measures that we all know we can take to reduce the impact of exposure to UV radiation from the sun, such as using sunscreen and seeking shade. Equally, there are many precautions that should be taken when using sunbeds, such as only using a staffed facility that provides guidance to users and limiting regular use of a sunbed. I will come on to those two points. Younger people who use sunbeds are at greater risk, which is why in 2011, regulations were introduced banning the use of sunbeds by under-18s in England and Wales, as we have heard.

Melanoma skin cancer is one of the most common cancers in the UK today. About 15,500 new cases of melanoma are diagnosed each year and more than 2,000 people die every year in the UK from melanoma. In recent years, skin cancer has become much more common in the UK, which is thought to be the result of increased exposure to intense sunlight on holidays abroad. Many people these days can afford foreign holidays, which come with much fun but also many dangers. It is worth noting that more than one quarter of skin cancer cases are diagnosed in people under 50, which is unusually early compared with most other types of cancer. Cancer Research UK estimates that 86% of skin cancers are preventable. I often say in Westminster Hall debates—my shadow will have heard me say this many times—that two thirds of cancers are down to bad luck and one third of cancers are preventable. When we consider the high percentage of skin cancers that are preventable, we realise that this is an area where we can move the dial in the prevention space. That is why I am interested in today’s debate and so grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire for initiating it.

My hon. Friend referred to the many people who would not have skin cancer if they had not used sunbeds. It is difficult to be certain about how many cases of skin cancer are due to sunbed use, as most people will also have had natural exposure to UV from the sun. Obviously, there are a few people who have skin conditions that mean that they must remain 100% covered up or who do not go outside, for other health reasons. It is vital—my hon. Friend made this point very well, as did others—that the public are fully aware of the risk from their overall exposure to UV and how to minimise the risks.

We have not mentioned vitamin D much in this debate. Vitamin D is a hormone that is very important in musculoskeletal health, and vitamin D synthesis is triggered in the skin through exposure to UVB, including...
from sunbeds. However, we do not advise people to use sunbeds to enhance vitamin D levels, because any beneficial effect of increased vitamin D synthesis is outweighed by the adverse effects that we have heard about in the debate. We recommend alternative sources of vitamin D, such as dietary supplements.

Public Health England, for which I am responsible, discourages the use of sunbeds for cosmetic tanning, and rightly so. Those individuals who have very fair skin, who burn easily in the sun—I think of the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) when I say that, and it certainly applies to me—or who have had skin cancer previously would be at increased risk and obviously are advised not to use a sunbed. This is the point that the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) made about the race that we are and the part of the world in which we live.

The Be Clear on Cancer campaigns, which Public Health England leads on behalf of the Government, are designed to raise the public’s awareness of specific cancer symptoms, encourage people with those symptoms to go to the doctor, and promote the diagnosis of cancer at an early stage. We are about to roll out the next iteration of the Be Clear on Cancer campaign, about cervical cancer, on which there was a big debate in this Chamber last month, and we have had the campaign on breast cancer in the past. It is fair to say that there is no shortage of applications for the next iteration of Be Clear on Cancer. And often we are limited in what we can do in those campaigns in relation to the impact that people would then be driven into the health service. However, one of the things that I will take away from this debate is that it would be well worth my placing on the radar of the Be Clear on Cancer team melanoma and skin cancers generally for the campaign as we roll it forward. That will hopefully be one positive outcome from the debate.

It is critical—it is important that Health Ministers say this at the Dispatch Box—that people are aware of their skin. They need to be skin aware—in the same way as so many women have, hopefully, been trained to be breast aware—and to seek advice from their GP if they notice any changes, particularly in terms of moles that itch, bleed or change shape. I remember being taught as a youngster and I wonder whether the younger generation are still as aware of that health message, but Be Clear on Cancer is something that we can look to with hope.

Let me touch on regulation. The Sunbeds (Regulation) Act 2010 came into force in April 2011 in England and Wales, as has been mentioned, to prohibit under-18s from using sunbeds. Restrictions on sunbed use by under-18s also apply in Scotland and in Northern Ireland. Guidance has been provided to support local authorities’ responsibility for monitoring and inspecting sunbed salons everywhere, except those situated in local authority leisure centres, which are regulated by the Health and Safety Executive. It is worth making that distinction.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire talked about banning sunbeds. Should they be banned? A range of options to minimise the adverse effects of sunbeds has been considered. Public Health England has contributed to the most recent World Health Organisation review, published in 2017, on the public health interventions to manage sunbeds. Banning sunbeds was one option under consideration, but the adverse impacts need to be considered carefully to avoid unintended consequences, such as increased use of home machines—like Del and Rodney had—with more harmful impacts.

We have to be aware of the unintended consequences. One of the unintended consequences of banning the use of commercial sunbeds by under-18s was the opening of a market for home hire of second-hand sunbed equipment and sunbed parties—believe it or not. I have been to many parties in my time, but I have yet to be invited to a sunbed party. The mind boggles—it is probably best to leave it there. My swimming trunks have not had an outing for years, but that is probably for the best. It is vital to equip people with the information to avoid the risks of over-exposure to UV radiation. In this way, we empower individuals to protect themselves from UV sources.

Before I address prevention, diagnosis and treatment, I will respond directly to my hon. Friend’s suggestion that sunbeds should be banned. I think we need to look at the regulations again, as the shadow Minister mentioned. They have not been changed for a number of years. My hon. Friend has brought this issue to this Chamber with great force, intelligence and evidence. Now is a good time because we have published the prevention strategy and we are working on a Green Paper on prevention. I am interested in any and every idea that is related to prevention.

As a Minister, I am often given papers by officials, and stuff to look at and sign off. However, in this process of preparing the Green Paper on prevention I can say to my officials, “I want real blue-sky thinking here. I want you to look out into academia, to see where the really interesting and cutting-edge work is going on around prevention and future prevention.” This Green Paper process is really open-minded and based on open-source planning. If we look at the evidence and think that banning the commercial use of sunbeds, while taking into account the possible unintended consequences, could be part of prevention, I will not rule it out. I absolutely do not rule that out.

Wherever possible, the aim is to prevent skin cancer from developing in the first place. I met Melanoma UK at the Britain Against Cancer conference just before Christmas. It has a fantastic team, who I am sure have been very helpful to my hon. Friend ahead of today’s debate. I am proud to say that Public Health England and Melanoma UK have had great success in raising awareness of the risks, and the actions to take to reduce the risk of exposure to the sun and the use of sunbeds. The Health and Safety Executive plays a vital role in raising awareness through leaflets and posters, reflecting its guidance for tanning salons and their customers about the safe operation of sunbeds. My hon. Friend used many quotes from people who are engaged in this issue. One interesting quote was from the lady who runs a salon and said that she wants people to feel good about coming into her business, and that sending people away with a potentially life-threatening condition is not a good look for any business. That was an important point.

A tan may give you a so-called healthy glow. The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock pointed to the magazines and the media image: people always have
that healthy glow. However, I have never thought of a good tan as a healthy glow. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidance, published in February 2016, is clear that there is no healthy way to tan. The idea that there is such a thing as a healthy tan, as my hon. Friend said in her opening remarks, is a myth. Any tan can increase your risk of developing skin cancer, whether through natural or artificial UV, and getting a tan does very little to protect your skin from the harmful effects of the sun, which is my hon. Friend’s fundamental point.

NICE, NHS England and cancer charities, including Cancer Research UK and Macmillan, are all clear that if you want browner-looking skin, fake tan is the way to go. It is much safer to use a fake tan product on your skin than to sunbathe or use a sunbed. As the expression goes, “Fake it, don’t bake it”. I think that is what they say in the Department of Health and Social Care these days. I do not know whether you are aware of that, Mr Hosie.

I hope that I have covered a lot of the points that have been raised. I hope that I have demonstrated the Government’s commitment—my commitment—to improving outcomes for people in this country living with skin cancer, and the many more who are at real risk of developing this disease. The Government’s ambitions outlined in the long-term plan for the NHS, the Secretary of State’s prevention strategy, and the Green Paper will ensure that we strive to do even better over the next decade. In conclusion, I agree completely with the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk that, while we learn a lot in this place, there is a lot of repetition in many of the debates, but that this debate has not been one of those.

10.26 am

Mrs Latham: I thank the Minister for his thoughtful response. I hope that we can get something in the Be Clear on Cancer campaign and the Green Paper, because that would take us to the next stage. If we can prevent melanomas, it will obviously be a good thing. I thank the hon. Member for Rhondda, who talked about killing machines. Unfortunately, he is no longer in his place, as he has had to become a diplomat, educating the Germans to be diplomatic.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), and the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who all made thoughtful contributions. This issue does have a very 1980s feel, as the Minister illustrated with the good example from “Only Fools and Horses”. However, it is still happening.

The Minister said that education is very important. I support a campaign for “Sun Safe Schools” in Mid Derbyshire. We had a broadcaster who died in his early 30s from a melanoma—not from sunbeds. A lot of the money raised for him was spent in schools to make them sun-safe schools, where children learn an amazing little song about slipping on a T-shirt, slapping on a hat and slopping on sunscreen. It educates not just the children, but their parents: keep covered up and keep the sun cream on.

That did not happen in my day. When I was a child, there was no sun factor. We just put on Nivea, got burnt and put on camomile lotion after that. Today, there are options for people and it is important that we educate as many children as possible, because they will educate their parents. I actually challenge builders in the street if I see them without a top on, getting burnt, and ask them if they put on sunscreen. They are very polite, usually, about my intervention.

We need to keep talking about this issue, because I passionately feel that nobody should die from a melanoma. There are familial traits, but we need to educate as many people as possible about sunbed use and over-exposure to the sun, whether on the beach, in the countryside or in the back garden. If the Minister could include it in the Green Paper, it would be an excellent step forward.

However, I would still like not only a ban on sunbeds in commercial premises, but a total ban on the sale of sunbeds in this country. I know that is draconian, and I am not a great “banner” of things, but nobody needs a sunbed—they are not necessary to anybody’s life. I thank the Minister for his thoughtful response. I hope that this has moved the debate forward. Since it is 10 years since anything has happened on this issue, let us hope it is not another 10 years before we move forward again on this particular type of cancer.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the health implications of sunbed use.

10.29 am

Sitting suspended.
Education Funding: Cheshire

11 am
Ms Esther McVey ( Tatton) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered education funding in Cheshire.

It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, and I am grateful to the Minister for being present to respond to this important debate. I am also grateful to the Secretary of State for agreeing to meet headteachers in my constituency, and I am delighted to be joined by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), who share my concerns about this important matter—I know that there might not be enough time for my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton to make a full speech, because this is only a short debate. I also notice that friends from across the House are present, including the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson).

I acknowledge the support that has been provided nationally to date, including the £1 billion increase in funding, the extra support for teachers’ pay and pensions and for capital spend, and the increase in overall education funding since 2010. However, increases in costs are outstripping that extra funding, and there are discrepancies and differences in school funding in different parts of the country. The funding of Cheshire’s schools is, and will be, seriously negatively impacted by its geography, rurality and perceived needs, or lack of needs. We will explain some, and hopefully most, of the key issues in the time that we have, so that if the Minister does not have time to go through everything, he will be able to meet us and address those funding shortcomings.

First, Cheshire East Council is considering its three-year budget forecast to 2020-21 and its calculations for its maintained schools, and it says that by March 2021, 50% of maintained schools in the borough will be reporting a deficit in excess of £100,000. The total forecast deficit will equal £9.2 million—that is 10% of those schools’ funding—which will affect 38 schools in the borough. Cheshire’s national funding formula consultation identified cost increases of 8% from 2016-17 to 2019-20, but funding in Cheshire East has only increased by approximately 2%. As the lowest-funded authority, our schools already have lean budget plans, which makes addressing those pressures even more challenging than in other areas. The current national formula is shifting resources away from areas—such as Cheshire East—with relatively low deprivation levels, reducing basic funding levels and not leaving enough to run the schools.

Under those conditions, it is not possible in Cheshire East to meet the headline minimum per pupil levels in all cases. Where school deficits are exceeding £100,000, schools will have to look at reorganising, whether that means creating federations or possibly closing. That will not meet the needs of families and children in Cheshire East, because the money will be diverted into transportation to get children to their schools. The pressures on special educational needs services continue to grow, particularly given the contribution of £6,000 that schools need to make. I have been told that because of that contribution, some schools might refuse to take children with special educational needs, or that schools that are all-inclusive and do accept those pupils will face an extra strain on their budget.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Presumably, the right hon. Lady was sitting at the Cabinet table in July when the latest school funding formula was discussed. I do not know whether she made representations to the Chancellor at the time, or even pressed the Cabinet for a vote, as there are well-documented claims that she did in the case of Brexit. We share some of her analysis of school funding cuts, but this matters when it comes to the Division Lobby, and in the right hon. Lady’s case, when it comes to her collective responsibility as a member of the Cabinet.

Ms McVey: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the fact that the extra £1 billion was put in place was particularly due to the pressure applied by my hon. Friend the Members for Congleton and for Eddisbury. As I only returned to the House at the 2017 election, I too applied pressure, because I think it is vital that schools get the money they need for education. For me, education is one of the key building blocks of social mobility that every child needs, so I did indeed make sure that we pressed for further funding. I would like that to be on the record.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the pressure that was put on by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton and myself, and indeed by other hon. Members who met with the Minister to ensure that a minimum level of funding was applied, resulted from the particular problems in Cheshire East and Cheshire West and Chester? Does she also agree that those problems are linked to the formula by which rurality is calculated, which is as the crow flies, rather than as the car or bus travels?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is correct in what she says and in the work that she has done. I am glad that I have entered the House again, enabling me to unite with my friends and push these important points.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Ms McVey: If the hon. Lady does not mind, I will continue a little bit further, because I do not have much time. This is only a 30-minute debate, and I know the Minister has to respond, so I want to raise a couple of key points about Cheshire West and Chester. However, I know that the hon. Lady has done a lot in this area, and has a lot of knowledge about it.

The key challenge in Cheshire West and Chester is that it is funded below the average of all local authorities, due to the emphasis in the national funding formula on funding areas of deprivation and areas with higher living costs. Under that formula, Cheshire West and Chester is funded at the minimal level of funding for all local authorities for early years provision, meaning provision for three and four-year-olds. In 2018-19 and 2019-20, Cheshire West and Chester has received the minimum 0.5% increase in school core funding, but in the same period, local government officers’ payment bills have increased by 5.6% and teachers’ pay costs have increased above the anticipated public sector pay cap. Spending is outstripping the funding that is going into that area, and as a result, Cheshire’s primary schools are now 44% less funded than London’s primary schools and its secondary schools are 49% less funded than in London.
My key questions to the Minister are as follows. Will he commit to look again at rural funding and address the discrepancy? Does he accept that the increase in costs is outstripping the increase in funding? Will he provide support when local authorities have to use independent schools to meet specific needs? Will he support Cheshire in creating additional special educational needs places, and provide capital investment to enable that to happen? Will he also look at the apprenticeship levy and whether it needs to be applied to schools, and if that is the case, make sure that the levy can be used in a wider context—maybe training, rather than just apprenticeships? Will he ensure that in the forthcoming spending review, he applies for more funds for the Cheshire area, now that he understands the discrepancies in funding in that area?

As I said, although we appreciate the money that has come in, when we look at how that money is filtering through, we see that there are still needs. Additionally, given the increase in housing and development in the Cheshire area that we all know about, considerably more pupils will be wanting to go to school. There are more children with needs in that area, including complex needs, and more demands are being placed on the local authorities of Cheshire East and Cheshire West and Chester. I appreciate that the Minister might not be able to give a full response to those questions today, but will he agree to a subsequent meeting, so that we can all work together to make sure that our area gets the right funding for its children?

11.9 am

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Ms McVey) for allowing me to contribute to the debate, which we applied for jointly.

Before the debate, I wrote to every primary and high school headteacher in my constituency. All seven senior school headteachers, whether in free schools, academies or multi-academy trusts, sent a collective response stating that they cannot remember morale being so low, the main reason being the lack of funding into schools, and that standards—high in Cheshire East—will be adversely affected.

The heads asked me to bring four key messages to Parliament. I will quote their words, which are strong:

“The Government must stop misleading the country by stating that record amounts are being spent on education when”, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, since 2010, in Cheshire East “the amount spent per child has fallen in real terms by 8%.”

Secondly, they say:

“The Government must commit to an index linked approach to the national formula so that all schools are able to deal with changes that are outside of their control, such as increased employer NI and pension contributions”, as well as underfunded pay awards and other cost pressures. They say that there has been a 10% rise in staff costs in our schools since 2017 alone. Their third and fourth points are:

“The Government must demonstrate that every school in the country will gain enough funding via the Age Weighted Pupil Unit to run a school regardless of the characteristics of its pupils. The Government should provide a long-term commitment to educational funding in a similar manner to the National Health Service.”

A major issue, say the heads, is that schools go from year to year with no annual Government statements or decisions about school funding, so there is no long-term planning. That makes it impossible for heads to plan or budget for the future. I have known most of them for many years and, dedicated as they are, it is remarkable that they carry on under the relentless pressure they experience year on year. One says: “the role of the Head Teacher is becoming an impossible responsibility to fulfil, due to significant constraints on the financial viability of schools.”

To quote the seven heads again, “school finances in Cheshire East are in a terrible state, despite the NFF promises made in July 2017.”

The Schools Minister knows that that was when funding of £4,800 per secondary school pupil was announced as a result, as we have heard, of a sustained campaign by headteachers, including those in my constituency. In Cheshire East, however, the heads tell me that they are not receiving £4,800. Instead, they receive: £4,018 for every key stage 3 child, £4,804 for every key stage 4 child and £3,971 for every key stage 5 child. That represents a reduction of 1% each year since 2014. Overall expenditure on school sixth forms has fallen in real terms by 16.3% since 2014. Funding for 16 to 19-year-olds is now 21% lower than funding for 11 to 16-year-olds, which makes it very difficult to run a broad sixth-form curriculum.

What is the impact of such figures on our schools? The heads state:

“Pastoral support…cut or removed at a time when the need is greater than ever…Class sizes have increased to unmanageable numbers and teacher contact ratios have been increased…over what is acceptable. SEN needs of pupils are not being met as they should. Courses have been cut, especially at KS5…denying many young people the opportunity to study what they want to. The potential closure of multiple post-16 institutions across Cheshire East…Schools are having to continually restructure at all levels…to save money”, reducing support for young people and staff year after year. Many schools have recently undergone ICFP—integrated curriculum financial planning—reviews, as recommended by the Government. The independent advisers said they cannot see where any savings can be made without the impacts I have just listed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley) also continues to work hard to support schools in his constituency. As a Minister, he is not able to participate in the debate, but I am grateful to him for having organised a meeting, as a local MP, with the Secretary of State. Before his ministerial appointment, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton, my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antooinette Sandbach) and I were able to discuss with him the important issue of school funding.

I turn now to primary schools. Many heads wrote to me—to many to quote them all, so I will quote just some:

“Finding it impossible to balance our budget.”

“Costs continue to escalate outside of our control from NI increases, regrading for Living Wage, national pay rises for teachers and non-teaching staff, local government pension increases, cost of energy and utilities, and general inflationary pressures.”
“If a child starts my school after the first week in October, I will receive no funding for them until 22 months later.”

“SEND Funding... is made up of a number of proxy factors, but 25% of this is deprivation. Just because you may have special needs, it doesn’t mean you’re deprived and... just because you’re deprived doesn’t mean you’re special needs... The current formula makes a postcode lottery out of special needs funding.”

“In 2019-20 in Cheshire East... 39 out of 124 primaries will get less than last year, 31% of primaries will lose an average of 3-4%. The very small schools, such as rural schools, suffer further losses: 8 out of 16 small schools will get less than last year, with an average loss of over 8%.”

“The whole NFF formula needs to be revised... and... in Cheshire East schools actually receive just £2,928 for every primary aged child”—not the £3,500 that they should get. Another head said:

“Funding for SEN is now at crisis point in Cheshire East.”

I want to finish with the comments of a new head, which moved me deeply:

“As a new Head, I have been overwhelmed by the constraints of our budget... We are particularly struggling with support for pupils with additional needs... support from the SEND Team at County has been limited because they are overspent and cannot afford to meet children’s needs... Services such as Special Needs, Safeguarding and Looked After are overspent and cannot offer the support and guidance that school and families need... The lack of funding in education in Cheshire is causing great hardship... It is heartbreaking to be supporting a child who needs alternative provision and to have to explain to their parents that there is nothing more you can do... If we don’t support our more complex children, we risk pupils being hurt, property being broken, and learning disrupted... We have a number of children suffering with mental health issues, and are witnessing self-harm”—this is at primary-school age. They continued:

“We frequently find Health and Safety issues, but are unable to correct them because we don’t have the funds... I am also concerned that talented staff will leave the profession.”

I note that the petition for a longer debate on fairer funding had been signed by 1,424 of my constituents as of this morning. That is 1.5% of them. I will of course speak again in that debate on 4 March, because I have much more to relate from my teachers, but time does not permit today.

11.18 am

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, I think for the first time.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Ms McVeey) on securing the debate. I pay tribute to her and to my hon. Friends the Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) for the way in which they have, over the past few years, brought the issue of school funding in their area to the Department, to me personally and to the Secretary of State. If I may say so, they have had a significant influence on the way in which the national funding formula has been implemented—

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): And the rest!

Laura Smith: Will the Minister give way?

Nick Gibb: I will not give way, because of time, but I was about to say that Opposition Members have also brought the issues to the Department’s attention. I pay tribute to them, too, and to other hon. Friends who are not present at the debate.

This Government are determined to create a world-class education system that allows every child to achieve their potential, regardless of where they are or where they live. As well as improving standards and supporting teachers, we are investing money in our schools and helping them to make the most out of every pound they receive. We are also delivering on our promise to make funding fairer. The introduction of the national funding formula, the biggest reform of the school funding system for a decade, means that we are now directing money where it is most needed, based on schools’ and pupils’ needs and characteristics.

I want to start by emphasising the significant progress we are already making towards creating a world-class education system, thanks in part to our reforms: the attainment gap between rich and poor is shrinking; the proportion of pupils in good or outstanding schools has increased from 66% in 2010 to 84% now; and our primary school children have achieved their highest ever score on international reading tests. We have also launched 12 opportunity areas to drive improvement in parts of the country that we know can do better.

Antoinette Sandbach: The Minister mentioned the improvement in standards. One example is the Sound and District Primary School, which improved the proportion of pupils achieving at key stage 2 from 70% in 2017 to 83% in 2018. Will the Minister deal with the suggestions about the index-linked approach and the age-weighted pupil unit funding that is the core of funding for every school, regardless of its particular characteristics, which my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton raised?

Nick Gibb: I will come to that point. I am sure other hon. Members would like to raise that as well.

To support the improvements in standards, and because children get only one chance of a great education, the Government have prioritised school spending, even while having to make difficult decisions on public spending in other areas. We have invested an extra £1.3 billion across 2018-19 and 2019-20, as referred to by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton, over and above existing plans set out in the previous spending review, so core funding for schools and high needs will rise from almost £41 billion in 2017 to £43.5 billion in 2019-20. Figures from the Institute for Fiscal Studies show that real terms per pupil funding for five to 16-year-olds in 2020 will be more than 50% higher than it was in 2000.

We can compare ourselves favourably with other countries. The UK spends as much per pupil on primary and secondary state education as any major economy in the world, apart from the United States of America. Although there is more money going into our schools than ever before, we absolutely recognise the budgeting challenges that schools face, and we acknowledge that we are asking schools to do more. That makes it all the more important that we do everything to ensure that we get the best out of every pound that we provide. One aspect of that is ensuring that that money is directed where it is most needed.

For the first time last April, funding was distributed to local authorities based on the individual needs and characteristics of every school in the country, not accidents of geography or history, as had been the case in the previous system, when schools with similar characteristics
received very different levels of funding with little or no justification. Those disparities had persisted and grown for nearly a decade and left some schools and areas unable to get the resources they needed. That is why our commitment to reform the unfair, opaque and outdated schools and high needs funding systems was so important. I am very pleased to say that our introduction of the national funding formula delivers on that commitment.

Schools are already benefiting from the gains delivered by the national funding formula. Since 2017, we have given every local authority more money for every pupil in every school, while allocating the biggest increases to the schools that have been most underfunded. By 2019-20, all schools will attract an increase of at least 1% per pupil compared with their 2017-18 baselines, and the most underfunded schools will attract up to 6% more per pupil by 2019-20, compared with 2017-18. On average, schools in Cheshire East, including in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton, will receive gains of 2.4% per pupil by next year, compared with 2017-18. That will mean an extra £10.4 million in total when rising pupil numbers are also factored in. On high needs, last December we announced that we will provide £250 million of additional funding across England over this financial year and the next. In Cheshire East, it means the local authority will receive an additional £1.6 million across this year and next, on top of the increases that were already promised.

We recognise, as I have said, the challenges faced by the lowest funded schools. We heard throughout the consultation, particularly from stakeholders in Cheshire East—I remember meeting headteachers that Members brought to the office—that we could do more to support schools that attract the lowest pupil funding. We listened carefully and have included minimum per pupil funding levels in the formula to guarantee that every school attracts a minimum amount of funding for every pupil, regardless of whether they have children with additional needs.

I am pleased that the council representing Cheshire East has chosen to use the transitional minimum of £3,300 for primary and £4,600 for secondary schools in its local formula in 2018-19. In 2019-20, the formula will provide for at least £4,800 per pupil in every secondary school and £3,500 for every primary. In Cheshire East, secondary schools in particular benefit from this measure with around half of secondary schools attracting extra funding as a result. We have not limited gains for schools benefiting from those minimum funding levels.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton also raised the issue of rural schools. The national funding formula includes support for small schools, especially those in rural areas. It provides a lump sum of £110,000 for every school as a contribution to the costs that do not vary with pupil numbers, and that gives schools certainty that they will attract a fixed amount each year. The sparsity factor in the formula allocates additional funding of £25 million specifically to schools that are both small and remote. This year, seven schools in my right hon. Friend’s constituency attracted a combined total of £133,000 in sparsity funding. 1

As for schools in Cheshire East that do not attract such funding either because they are not among the smallest schools nationally or they are not far enough apart to meet the distance threshold—something my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury raised—we have been clear that we want all schools to operate as efficiently as possible, and there is scope for rural schools in close proximity to work together to get the best value from their resources. None the less—this will please my hon. Friend—we keep the formula design under consideration and will consider feedback on specific factors when developing the formula. In particular, we appreciate that the straight-line distances used to determine eligibility for sparsity funding might not always be appropriate, given local geography, and we are considering how to refine the methodology for calculating sparsity eligibility in future. In the meantime, local authorities can submit a request to vary how distance is measured for sparsity funding allocations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton also raised sixth-form funding. We recognise the pressure that post-16 funding has been under and we have protected the base rate of funding for all 16 to 19-year-olds until 2020. Our commitment to the 16 to 19 sector has contributed to the current record high proportions of 16 to 17-year-olds who are participating in education or apprenticeships. We are also providing additional funding to support institutions to grow participation in level 3 maths. Institutions will receive an extra £600 for every additional student from next year.

I also recognise that protecting the base rate in cash terms means that funding per student has not kept pace with inflation, and we will look carefully at 16 to 19 funding in preparation for the next spending review. I hope that gives some assurance to my hon. Friends.

**Fiona Bruce:** I appreciate what the Minister is saying, but the issue is not only about pupils coming to the end of their time at school. Primary school heads have told me that the base figure of £3,500, which they do not receive, will simply not cover their costs. They say the base cost to run a primary school and serve their pupils is £4,060, so they make the point that the base figure is now insufficient.

**Nick Gibb:** I understand the representation that my hon. Friend makes. She is, as always, assiduous, as are my other hon. Friends and Opposition Members. We have to make difficult decisions. We introduced that minimum amount to tackle particular problems highlighted by headteachers from Cheshire, and we keep the issues under review.

We understand that the national funding formula represents a big change to the funding system and that schools need stability. To ensure that there is a smooth transition, we have confirmed that, for the next two years, local authorities will continue to be responsible for setting school budgets at a local level, in consultation with their schools. This flexibility will help to ensure that the transition to the formula takes place in a way that best meets the needs of local schools and pupils. Many local authorities are moving closer and closer to the national funding formula, and 112 authorities, including authorities in Cheshire, have introduced a minimum per pupil funding level factor in their local formula. I am very pleased that so many authorities across the country are showing such strong support for the national funding formula.

I thank all Members in this debating Chamber today for their contributions to this very important debate.

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).*

11.30 am

**Sitting suspended.**
Human Rights in the UK

[Mike Gapes in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I beg to move.

That this House has considered human rights in the UK.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes, I think for the first time. I am delighted to have the opportunity to introduce today’s debate.

Over the last few years, particularly since we began our Brexit journey, we have discussed human rights in the United Kingdom and the potential consequences for them were this country to leave the European Union. A number of colleagues, most notably my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), have sought assurances from Ministers that human rights protection in the United Kingdom would not be in any way diminished as a result of that process. By and large, those assurances have been given.

Why, therefore, is it appropriate to discuss this matter again? There are three reasons. First, we have moved on in the Brexit process. We now have a draft political declaration that seeks to define the relationship this country would wish to have with the other 27 members after it leaves the European Union—if, indeed, it does.

Secondly, the Government are led by someone who could hardly be described as absolute in her commitment to the current human rights legislative framework in this country. When the Prime Minister was Home Secretary, she sought to undermine the Human Rights Act 1998 by suggesting that it was in some way soft on terrorists. She was, in her words, no majority in Parliament for doing so. One wonders what her position might be were the majority in Parliament to change.

Thirdly, the Conservative party was elected on a manifesto that pledged that the HRA would not be repealed “while the process of Brexit is underway”.

Who am I to guess whether the Brexit process is nearing the endgame or not? It certainly looks likely that, in 2019, it will get to the final stages, and we may or may not leave the European Union. The question therefore arises: what would the governing party’s policy be on repeal of the HRA once the Brexit process has been completed or at least got to the position of being implemented? For all those reasons, the central purpose of today’s debate is to seek an assurance from the Minister that there will be no attempt to repeal, undermine, weaken or amend the provisions of the Human Rights Act 1998.

I often feel that our discussions on human rights can become somewhat abstract and go over the heads of the ordinary man or woman in the street. It is important that we state clearly why human rights are so central to everything we believe in. In essence, human rights are an expression of what we mean by civilisation. They define how individuals should act towards one another. They confer respect and dignity on the individual. Crucially, as well as setting standards for the behaviour that we expect from others, they set obligations on how we ought to behave towards others. I would argue that the existence of human rights is central to our wellbeing as a healthy and dynamic society.

It has been rightly suggested that few people ever think about their human rights; they certainly do not feel the need to go to court to have them upheld. I doubt if more than a tiny percentage of the population even know of someone who has gone to court on a human rights matter. That in itself suggests how powerful and useful the legislative framework is. The central point of human rights legislation is not to allow people to seek redress if their rights are infringed, but to protect people in the first place from others doing bad things to them. The fact that there is so little court activity in this field vindicates the view that the system is working.

Of course, there are cases where the system does not work and people feel the need to have their rights upheld. It is interesting to refer to a few of those, so that we, and the public, can understand how central these matters are. Celia Peachey did not think that the Human Rights Act related to her at all. Her mother was killed at the hands of a violent partner. She tried for years to get the police to do something about it, but could not persuade them to intervene. After her mother died, she was able to use the Human Rights Act to secure an inquest, which returned a verdict of unlawful killing and criticised the police for refusing to take action despite her representations.

The Driscolls were an elderly couple who depended on each other for care and support to go about their daily lives. When Mr Driscoll was rehoused in a residential care home, his wife was not allowed to live with him. They used the article in the Human Rights Act on the right to a family life to argue that they should be rehoused together, and they won and were rehoused as a couple. That was of benefit not only to them; they set a precedent, and in such cases it is now normal to consider rehousing elderly couples together.

Members will know of the case of Gary McKinnon, a young man with Asperger’s who allegedly hacked into a National Aeronautics and Space Administration computer database and who was wanted by the United States of America. They tried to extradite him, but could not persuade the US to do something about it, but could not persuade them to intervene. After her mother died, she was able to use the Human Rights Act to secure an inquest, which returned a verdict of unlawful killing and criticised the police for refusing to take action despite her representations.

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had happened to them, and their complaints were not investigated at the time. After the case came to prominence, they used the Human Rights Act to get an inquiry into how the police had dealt with their complaints. It found that they had not done so correctly. The police were reprimanded, and the victims received compensation as a result of that use of the Human Rights Act.

Many people will know of the continuing campaign of the families of those who died in the Hillsborough disaster to seek justice for their loved ones. They have repeatedly used the Human Rights Act over the last 20 years to move their cases forward.

The final example I will give is that of people trying to get redress against public authorities—particularly health authorities, such as the Mid Staffordshire NHS hospital trust. I do not want to go into detail about the sad state of affairs in that institution; suffice it to say that 119 families have used the Human Rights Act to seek redress for the treatment they received from that hospital. Those are all important uses of the Act. Often, they quite literally make the difference between life and death, and are central to the quality of life of our citizens.

Let me turn to the implications of Brexit for the protections in the Human Rights Act. I have already discussed the wording of the political declaration with respect to the European convention on human rights, but in a sense I have to wonder why it is even an issue. The ECHR is the creature not of the European Union, but of the Council of Europe—an organisation to which this country subscribes and that involves 47 European countries, 40% of which are not members of the European Union—so one wonders why this is even being talked about in the context of Brexit.

It has been suggested that a commitment to the ECHR, if taken seriously, is in some ways a hindrance to the process of government and that it prevents the Government from acting freely. Some people on the extreme wings of the Brexit movement would suggest that it means foreign interference with the ability of an independent United Kingdom to do whatever it wants. Well, it is a good hindrance, because it obliges us to conform to international norms of civilisation to which most people throughout the world subscribe.

In terms of complaints under the ECHR and judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, the United Kingdom actually has a very good record: it is right down at the bottom of the list of countries having cases lodged against them. Our association with the Court and with the processes upholding the convention should not be seen as some sort of hindrance; it is a vindication of the fact that this country is actually quite good at upholding human rights when it comes to how things are governed.

There is a concern that one reason behind the debate on revisiting human rights legislation may be a desire to free up the United Kingdom for international trading arrangements post-Brexit—the International Trade Secretary is not doing that well at signing us up to them, but I am sure more will come on the agenda in time. It is important that we say at the outset that we are not prepared to accept any trade-off in human rights standards from third-party countries as part of securing trade agreements. Surely we need to be seen as a country that not only upholds its own human rights standards, but uses its power and authority to ensure that such standards are upheld internationally. I therefore ask the Minister, first, to confirm that there is no intention to diminish current protections, and, secondly, to explore how in a post-Brexit scenario—if indeed that comes about—human rights will be protected not just in this country but around the world.

One problem is that we are talking about something that, to some extent, has already happened. Last summer, in debates on the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, the Government were keen to ensure that the EU charter of fundamental rights would not be included in British legislation, despite opposition from my party and many others. Their case was that including the charter would be unnecessary duplication, since all the individual rights in it were replicated elsewhere. That was not quite true—some rights in the charter are not in the ECHR—but, in any case, it missed the main point: the charter’s purpose was not just to define people’s rights, but to create obligations on EU member states regarding how those rights would be upheld and, in particular, to assert their primacy over other legislation.

Jason Coppel QC’s advice to the Equality and Human Rights Commission cites a 2017 case of cleaners in the Sudanese embassy who had tried to go to court to uphold their employment rights but had been told that, under the State Immunity Act 1978, foreign embassies were exempt from employment claims. They used the charter to go to court and to argue and win their case that their employment rights and human rights at work are more important than the 1978 Act, which should be set aside to ensure their rights. The tragedy is that if we exit the European Union at 11 pm on 29 March, the charter will be gone, so those cleaners would not be able to bring such a case. That is a diminution of people’s rights.

It is important not to be complacent about this, so we need to look at ways of strengthening and developing the application of human rights in our country. To that end, I want to say something about the situation in Scotland, because developments there can provide some leadership to the United Kingdom and the other nations in it. The Human Rights Act is a reserved matter, but the European convention on human rights, which the Act enshrines, is fundamental to the devolution settlement in Scotland and Wales and to the Good Friday agreement in Northern Ireland. Scottish Ministers are required to comply with the ECHR in everything they do. For that reason—and for the simple reason that upholding most people’s human rights has an awful lot to do with the day-to-day processes of government—the Scottish Government are keen to look at how human rights can be developed and incorporated into Scots law.

Just before Christmas, the First Minister’s advisory group on human rights leadership, chaired by Professor Alan Miller, published a very good report, which I commend to colleagues. It sets an agenda for taking things forward over the next five years and sets out three central principles in the context of Brexit. The first, which I have already mentioned, is that there should be no regression in human rights protections as a result of Brexit. The second, which we do not often talk much about, is that we need to keep pace with any improvements in human rights protections in the European Union. That is a matter of having policies to ensure that this country does not lag behind the EU27, or indeed
the Council of Europe. The third is how to make it real—how to integrate human rights protections into the very processes of government.

The report splits human rights into categories, of which the most familiar is civil and political rights such as the right to life, the right to vote or the right to free expression. Those rights are central to the ECHR and the Human Rights Act, but there is a whole other dimension of human rights that is essential to defining the nature of our society: social and economic rights, such as the right to health, the right to shelter or the right to work. The report is instructive in how it takes forward the debate; rather than describing those rights as abstract principles or objectives to attain, it examines how to shape Government policy towards their delivery.

I am happy to debate the point, because colleagues from the libertarian right may be able to put an alternative point of view, but, to my mind, delivering social and economic rights has to address the question of regulating resources in society. Essentially, such rights are about a fair allocation and sharing of resources between people. That does not mean that it is the Government’s responsibility to provide everybody with the keys to a three-bedroom house, but it does mean that the Government ought to be responsible for ensuring that there is a housing public policy framework with the objective that everyone should be adequately housed. In cases where regulation or the market fail to achieve that objective, the Government should also be responsible for ensuring safety-net provision of basic shelter. To test whether Government policy is delivering those rights, we need to ensure that the notion of human rights is integrated into Government at all levels.

There is much that can be learned from the debate in Scotland, so perhaps the Minister could comment on it, and on whether such a debate could happen in the United Kingdom as a whole. Human rights cannot be seen as an add-on or afterthought to Government policy; they need to be central to it at all levels. In future debates on the subject, rather than having a reply from a Justice Minister, perhaps it would be more fitting to have one from a Cabinet Office Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister or even the Prime Minister, because human rights need to be driven into every aspect of Government policy. They should not be seen as the concern only of lawyers or legal departments; they should be central to how we do the business of Government.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): Order. I am conscious that several Members wish to speak. I intend to move to the Front-Bench spokespeople at 3.28 pm, so I advise Members that they will have to be relatively concise if everyone is to speak. I call John Howell.

2.50 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes, and a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), who is a fellow member of the Council of Europe. I understand and agree with a lot of what he said.

The European convention on human rights has been around since the early 1950s, and it is worth remembering that it was 1965 when we agreed to abide by the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights in the UK. We have had almost 60 years of a relationship with the European Court of Human Rights and its decisions.

I start by making the point that the convention is not the same as the Human Rights Act, and the European Union is not the same as the Council of Europe. The two are very different and we should take them as such. I have a lot of time for the convention, and I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman said about it. I was particularly irritated during the referendum campaign that a lot of people got the ECHR confused with the European Court of Justice. The two are completely separate. One is owned by the European Union and the other by the Council of Europe.

I would go on to say that the single biggest contribution to peace in Europe since the end of the second world war has come from the European convention on human rights, together with the work that NATO has done. We should state that, and we should be proud of it, because we have been very much involved in it from the beginning. As the hon. Gentleman and I know only too well, the European Court of Human Rights comes with a democratic mandate. I imagine the hon. Gentleman spends a lot of time, as I do, voting for the judges who are nominated to sit on the European Court of Human Rights. That gives democratic control and is also a means of reflecting, to some extent, the mixture of politics, competence and a whole number of other matters that give the European Court of Human Rights its character.

I am not as enamoured of the EU’s involvement with human rights, which I think has created a very mixed picture. If I am not using the term wrongly, I think that too many people got the ECHR confused with the European Court of Justice and its decisions. I have a lot of time for the convention, and I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman said about it. I was particularly irritated during the referendum campaign that a lot of people got the ECHR confused with the European Court of Justice. The two are completely separate. One is owned by the European Union and the other by the Council of Europe.

There is much that can be learned from the debate in Scotland, so perhaps the Minister could comment on it, and on whether such a debate could happen in the United Kingdom as a whole. Human rights cannot be seen as an add-on or afterthought to Government policy; they need to be central to it at all levels. In future debates on the subject, rather than having a reply from a Justice Minister, perhaps it would be more fitting to have one from a Cabinet Office Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister or even the Prime Minister, because human rights need to be driven into every aspect of Government policy. They should not be seen as the concern only of lawyers or legal departments; they should be central to how we do the business of Government.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that there are countries across the world, such as South Africa with its new constitution and some Nordic countries, that have a right to adequate housing in their constitutions? Does he consider those to be socialist countries?

John Howell: When the EU decided to bring out its own human rights framework, it thought very carefully about what should be included, and it differs from the European Court of Human Rights on only a few exceptions.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The European convention on human rights was opened for signature in November 1950 in Rome, and the Government in this country was a Labour Government from 1945 to 1951. Will the hon. Gentleman praise the socialist Government under which the ECHR was originally conceived?
John Howell: The hon. Gentleman plays politics with human rights, which is unworthy of him and of this Chamber.

To return to the issue I was discussing—the success of the British Government with the European Court of Human Rights—about 90% of applications that come before the European Court of Human Rights are deemed unacceptable and are not taken forward. Of those that are taken forward, since 1975, the Court has found no violation in a quarter. Our track record is particularly successful.

I want to bring up two cases that illustrate the extremes. The first is that of the Gurkhas. Members may remember that a few years ago we moved their headquarters back to the UK and their pensions on to the same basis as UK soldiers. They took their case to the European Court of Human Rights, which decided that there had been no real discrimination against them, and found for the British Government.

In a slightly different case on the UK’s mass surveillance regime, which it uses as part of security operations, the Court found that the UK had violated the convention and it asked for some changes. That brings us on to the very tricky issue of the role of human rights versus legislation regarding dealing with terrorism. I agree with the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) on securing the debate. I certainly have concerns about the loss of the charter of fundamental rights of the European Union, including article 25, on the rights of older people. I have been campaigning for a commission for the rights of older people; they are very much voiceless in our institutions, and we need serious reparation.

Today, I will take a different perspective. People will be glad to know that I am going to talk not about Brexit but about my city of York, which became the UK’s first human rights city on 24 April 2017. Currently, there are 41 human rights cities across the world, including nine in Europe, which are networked together. That is something we are incredibly proud of, and it builds on a strong legacy. In setting out what a human rights city is, I hope hon. Members will be encouraged to take that message back to their own cities to develop a case like the one Swansea is currently developing.

York is a human rights city built on a legacy. We became a city of sanctuary in 2016. York Travellers Trust has done incredible work representing Travellers and Gypsies in our city. The York LGBT Forum has welcomed lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender asylum seekers and refugees, bringing them together in a safe space. The University of York has a global reputation, and its Centre for Applied Human Rights is famous for its protective fellowship scheme, which brings human rights defenders from across the world to the university not only to have some thinking space to make sure their human rights activity is sustainable globally, but to have some intellectual rigour in looking at best practice in terms of human rights defenders across the globe.

I ask the Minister to ensure that we do not face real challenges in getting visas for these individuals when they come to the UK, so that they can have that space. We are humbled to hear of the work they are doing, whether they are journalists, human rights defenders or people working in court systems. They come to the UK not only to have some respite, but to advance their human rights practice, yet visas are blocked time and again because these people do not have the resources, although they have people here who are willing to sponsor them. It seems a shame that doors are shut when we should be extolling the incredible work these people do.

As a human rights city, York has signed up to a charter to work on the domestic human rights agenda. I disagree with the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) on the importance of these issues, because human rights must also apply at home in the UK. The five areas that York has chosen—are they not circumscribed—are equality and non-discrimination, education, decent standards of living, housing, and health and social care. In becoming a human rights city, York embraces a vision of a vibrant, diverse, fair and safe community built on the foundation of universal human rights. It is a vision that is shared by all citizens and institutions in our city, including the council, the police, the voluntary sector and the faith communities. It puts fundamental rights at the heart of policies that are passed by these authorities, and builds on hopes and dreams.
People who know the history of York will know that this follows a strong legacy. On housing, human rights is such an important issue to our city, where the Rowntree family built our country’s first garden village in New Earswick. That stimulated the Housing Act 1919, which was the foundation of social housing in our country, and the model was then taken forward into Tang Hall, further into the city.

As a city, we have had pioneering mental health services—first at Bootham Park Hospital, which was established in 1777. When a patient tragically died there, the Quaker movement said, “We can do better” and set up a retreat. To this day, there has been competition to advance the human rights of people with mental health challenges in our city.

We then had Seebobhm Rowntree, and many people will know that he wrote three incredibly powerful reports on the issue of poverty—the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has followed that through until today. Even in the 1899 report “Poverty, A Study of Town Life”, the authors talked to over 46,500 residents of York to look at the serious poverty in our city. What an incredible study that was, taking the stories as well as the statistics to try to advance our city.

Then we had Joseph Rowntree himself—yes, he of chocolate fame—who outlined what good-practice work should look like in our city. He provided not only jobs with decent pay, but pensions, healthcare, education, housing, a park, theatres, access to the arts, a swimming pool and decent conditions. He and his family understood the real importance of that holistic agenda for advancing individual rights, and he sewed that legacy into our city.

That is why we are proud to be the UK’s first human rights city.

However, we are on a journey, and it is fair to say that there is a lot that we need to achieve. As we map our way forward, we are looking at statistics and stories to tackle challenges where, quite frankly, our city needs to improve. Over the last year, we have seen wages fall in York by £65, causing greater economic inequality when we are already the most inequitable city outside London. By using the human rights framework to look at economic disadvantage, we will be advancing opportunities for people in our city. We have a gender pay gap of £117, which has to be addressed—it is above the national average. We have also looked at the issue of food bank use, which is up 25% in the last year—over 4,000 residents needed to use a food bank. How can that be ignored when we look at a human rights framework? These are fundamental issues facing our society today.

There is an eight-year gap in life expectancy in York. In the wards of Clifton, Westfield and Tang Hall, men die eight years earlier than their counterparts elsewhere—they are disadvantaged both economically and in terms of health.

On education, using the human rights framework we have established, we have already seen the number of NEETs—people who are not in education, employment or training—fall. That is a really positive outcome, which is due to our tracking through the causation and then introducing the restorative means to get more people into work. However, York has received the worst school funding in the country from the Government. In areas where we have the lowest attainment—we have the biggest attainment gap in the country—we are not building a legacy for the future. I urge the Government to look at the data and make the link between funding and attainment, which our human rights framework clearly does.

Cuts to social care have had a real impact. To go back to the fundamental rights I mentioned, we know that contact with social care services has fallen in our city. On the important issue of housing, although we are a low-wage economy, we have people with high skills and therefore under-employment. That makes it harder to access housing, because we have a very high cost of living. Purchasing a property in York requires 10 times the average annual income, and it is incredibly expensive to rent. We have poor access to housing, and greater inequality is therefore being created between the haves and have-nots in our city. We therefore use the human rights framework to advance opportunity and map a way forward for people in our city.

Since 2017, we have established a human rights and equality board and developed community voices, ensuring that those who never engage in our democracy, and whose voices are silent, are at last being heard. We reach out particularly to the homeless, disabled people, women and young people. We also support others who hope to develop the framework to advance rights in their own city. York has been built on its history and social traditions, and we want its legacy to move forward. The Labour party in the city has a vision of building a fair city for the future and re-enacting and repeating the work that Seebobhm Rowntree did.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): Order. Three people wish to speak. If Members can keep their remarks to about five minutes, including interventions, that might allow Front-Bench speakers time. I intend to call the first Front-Bench speaker at 3.28 pm.

3.10 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Mr Gapes. I am a little perturbed that my time has been cut, but that is by the way. I thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) for securing this debate. Although we champion human rights in this country, there are certainly cases that show we are not where we should be. Next year is the 400th anniversary of the Mayflower’s journey. In September 1620, a group of 102 people and 30 crew members sailed across the Atlantic to seek opportunity and to escape religious persecution in the UK. Some 400 years later, we still have some problems.

There are also cases that show us that one person’s human rights should not be laid on the altar of someone else’s perceived rights. An example was the case of Ashers Bakery in Northern Ireland, when the question was raised as to whether we still have the right to refuse to serve based on a message that directly contradicts a sincerely and dearly held faith. After much legal wrangling, the case upheld the right to refuse a message, but not a customer. The idea that you cannot be forced to advocate something that you do not believe in is fundamental, and the decision was very important. The case was taken to the UK Supreme Court and in a unanimous decision five of the UK’s most senior judges upheld Ashers’ appeal against claims of discrimination. They agreed:
[Jim Shannon]

“The objection was to being required to promote the message on the cake. The less favourable treatment was afforded to the message not to the man...Nobody should be forced to have or express a political opinion in which he does not believe.”

That is what the court said, and it is very important to have that decision when it comes to human rights in the United Kingdom.

Although the case was ostensibly about a message on a cake, a section of Christian people were fearful that it was also about an impact on their right to hold their belief and to live their belief out. We are so good at protecting the rights of everyone to live their beliefs inasmuch as they are not harmful or destructive, and yet increasingly we have a section of the UK beginning to fear what can be said or not said when it comes to their Christian beliefs.

A 78-year-old preacher in Northern Ireland was questioned and tried for preaching from his pulpit regarding a biblical story and hell and the fact that if someone does not have faith in Jesus Christ they cannot go to heaven. He was found not guilty. That is another example of human rights. We have registrars who have lost their jobs as they cannot oversee the marriage ceremony of same-sex couples, which is against their held beliefs. Other people are happy to do it, and yet registrars have lost their employment. It is little wonder that Christians question their human rights when all seem to say, “Believe anything you want, tolerate everything possible, except for something based on the word of God and personal and heartfelt beliefs.” The court cases have proven that that is not the case. We must question how such cases get to court. There is a real fear within Christian circles at this time.

I have heard more than one Christian preacher warn his congregation that a time is coming when all will be persecuted for their faith, and many people believe that will happen in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I want a message sent today, very clearly and specifically, that that will not happen in this country while we are still a democracy—that we will not be persecuted for living their faith, in the same way and may be supported to some extent. As I say, it is rare that the right itself would found the claim or application for a remedy.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right in his assessment of the criminal law. The one area where the Human Rights Act, in the sense of the incorporation of the ECHR into UK law, has made a big difference is in family law, particularly in rights to see children.

Alex Chalk: That is right, and there are areas where there has been a greater role for it. However, I want to slay the myth that people are routinely invoking Human Rights Act points to seek remedies that are not otherwise available in the legislation. There are examples of that, but they are by no means the norm. The convention is important because it provides an important safety net at a time particularly of national stress and crisis. We know that in the case of a terrorist atrocity, the cry immediately goes up that the state must act ever more robustly, often impinging upon individual liberties. Sometimes that is the right judgment to make, but equally it is critically important that any measures that the state proposes are viewed through the prism of what we see as keenly won liberties. It is not just a British phenomenon.

If one thinks of the United States in the second world war, one of the episodes of which it has now the most shame was the internment of Japanese Americans at a time of national stress. But our country is not immune to it. In the aftermath of September 11, there was legislation in the UK that people will remember: part 4 of the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001, which was used by the then Government to effectively hold people without charge. That ultimately was challenged in the European Court of Human Rights and the Court ruled that that was unlawful because it breached article 5. Again, it seems that that provides a useful safety net.

Joanna Cherry: In my lifetime, members of the Catholic community in Northern Ireland were interned without trial, with quite some impact on family life. Does the
hon. Gentleman agree that that is something that the ECHR has made a big difference to in the United Kingdom? As a result of our membership and its applicability through the Human Rights Act, it now would not be possible to intern without trial in the UK.

Alex Chalk: It is an important point and we must recognise that because—as is necessary in a democracy—we listen to our constituents and reflect their concerns, this House will always have a tendency to react in a very public way to what is perceived as a public need; but it is not wrong that there should be a check to that and a requirement for us sometimes to pause for thought.

In so far as we give great power to the courts—and to the European Court of Human Rights, through the convention—it is also right that they should exercise necessary discretion, and I respectfully suggest that there have been examples of their straying beyond their natural area of competence. The most obvious example is Hirst, when article 3, which of course prohibits torture and “inhuman or degrading treatment”, was relied on to rule that the British Government were in error in saying that prisoners could not vote. A number of people might think that that had gone too far, and that there had not been appropriate respect for the principles of subsidiarity and the margin of appreciation. I will not go into that now, but there is certainly a case for saying that the Court should tread carefully—and I invite it to do so. I say that because what the Court does, and the rulings that it provides, overwhelmingly contribute to human rights in this country and to the quality of our public discourse and democracy. It would be a crying shame if unfortunate judicial activism were to put that at risk.

3.21 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) for bringing this important issue to the House.

I am deeply concerned by the huge hole that will be left in human rights protection after Brexit, especially in the event of a no-deal Brexit. However, even while the UK remains a member of the European Union, human rights have been considerably worn down as a result of austerity policies.

Alex Chalk: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kate Osamor: No, but only because there is not a lot of time.

Only last year, the UK, according to Professor Alston, the UN rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, was found in breach of four UN human rights agreements: those relating to women, children, disabled people and economic and social rights. The critiquing report drew on work by the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to highlight predictions that child poverty could rise by 7% by 2022, possibly up to a rate of 40%. Professor Alston declared that such actual and projected levels of child poverty were “not just a disgrace, but a social calamity and an economic disaster”.

Such reports agree with the experience of my constituents. Enfield Council has already made £178 million-worth of savings since 2010 because of funding cuts from central Government. However, further cuts mean that the council currently has to find another £18 million to draw out of essential services by 2020. That amount of £18 million is more than Enfield’s current net spend on housing services, leisure, culture, library, parks and open spaces combined. The impact of cuts on young people is tragic. Youth services have been decimated and young people are abandoned, as essential staff have had to be shed, and what is simply a skeleton service is provided. Austerity in education in Edmonton has created an £8.5 million annual funding shortfall. Every school in my constituency had had funding cuts since 2015. That means, in an already struggling community, that the education of every single pupil in Edmonton has been undermined.

All that and much more has been done while the UK still has the protection of the EU charter of fundamental rights. The Human Rights Act 1998 is woefully insufficient on its own, and I dread what could be done to our communities without the limited protection that the EU charter provides. Does the Minister recognise the limitations of the Human Rights Act without the protections of the EU charter of fundamental rights, and can he explain how his party’s Government are preserving those rights before the UK leaves the EU?

3.24 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) on securing the debate. We have had diverse contributions, from the hon. Members for Henley (John Howell), for York Central (Rachael Maskell), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) and for Edmonton (Kate Osamor). I was particularly interested in the concept of the human rights city, which I was not aware of. I shall look at that as something that Edinburgh might think about. I was also pleased that the hon. Member for Edmonton mentioned the report and findings of the UN rapporteur on poverty. We should bear that in mind carefully as we proceed to look at how we run our economy and society.

The debate is timely, because Parliament is convulsed in a state of indecision at the moment about whether to go for the Prime Minister’s deal, no deal or no Brexit. Everyone is talking about the backstop. It is important in that context not to lose sight of the clear risk posed by Brexit of regression in terms of human rights, across the United Kingdom. It is also important to remember the threat that it poses to human rights in Northern Ireland. At least one speaker today has pointed out how integral the recognition of human rights is to the Good Friday agreement. For anyone interested in that, I highly recommend the briefing paper “The Good Friday Agreement, Brexit, and Rights” by Professor Christopher McCrudden, who is the professor of human rights and equality law at Queen’s University Belfast. The paper was published by the British Academy and the Royal Irish Academy, and makes interesting reading.

I believe that human rights are in a precarious position in the UK at the moment, because despite a clear commitment from the Prime Minister that Brexit would not result in a diminution of rights protections, the UK Government have not to date lived up to that commitment, either in the context of Brexit or more widely, as we can see from the UN rapporteur’s report and the huge concern caused by the Windrush scandal and other aspects of
the hostile environment policy. Many of us feel that the Government have refused to engage with people's concerns about the impact of Brexit on human rights. It is concerning that while the Human Rights Act is said to be safe for the duration of the Brexit process, recent events have made it clear that the current UK Government have not lost sight of a long-standing desire on the part of some in the Conservative and Unionist party to repeal and replace the Act.

In the meantime, we know for certain that if Brexit happens we shall lose the charter of fundamental rights. That charter protected a wide-ranging list of fundamental rights and principles, covering certain social and citizens' rights, and going considerably further than the ECHR. The UK Government have tried to argue that the charter did not add anything to the corpus of UK law, but that is demonstrably false, even going by the UK Government's own right-by-right analysis from 2017. That highlights how limited UK domestic protections are in certain key areas. That is not just my view; it was echoed by the Joint Committee on Human Rights, of which I am a member.

The Scottish Parliament tried to preserve the benefit of the charter of fundamental rights on or after exit day, in so far as it applied to retained EU law in Scotland. It did that in a Scottish Parliament Bill called the UK Withdrawal from the European Union (Legal Continuity) (Scotland) Bill. Most regrettable, British Law Officers objected to the Bill and held it up until the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 was passed. That retrospectively changed the powers of the Scottish Parliament so that the continuity Bill, in so far as it attempted to preserve the charter in Scotland, was ultra vires. That was a retrograde step. To anyone who says that Brexit has not been used as a power grab on the Scottish Parliament I point out that the UK Supreme Court has clearly said otherwise.

The Brexit process threatens human rights protections across the UK, not just by repealing the charter but because of the wide range of delegated powers afforded to the Executive in the Brexit process. As the withdrawal Act stands, it would allow the amendment of important domestic rights legislation such as the Equality Act 2010, the Modern Slavery Act 2015 and the Data Protection Act 2018 with little or no parliamentary oversight. That is so because, despite the efforts of many of us to amend it, the Act contains no clear prohibition on the use of delegated powers to erode rights protections.

The repeal of the charter, the risks of delegated legislation, and Government obfuscation on these issues—that is also a result of Brexit—all threaten human rights in the United Kingdom. Hon. Members should not just take my word for that, because the Joint Committee on Human Rights criticised the Government over their report on human rights and the implications of Brexit, and stated back in 2016 that it was "regrettable" that the Government had not set out "any clear vision" for how they expected Brexit to impact on the UK's human rights framework.

In the same report, the Committee found that the Government seemed "unacceptably reluctant" to discuss human rights after Brexit. The then Minister responsible for human rights, the right hon. and learned Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald), was either "unwilling or unable to tell us what the Government saw as the most significant human rights issues that would arise when the UK exits the EU."

Such reluctance to commit is of particular concern when we consider future trade deals with third countries because many of us fear, as the JCHR hinted, that an unwillingness to discuss such issues in detail is suggestive of a Government who wish to prioritise trade deals over human rights. That is important not only because of the message that it sends out to the UK, but because of the message that is sent out across the world if the United Kingdom does not prioritise human rights.

As my hon. Friend said, concern has recently raised its head again about the Government's long-term intentions regarding the repeal of the Human Rights Act 1998. It is difficult to remember what we all talked about in those dim and distant days before Brexit, but in 2015 and 2016 the current Prime Minister's avowed desire to get rid of the Human Rights Act was a huge issue, and the big question mark that she raised over whether Britain would continue to observe the ECHR involved us all in a lot of debate. It seems that that issue has merely been put on the back burner, which is concerning.

As my hon. Friend said, in Scotland under devolution two pillars guarantee human rights—membership of the European Union and membership of the ECHR. Scotland now faces being taken out of the European Union against the will of the majority of Scots, and there is a big question mark over the depth of this Government's commitment to the ECHR. The majority of Scottish voters did not seek or support those threats to human rights, and it is good to know that the Scottish Government are showing the way forward. Scotland's national action plan for human rights has existed for a number of years, and just before Christmas the advisory group on human rights leadership to the Scottish Government published a report that suggested a new human rights framework for Scotland in the future. That advisory group was asked by the Scottish Government not only to make recommendations about civil and political rights, but to consider social, cultural and environmental rights, as well as if and how to incorporate rights found in United Nations treaties into Scots law and governance.

As my hon. Friend said, in recommending the next steps on Scotland's human rights journey, the report of the advisory group set out three guiding principles—first, that Scotland should not regress from the rights currently guaranteed by membership of the European Union; secondly, that Scotland should keep pace with future rights developments within the European Union; and thirdly, that Scotland should continue to demonstrate leadership in human rights.

Will the Minister consider each of those principles and say whether the UK Government will sign up to them for the whole of the UK? Will the Government agree that the whole UK should not regress from the rights currently guaranteed by membership of the European Union? Will they agree that the whole UK should keep pace with future rights developments in the European Union, and that the UK should continue to demonstrate leadership in human rights? That is the sort of clarity that the Joint Committee on Human Rights and others have been calling for. I would like to hear such clarity from the Minister today, and if the UK Government cannot sign up to those principles, will the Minister tell us why not?
3.34 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes, and I am grateful to all hon. Members who have contributed to what has been, on the whole, a very fine debate on human rights. I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) on securing it, and on his speech. He powerfully highlighted why this debate is so timely, given the worry that there will be a roll-back of rights, and that the EU27 will move ahead and enhance rights while we in this country fall behind. He also spoke well about the Prime Minister’s ambiguity on this matter, to say the least—I will return to that in a moment—and he picked out some strong examples of practical cases where the Human Rights Act and the incorporation of the ECHR into UK law has made a difference to those seeking justice in this country over the past two decades.

It was great to hear about the human rights city initiative in York, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and all those involved in that. We must spread information about the human rights and equalities board, and all the other work going on around the country. I am also grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor), and the report of the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights should wake us up to the endemic problems of poverty in this country. She spoke about human rights agreements being breached, and that involves the economic and social rights of women, children, and disabled people. That is a stark reminder that although rights are critical, they are paper rights if people do not have the means to enforce them. It says everything we need to know about economic policy over the past nine years when an outgoing Lord Chief Justice can say that our justice system is “unaffordable to most”, and that should be a matter of great alarm.

The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) spoke about his experience on the Council of Europe, and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke movingly about religious persecution, about which we should all be vigilant. I did not agree with all the arguments made by the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk)—he is no longer in his place—but I certainly agreed with his support for the European convention on human rights.

We must return to first principles when discussing the European convention on human rights, which grew after world war two out of the desire and noble objective to ensure that what had happened could not happen again. As I said to the hon. Member for Henley, the convention was part of many different initiatives by the post-war Government to put that “never again” spirit into practice. I am always even-handed when dealing with the history of this initiative, so let us consider who supervised the drafting of the original ECHR. One of the people who took part in that, David Maxwell Fyfe, was a Tory MP and lawyer, and I wonder what on earth he would make of some of the modern-day Conservative party’s ambiguity towards that initiative.

What does the ECHR actually protect? I think the hon. Member for Cheltenham touched on that. It protects respect for life and is against torture and servitude. It protects liberty and security, and the right to a fair trial and not to have legislation applied retroactively. It protects the right to privacy, freedom of conscience and religion, and freedom of expression and association. It protects the right to get married if one wishes to, and provides effective remedies and protection against discrimination. Who could disagree with any of that? My challenge to those who say that we should have a British Bill of Rights is to ask which of those rights they would take out and not include in that Bill. I remember asking Ministers that question when I first came to Parliament in 2015, but answer came there none.

John Howell: As I said, I am a great champion of the convention, and although it was written immediately after the second world war, it contains nothing that does not apply to today.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am happy to find some agreement with the hon. Gentleman because, yes, all those things still apply today. That is precisely my point—why would anyone want to change any of those time-honoured principles? Of course we can debate how some of them are applied and so on, but those principles are as important and relevant in 2019 as they were in late 1950 when the convention was opened for signature.

The Human Rights Act 1998 is also seminal—it is important to understand precisely what the situation was before its passage. The hon. Member for Henley said that our courts started following the judgments in 1965, but of course the problem was that between the early 1950s and October 2000, when the 1998 Act came into force, if one wished to enforce any of those rights, one had to go to Strasbourg in the first place. The big change that came about in 2000 was the ability to go to our local courts to enforce those rights, which meant that it was cheaper, easier and more efficient to enforce the rights that our citizens had held for so long. That was a seminal change.

I parted company with the hon. Member for Cheltenham because, although in one sense he is right to say that those rights buttressed existing UK common law rights, there are numerous examples—the hon. Member for Edinburgh East referred to some of them, and I also point out the example of family law to the hon. Member for Henley—where the incorporation of the 1998 Act into UK law has made a significant difference.

The Labour party is very committed and passionate about the ECHR and the UK’s signatory status, and about its incorporation into our domestic law. However, there is real concern about the governing party’s position, particularly that of the Prime Minister, on the ECHR. In 2011, the Prime Minister—when she was Home Secretary—said:

“I’d personally like to see the Human Rights Act go because I think we have had some problems with it.”

Her first view appeared to be that she wanted it gone. In April 2016, she said:

“So regardless of the EU referendum, my view is this: if we want to reform human rights laws in this country, it isn’t the EU we should leave, but the ECHR and the jurisdiction of its court.”

That is the Conservative party’s position in its 2017 manifesto, which states:

“We will not repeal or replace the Human Rights Act while the process of Brexit is underway but we will consider our human rights legal framework when the process of leaving the EU concludes. We will remain signatories to the European Convention on Human Rights for the duration of the next Parliament.”

In his response, the Minister has an opportunity to explain, because although we know what the position is for this Parliament, we do not know what it will be for
the next Parliament. The hon. Member for Henley said, quite rightly, that these are time-honoured principles. Why, according to the Conservative party, are they only good enough for this Parliament? Why are they not good enough for the next Parliament, the next 10 Parliaments or the next 20 Parliaments?

I can say for certain that the Labour party will always be fundamentally committed to human rights, to the ECHR and to the Human Rights Act 1998. Can the Minister say the same for his party?

3.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) on securing this debate on human rights in the UK. I have listened with great interest to the views expressed. We have a multiplicity of not only hon. Members, but hon. and learned Members, who have offered the benefit of their legal expertise.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh East set out not only his case, but the broader importance of human rights as a concept, highlighting a number of specific cases and examples. That is, quite rightly, a subject of real importance to all Members, and one in which I have taken a very close interest within my portfolio. It is not only intellectually fascinating but, as hon. Members have said, it permeates our national life.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of where responsibility for human rights should sit. I will not take personally his suggestion that it be moved. The reason that it currently sits with the Ministry of Justice and with me is that, although he is absolutely right to say that it is a cross-cutting issue, the Ministry of Justice is a key defender of the rule of law, and this issue goes to the heart of that. I am sure, however, that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Ministers in the Cabinet Office will have noted his points.

As many hon. Members have said, human rights in the UK are not new. The UK has a reputation for setting the highest standards, both domestically and internationally. As has been set out, that did not begin with the ECHR, the Human Rights Act 1998 or our membership of the EU—nor will it end with our exit from the EU. “Human rights” as a distinct term may have entered common usage in this country in the 20th century and developed through international treaties and organisations, but the concept of rights—and, I might add, responsibilities—in our country goes all the way back to Magna Carta in 1215, the Petition of Right in 1628, the Bill of Rights in 1689 in England and the Claim of Right in 1689 in Scotland. The concept has evolved over many centuries.

Common law developed alongside statutes and set out rules developed by the courts to govern relationships between people and Government, which we would recognise today as “rights”. We have a strong and proud track record on that. As the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) highlighted when talking about her city and its university, in many of our communities, the issue is rooted more locally. I was particularly interested in her comments about the work that the university and her city are doing in that respect.

Winston Churchill, no less, was one of the main advocates for a new regional organisation that was to become the Council of Europe. In 1942, he called for the “enthronement of human rights” and in 1948, he called for a charter of human rights that would be “guarded by freedom and sustained by law.”

The European convention on human rights, as many hon. Members have mentioned, was drafted in 1950 by the Council of Europe, to safeguard basic political and civil rights.

I am always educated, not only in matters of the law, but in matters of history, by the shadow Minister, although in this case, it is a coincidence that I read David Maxwell Fyfe’s memoirs over Christmas. I suspect I am one of only a very small number of people in the House, or indeed in the country, to have done so.

As has been said, the UK was one of the first to sign up to the ECHR in 1951, before it came into force in 1953. It has been strengthened over the years by protocols, and the 1998 Act was a huge step forward in putting those rights on a footing whereby they could be enforced in the UK’s domestic courts. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) set out, the ECHR reflects—not in totality, but in large parts—domestic laws both passed by Parliament and in previous common law. My hon. Friend’s views on the matter are always thoughtful and considered.

How are we doing in relation to the rights that we now recognise as forming our human rights framework? Let us not judge ourselves; let us see how others judge us. The hon. Member for Edinburgh East and my hon. Friend the Member for Henley remarked that we have a proud track record. Last year, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg considered 354 applications against the UK, which equates to 5.34 applications per million inhabitants—the lowest of all 47 states parties, and one tenth of the European average. Only 21 cases were considered by the Court to be potentially of merit and were sent to the UK for a response, with just two judgments against the UK. That touches on a point that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made about the need to strike a sensible and appropriate balance when considering such issues in a domestic context, which I think the UK generally does.

After the UK has left the EU, it will continue to afford its citizens access to well-established domestic and international mechanisms to bring their case and obtain appropriate remedies.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am pleased to hear that the Minister has read the biography of David Maxwell Fyfe. On our future commitment to the ECHR, at the moment there is real concern that the Conservative party’s position is to remain a signatory for the duration of this Parliament only. Can the Minister give a guarantee for the next Parliament and beyond?

Edward Argar: If the shadow Minister is patient, I will turn to what our ongoing position is—a number of Members have made that point. He may or may not be satisfied, but I will seek to answer him.

As I was saying, individuals will be able to obtain appropriate remedies when they consider their rights to have been breached. That will remain under our common law, the devolution statutes and, of course, the Human Rights Act 1998.

[Edward Argar]

Human Rights in the UK

13 FEBRUARY 2019

Human Rights in the UK
At the beginning of this month, the shadow Justice Secretary, the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), asked my right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, to “give a reassurance...that the Government will not repeal or reform the Human Rights Act in the aftermath of our departure from the European Union”.

The Secretary of State answered:

“We certainly have no plans to do so”. —[Official Report, 5 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 163.] I believe that that offers reassurance—perhaps not as specific as my shadow might wish, but it offers reassurance.

As we made clear in the Chequers White Paper, and as is clear in the political declaration, the UK is committed to membership of the European convention on human rights and will remain a party to it after we have left the European Union. The Lord Chancellor, and in this Chamber, the shadow Minister and others, read out the wording of our manifesto commitment on the matter. Our future relationship with the EU should be underpinned by our shared values of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. As reflected in my opening comments, the UK is committed to human rights. Our exit from the EU does not change that or signal a desire to reduce human rights protections.

I reiterate that most of those protections stem from work by the Council of Europe and under the ECHR, rather than from the EU, as my hon. Friend for Henley set out eloquently in his speech. I take the opportunity to pay tribute to the work of all those hon. Members, including my hon. Friend, who serve on the Council of Europe. It is an organisation that, though not spoken about as often as it perhaps should be, continues to do very good work quietly and persistently. With that in mind, while I recognise the courtesy with which the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) made her point, I simply do not share her view that Brexit will leave any deep hole in human rights protections in this country.

More broadly, I too enjoyed reading Professor Miller’s recent report, which the hon. Member for Edinburgh East cited, and the work undertaken for the Scottish Government by the First Minister’s Advisory Group on Human Rights Leadership, which proposed new ways to draw further international commitments to which the UK is party into Scotland’s legislative framework. To underpin seven recommendations in the report, Professor Miller engaged in the broader debate about human rights in the context of socio-economic considerations and whether those should sit in a revised framework. That is part of a broader political and philosophical debate, with different views, as we have seen in the Chamber today. I suspect it is a debate that will continue. The hon. Gentleman asked whether it would continue in this place, and I have no doubt that if it does not, he will seek a debate on exactly that subject.

The SNP spokesperson, the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), asked that I read and consider the report and its contents. I will do so; I am happy to read it again and to consider it carefully. I cannot give a commitment about whether I will agree with everything in it, but I will certainly reflect on it carefully, as I do with anything she suggests that I should read.

UN human rights treaties have not been incorporated into UK domestic law, and they do not require states parties to do that. The UK has instead put in place a combination of policies and legislation to give effect to the UN human rights treaties that it has ratified. We have a long-standing tradition of not only ensuring that rights and liberties are protected domestically, but fulfilling our international human rights obligations. That aspect should not be neglected.

Some hon. Members touched on the report of the UN special rapporteur. As other Ministers have made clear, the Government will consider carefully the rapporteur’s interim findings, but they disagree with the conclusions reached by the rapporteur, highlighting that, compared with 2010, for example, income inequality has fallen, the number of children in workless households is at a record low, and 1 million fewer people are in absolute poverty. I suspect, however, that that is a debate for another day—it could take at least another hour and a half, if not more.

I am the Minister responsible for overseeing the UK’s obligations under the UN convention against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and its optional protocol, and under the UN covenants on economic, social and cultural rights and on civil and political rights, not forgetting the UN human rights peer review process, the universal periodic review. I take those responsibilities seriously, and last year I went in person to Geneva to discuss the UK’s role in relation to the convention against torture with officials. Broadly, in my conversation with them, I was clear—as were they—that the UK has a continuing role in leading the way on human rights in the world.

The title of this debate is “Human Rights in the UK”, so let me sum up by reflecting on the fact that the UK has a rich tapestry of rights running throughout our history, for hundreds of years, and reaching out across the globe. They neither began nor will end with the EU, and many of the key rights stem from the Council of Europe. I appreciate entirely that, during times of change, voices will rightly be raised to question protections and the future, challenging Government. It is absolutely right for that debate to take place.

Let us focus on the commitments given, the protections in place and our historical role—we should be judged on those and on this country’s proud commitment to human rights. Many have suggested that human rights matter; I go further, echoing the words of my noble Friend Lord Keen of Elie: human rights are central to the way we live now and to the way we wish to live in the future. They are an integral part of the society of which we wish to be a part, and a reflection of our identity as individuals and as a country.

I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in the debate, and you, Mr Gapes, for chairing it. In particular, although we might not agree on everything, I thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh East. I suspect that we will return to the subject in future—quite rightly so.

3.56 pm

Tommy Sheppard: I know we are nearly out of time, so I will be brief. I thank everyone who has participated in the debate. I am slightly concerned that a few more Members did not turn up, particularly because we do not seem to have that big a distraction in the main Chamber at the moment—unlike with many debates in the Westminster Hall Chamber in the past. Perhaps as the months go on, we will encourage more of our colleagues to take part.
I have a couple of quick points to make. I will have to check the transcript, but I did not get from the Minister quite the unequivocal and categorical assurances that I sought on commitment to the existing Human Rights Act and the protections that it affords, or—several Members requested this—on no falling behind after Brexit, if rights improve in other European countries. I hope that we get such assurances in future, but that ambiguity—if no other reason—ensures that we will return to this debate in the months ahead.

Finally, I invite my Council of Europe colleague, the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), to reconsider his attitude on whether social and economic rights should be accorded the same status as civil and political rights. After all, in this country we have a body of legislation that already gives people the right to education and to housing in some circumstances. As time goes on, we will want to incorporate such rights into the body of what we know as human rights. It is cold comfort, is it not, to know that we have the right to free expression if we are starving on the streets and have neither an income nor a home to live in. I am sure that we will return to the subject in the months to come.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered human rights in the UK.

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NHS Funding: Essex

[Sir Christopher Chope in the Chair]

3.59 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered NHS funding in Essex.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I have raised the pressing need for a new hospital in Harlow on more than 20 separate occasions in the House of Commons, and this is my fourth debate on this subject. I thank my fellow Essex and Hertfordshire MPs, many of whom have kindly joined me this afternoon, for their support in the House and in our sustained campaigning efforts to secure capital funding for an all-encompassing health campus.

In May last year, I wrote to the former Health Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), to urge the Government to support the capital funding bid at the time for a new hospital. In that respect, I am particularly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker); my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk), who is a stalwart supporter and works closely with me in campaigning for our new hospital; my hon. Friends the Members for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch), for Braintree (James Cleverly), for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) and for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford); the Deputy Speaker, the right hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dame Eleanor Laing), who is another neighbour who works with me to ensure we have a first-rate hospital for the 21st century; and my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel). They all joined me in signing the letter, and they pledged their support for a new hospital to serve our constituents.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I hope the Minister will take away my right hon. Friend’s point that healthcare in Harlow is important, certainly to the people of Harlow and Essex, but also to people in Hertfordshire. People in Bishop’s Stortford, Sawbridgeworth, Hertford and Ware are all looking for this investment, and we hope the Minister will listen carefully.

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend has been an incredible supporter; his constituents will know the work he has done to lobby the Government for our new health campus. He makes an incredibly important point: this is about not just a Harlow hospital, but a hospital for the surrounding area that will serve the people of Hertfordshire and Essex, and I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) is also here.

Mr Mark Prisk: I hope the Minister will take away my right hon. Friend’s point that healthcare in Harlow is important, certainly to the people of Harlow and Essex, but also to people in Hertfordshire. People in Bishop’s Stortford, Sawbridgeworth, Hertford and Ware are all looking for this investment, and we hope the Minister will listen carefully.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): May I take the opportunity to add my support and that of colleagues in south Essex for the excellent campaign work on the additional provision in Harlow? I wonder whether my right hon. Friend will touch more broadly on the sustainability and transformation plans, particularly in south Essex. If we encourage the Secretary of State to press ahead with those plans, although there are some reservations, that will release capital expenditure in the south and further release pressure. That will not alleviate the problem completely, but it will help the issue across the county.
Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend makes the funding case for south Essex. As he says, the whole of Essex needs support, and I know he is supportive of a new hospital in Harlow.

The MPs in the surrounding area who wrote to the former Health Secretary said:

“The creation of a health campus...is fundamental to vitality of community and also to the economy of the entire region.”

To provide some context, the Princess Alexandra Hospital in Harlow was built more than 50 years ago, having been completed in 1966. There is a lot to be celebrated about our hospital, but special mention must be made of the maternity unit, which was deemed outstanding in the Care Quality Commission report. It has been selected to feature for a second series of “Delivering Babies”, featuring “The Voice UK” host Emma Willis.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): My right hon. Friend makes a very good point about the maternity ward at the Princess Alexandra Hospital, where my 26-year-old daughters were born. Although we are concentrating on Harlow, I want to make the point that £15 million of investment has been made in Clacton Hospital, which is very welcome. However, we are still having trouble recruiting GPs to coastal areas, and I would like the Minister to bear that in mind.

Robert Halfon: I am delighted that my hon. Friend’s daughters were born in the Princess Alexandra Hospital—not a fact I knew until today. Knowing their father, I am sure he was very proud that they were born in Harlow. I thank him for his support for our new hospital, and I am sure the Minister has heard the point about the need for more health investment in his part of Essex.

As one would expect, the natural ageing of the building means the estate is no longer fit for purpose, nor does it allow for service improvement. The structural materials are crumbling and the fabric of the hospital is outdated, making compliance with regulatory health and safety standards more and more challenging. Not only that, but demand for health services in Harlow has changed considerably since 1966. The population has grown by over 30,000, diagnosed physical and mental health illnesses are on the rise, and, more recently, NHS hospitals in neighbouring constituencies have closed, meaning that the Princess Alexandra Hospital now serves over 350,000 people—well beyond its envisaged capacity.

The impact of these pressures is fronted by both patients and staff. Waiting times in the A&E department are among the highest in the UK, and crowded wards are hampering patient experience. The dilapidated working environment, temperamental equipment and pressurised conditions are taking their toll on staff morale, with any hopes of enhancing performance dashed by factors beyond their control. Does the Minister not agree that we should do all we can to support our hard-working NHS staff and to champion their admirable aim to improve patient care at the Princess Alexandra Hospital?

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate, and I absolutely support it. We have to make our case for investment in the Princess Alexandra. In terms of getting the improvements my right hon. Friend seeks in his hospital, as well as across our county of Essex and in neighbouring areas, it would be good to hear from the Government what plans there are in the 10-year plan to secure funding for the facilities we need.

Robert Halfon: My right hon. Friend has always been a champion for Essex—there is not an Essex issue that she is not on top of. She has been very supportive of the need for a new hospital in Harlow, and I welcome her signing and supporting the letter we wrote to the Health Secretary. She is right that we need to know how the 10-year plan will help our beautiful county—how it is going to help in west Essex, across the south and right up to the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling).

In spite of the difficulties, the staff have proved they can implement changes. In March 2018, the hospital was brought out of special measures thanks to the incredible efforts of every employee, from the board members right through to the nurses, doctors, porters, cleaners and catering staff. Given the working conditions, it is no wonder that attracting and retaining well-qualified staff is so difficult. In December, the hospital operated at a 13.8% vacancy rate, and the board cited particular difficulty in filling critical nursing roles.

That issue is exacerbated by the promise of higher salaries and competitive training programmes at Barts and University College Hospital, just 30 miles from Harlow, in London. Further, Essex County Council notes the higher wages available in the privately funded social care sector as another magnet attracting staff away from our NHS hospitals. Many of those factors were never envisaged during the hospital’s construction in the 1950s, but we have the opportunity now to build a brand-new health campus that will bring healthcare services in Essex into the 21st century, as well as creating the space and training facilities for longevity.

At the start of this month, the hospital and I were delighted to welcome the Health Secretary; he saw for himself the state of affairs at the Princess Alexandra Hospital. I am incredibly grateful to him for taking the time to speak so meaningfully with the NHS staff, particularly those on the frontline—the doctors, nurses and support staff—to allow him to gauge the realities of the day-to-day operations at the hospital. I take this opportunity to ask whether the Minister will commit to visiting the Princess Alexandra Hospital in Harlow, to continue the Health Secretary’s work. Does he recognise how useful it may be to inform future decisions about capital funding?

The Health Secretary concluded that Harlow has a strong case for capital funding. He stated how impressed he was with what the staff were managing to do in the tight working spaces, and acknowledged that a longer-term solution was essential. The board is doing all it can to set progress in motion. The trust is currently developing a pre-consultation business case and refreshing its 2017 strategic outline case, which will be submitted for approval in June. An event will be held tomorrow with stakeholders to assess the preferred way forward, including for the location of the new health campus, with a final decision to be made next month.

I understand from discussions between the Health Secretary and the trust’s executive board that the Department of Health and Social Care has spent its current capital allocation, and that major capital projects will be considered following the upcoming spending
review. Will the Minister provide an assurance that, when the time comes, he will take all the necessary steps and work with the Treasury to release the capital funding for the new hospital we desperately need? Will he also set out a timeframe for that decision?

The trust’s executive board estimates that the health campus would cost £400 million. It is one of the seven new hospital projects seeking more than £100 million. I assure the Minister that that investment would provide a long-term solution, ultimately saving the Government, the hospital and the taxpayer millions of pounds. Princess Alexandra Hospital has been fortunate to receive pockets of Government funding, for which we are incredibly appreciative. In December, it received £9.5 million to provide additional bed capacity, on top of a £2 million investment in September ahead of the busy winter period. Successful capital funding bids led to the four-month turnaround of the £3.3 million new Charnley ward in January and the addition of a second maternity theatre last year.

I acknowledge that the Government are supporting the hospital, but those stop-gap investments were quick fixes when the need became urgent. Surely it is now time to look at the bigger picture. Does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that we must be wise with taxpayers’ money, and that to do so, we must address the root causes of the problems—the reasons why we need additional space for beds and extra funding for our A&E department, which is one of the busiest in the country?

Giles Watling: Does my right hon. Friend agree that those problems are not always merely a question of funding but are frequently to do with hospital management, which sometimes fails? We politicians, and the Government, should stand by to offer support and hold management to account.

Robert Halfon: The health campus would work closely with Public Health England, whose timely move to Harlow in 2022 would allow for unrivalled research and training partnerships.

The hospital is already working with the award-winning Harlow College to provide apprenticeships, and with the University of Essex on training, but we could go further. High-class nursing degree apprenticeships could be delivered at an education centre on site, rather than sending staff away on courses that cost valuable time and money. These career development opportunities would go a long way to improve staff retention, and the board would no longer be forced to pay expensive agency providers to fill vacancies.

In line with the NHS 10-year plan, this digitally enabled, purpose-built health campus would provide the flexibility to adapt and take advantage of technological advances in medicine and science. Harlow would become the health science capital of England if the Department would allow it to have that future.

In summary, we have a hospital that has outstanding staff and is improving daily, yet it has an ageing infrastructure that is not fit for purpose, and it is currently spending millions on repairs that could be spent on the frontline. A new Harlow health campus for the 21st century would save the Treasury money in the long run, because it would mean an end to this constant need for capital refurbishments, hugely cut down on agency staff and help to cut the cost of healthcare in west Essex more generally, providing an enormous number of modern services under one roof.

The hospital, its staff and the MPs who represent them all have grand aims for the future of healthcare in Essex. I urge the Minister and the Government to pick up the baton, to champion our hard-working NHS staff and to dip into the £20.5 billion of additional NHS funding announced in the Budget to deliver the health campus that we desperately need.
4.31 pm

**Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) on securing this debate and on being—I hope he will not mind me referring to him in this way—a warrior for Harlow. There is no doubt that he has made a strong and welcome case for investment in the Princess Alexandra. It is clear that Harlow needs a new hospital, and that a new campus can meet the long-term health objectives of both Harlow and neighbouring areas.

That brings me to the question of the health challenge across the whole of Essex when it comes to funding and investment in the NHS and the delivery of better healthcare services, especially given the significant levels of housing and population growth. There is an irony here: central Government provide money to local authorities for housing, looking at capacity studies, new growth and things of that nature, but we are not joined up enough across Government to release some of those funds back into the health economy.

Importantly—I hope the Minister will recognise this—the comprehensive spending review presents an opportunity for the Government to look at how the funding formulas can be connected to long-term economic and population growth. Of course, to ease pressures on hospitals and the health and social care systems, we also need investment in my constituency in a new multi-purpose healthcare centre that brings GPs and other health practitioners together at a local level. I am grateful to the Department of Health and Social Care, because I recently met the Secretary of State, who endorsed and gave his personal support to a new health centre in Witham and has also put pressure on the clinical commissioning group to work on the delivery of that, as the Minister is aware.

Returning to the point that I made in my intervention earlier, the new 10-year plan for health and the NHS is a perfect opportunity and window to consider how the Department can join up the whole system, make it much more integrated and look at delivery. My hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) mentioned GPs; in our part of Essex and in rural parts of Essex we struggle to recruit them. We have the excellent Anglia Ruskin University training the next generation of GPs at a rate of 100 per year, thanks to its new medical school, and we want to benefit from that; I think the whole of Essex will benefit from it.

I hope the Minister, in his remarks, will look at the whole health economy in Essex and take on board the case that has been made today that we need not just investment, but a long-term vision from the Department.

4.34 pm

**The Minister for Health** (Stephen Hammond): Sir Christopher, it is good to see you in your place and to take part in this important debate. I start, as I should, by congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) on securing another debate—his fourth—on this matter. He is well known for his tireless work on matters of healthcare in Harlow and across the whole of Essex. My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) described him a moment ago as a “warrior for Harlow”; I think that was in response to the compliment he paid her of being a “champion for Essex”. I listened to her speech and her earlier intervention, and I will say that, should she wish to, I would be delighted if she joined me in a debate next Tuesday on the 10-year plan.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham is of course right that this is an opportunity. We have set out a comprehensive plan, full of ambitions to link up healthcare, backed up by an implementation plan. I am hopeful, because this is the first time that has been seen. Layer on to that the integration of health and social care in the Green Paper, and I hope she will agree that those are steps forward.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow has not only secured debates, but has had a number of meetings with my predecessor on a number of issues relating to the Princess Alexandra Hospital NHS Trust. I notice that today he welcomed the visit of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who visited the trust two weeks ago. I know the Secretary of State was hugely impressed by the outstanding staff and the good work they do, and I have noted the kind invitation extended by my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow to come to Harlow, which I accept; I look forward to coming later in the year.

On a number of occasions, my right hon. Friend has raised the proposal to build a new hospital, which demonstrates his commitment to what he and I both recognise as the most important issue in his constituency. The Government recognise that a number of trusts face estates challenges; that is why there is a commitment to upgrade the NHS estate, with £3.9 billion in capital investment for buildings and facilities by 2022-23. I will come on to the comprehensive spending review in a second.

I noted, of course, the interventions from other hon. Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk) made the point about Harlow’s importance to the wider health economy in Hertford and Stortford, and my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) reminded me that we must have the staff in the hospitals. The workforce section of the 10-year plan sets that out.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow knows that the NHS’s buildings and services are being modernised and transformed through the sustainability and transformation fund investment. That money is going toward a range of programmes. I recognise that in July 2018 the trust put forward a revised bid for around £330 million, with potential for that to be funded through sustainability and transformation partnerships funding, private finance contributions and some land disposals.

I know that the bid was well supported and attracted a lot of careful attention but, as my right hon. Friend will recognise, there was strong competition from a range of schemes across the country; the fund was heavily over-subscribed and there was some rigorous prioritisation. I hope he will recognise that officials from both NHS England and NHS Improvement are working closely with the trust. They are supportive of the capital bid that has been put forward and are working with the trust on the programme to look at that bid for the future. They continue to develop the options to tackle the challenges that the people of Harlow and the wider economy face, and to secure that best outcome. I guarantee him that that work will continue, and that I will ensure that I take an interest in his scheme.
I know that my right hon. Friend will have recognised and welcomed a number of tranche 4 bids that did secure some money for the trust for additional bed capacity, improving emergency department performance and patient flow and reducing bed occupancy. That scheme represents a key part of the NHS trust’s plan to dramatically improve and transform the emergency care pathways. I acknowledge that that was not the scheme he wanted, but I hope he will recognise that it has been extremely helpful, and that the trust has made excellent use of that capital.

I know that my right hon. Friend will wish to acknowledge that there has also been wider recognition of bids from across Essex; there was money for Hertfordshire and West Essex in Luton, in the Hertfordshire and West Essex vascular surgery network and in West Hertfordshire hospitals. I hope he will agree that there is continued commitment from the Government to the NHS and to the patients in the wider region.

I will directly address the point that my right hon. Friend raised with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. There will be further opportunities to access capital. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham pointed out, there will be a comprehensive spending review this year, in which we clearly have the chance to link up those things she mentioned; I entirely take her point on board. My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow will recognise that the CSR will be when decisions on future capital allocations will be made for the next five years. The 2015 CSR first did that, and that has continued, and we expect it to happen in the next CSR. I assure my right hon. Friend that I have no doubt that the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury will listen to his financial appeals for his constituents.

I hope that my right hon. Friend recognises the wave 1 and 2 capital funding secured during 2017-18 to support the redesign of the emergency department at the hospital. That was targeted very much at improving those facilities. I hope that he also recognises that that was on top of what I referred to earlier. I am sure he will support, as I do, the fact that that has gone into championing excellence in the paediatric emergency department.

My right hon. Friend mentioned the Harlow science hub and campus programme. Partly owing to his campaigning, there will be a new public health campus in Harlow, and I pay tribute to his efforts. I am pleased to say to him—as I am sure he knows—that that is still on schedule. A phased opening from 2021 will ultimately see approximately 2,700 people based there from 2024. Public Health England and the Princess Alexandra Hospital have discussed what other opportunities for Harlow’s wider health economy might arise from basing the campus there. I hope to be able to share with him more details on that in the near future.

I commend my right hon. Friend’s work in raising support for the Princess Alexandra Hospital NHS Trust’s bigger capital bid. I reassure him that there will be opportunities to access that capital in the spending review process in the latter part of this year. He challenged me on the timeline of that. As someone once closely associated with the former Chancellor, he will know that the Treasury does not easily give out its timelines. “Soon” or “this autumn” are probably appropriate answers to his inquiry.

On numerous occasions, my right hon. Friend has raised the estate issues facing the trust, in the House, in meetings with my predecessors and with the current Secretary of State. I look forward to accepting his invitation to continue working with him on this issue for the people of Harlow and for the NHS in Essex.

*Question put and agreed to.*
Primary Schools: Nurture and Alternative Provision

4.43 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered nurture and alternative provision in primary schools.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I am grateful for the opportunity to debate this issue. I am also grateful to colleagues who have come along. On what is a standard Brexit day in the House, an education debate might be nice light relief for us all.

I got into politics to talk about education. As somebody who always wanted to be a teacher before accidentally finding myself here, I have the privilege of working on the Education Committee, which has undertaken—before my time on it—interesting inquiries on both alternative provision and the benefit of early intervention for the life chances of young people. It is important that we get the foundation of our education system right. In my view, education should always be our priority; without it, nothing else works. Without the right support early in children’s lives, the challenges and costs only grow over time.

This debate covers two specific areas: “nurture care”—I am grateful to nurtureUK for the information it shared with me on that—and alternative provision, each of which I will address in turn. Nurture care begins at home but is a crucial aspect in the early years of schooling, especially in deprived areas and for troubled families. Across my constituency, there are relatively high levels of family breakdown, mental health issues and deprivation, which is a perfect storm of challenges for both parents and children.

Those challenges have an impact on educational attainment. In Mansfield, 27% of children start primary school without the core abilities needed to succeed, including speech and language skills. I have seen this at first hand. Barely a week goes by when I do not visit a local school. I have seen five-year-olds still in nappies, unable to communicate properly, not knowing what a book is or how to hold one and unable to settle in primary school. The Government introduced free childcare, starting for two-year-olds, aimed at supporting such children to move in and out of that mainstream setting is on site and is therefore more flexible, allowing the teachers at Forest Town do a fantastic job, and to have a space to call their own within the school. Equally, they are not excluded from their social networks and individualised experience.

Education Ministers that the Government have touched down the line?

That Forest Town centre is a separate building on the school site, allowing young people who find mainstream education challenging in those early years to be in a quieter, more personal and supportive environment, and to slowly build up to the full experience. Some have special educational needs or challenging situations at home, but all are able to grow at their own pace with extra support. It is a bit like alternative provision, but it is on site and is therefore more flexible, allowing the children to move in and out of that mainstream setting and to have a space to call their own within the school. Equally, they are not excluded from their social networks in the same way as if they were sent to off-site provision. The teachers at Forest Town do a fantastic job, and their hard work and supportive care makes a huge difference to those children’s lives.

Emma Hardy: The different curricula offered to children in nurture care are more bespoke and suitable for those children. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the progress of those children should therefore not be judged by the same measures as their peers? They are getting a bespoke and individualised experience.

Ben Bradley: I agree; there has to be some leeway. We often talk in this place about people’s aspirations for the future. For some people, that means undertaking A-levels and going to university, but for others it just means being able to live a relatively normal life, to get on in school and get into employment; the simpler things. There should be an acceptance of that in the way that we judge schools more broadly.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his work on the Education Committee. I note that several Committee members are here. On his point about on-site organisation within a school, he will know that the Committee’s alternative provision report suggested...
that, whether it is learning support units or other organisations within schools, it is important for teachers to be properly trained to deal with children who have difficulties. At the moment, there are often supply teachers or temporary teachers in those organisations, who do not necessarily have those skills, which can make a world of difference. As he describes, it is so much better for a child to stay within the main school and to move between the mainstream unit and the separate unit, depending on his or her difficulties.

Ben Bradley: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention and particularly thank him and the other members of the Select Committee for coming along today. I absolutely agree—I will touch on this later—that it is important that this is not exclusion from the classroom; it is a nurturing and supporting environment to help the children to succeed.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on initiating the debate. The fact that so many hon. Members have intervened indicates our interest. Like the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), I believe that there is a real need for the short-term, focused intervention that is found in nurture groups for children with particular social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Does he agree that we need to increase the availability of nurture groups, which will allow individual children to reach their potential, but also ensure that teachers are able to better spread their time and energy throughout classes in which children who are unable to learn in a typical classroom set-up are being taught in a dedicated way that benefits everyone?

Ben Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Later I will touch on some statistics from Northern Ireland that I hope he will find interesting. I agree with him. The reason why the provision at Forest Town, in particular, works is that although it is in a separate building and environment, it is included within the school. That allows the teachers to engage with it and children to dip in and out, and allows the integrated and supported approach that the hon. Gentleman describes. It is incredibly beneficial.

The earlier we can get children and families engaged with nurture care, the better. Children learn best when they have strong self-esteem, a sense of belonging, and resilience. Nurture groups were first developed in London in 1969 by educational psychologist Marjorie Boxall. Large numbers of young children were entering primary school in inner London with severe emotional and behavioural difficulties, which led to high demand on special school places in particular. Marjorie Boxall understood that these children had not received early support and were not ready to meet the demands of primary school. As a response, nurture care was developed, and it has consistently proved to be an effective way of helping disadvantaged children.

Nurture groups tend to offer short-term, inclusive and focused intervention. The groups are classes of between six and 12 children, supported by the whole school—not just by specialist staff for that particular site, but by teachers from across the school and by parents, who are often included in the provision. Each group is run by a couple of members of staff. They assess learning, communication and emotional needs and try to break down the barriers to learning in the mainstream environment.

Crucially, the children who attend nurture groups remain an active part of their main class and their school. They are not excluded; they are not taken off site into alternative provision. They are able to engage in the classroom with their peers wherever that is possible and wherever they are comfortable. I will touch on this again later, but I strongly support programmes that allow children to remain in mainstream schooling to engage with their peers. That is better for the child and for the taxpayer wherever it is possible.

The relationship between staff and pupils in nurture groups provides a consistent and supportive example that children can base their own behaviour on. For so many children, role models are simply vital, and this caring approach can be hugely successful. It engages children with education, giving them a positive and enjoyable learning experience, and it can help where children do not get the same support at home.

Nurture groups have been working successfully for more than 40 years right across the UK. That statement is supported by a number of studies. Last year, in my constituency, I was pleased to meet nurtureuk, which is the national charity supporting this whole-school intervention. Its figures show that this provision works. One school in Kent running a nurture programme saw exclusions drop by 84%, which I am sure that hon. Members will agree is a remarkable figure.

A 2016 Queen’s University Belfast study also supports the effectiveness of nurture groups. It evaluated the impact of 30 such groups in Northern Ireland and found them to be cost-effective. In addition, although 77% of children who entered nurture groups exhibited difficult behaviour, that had reduced to just 20% at the end of the programme.

Emma Hardy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. Does he share my concern in this respect? Nurture groups sound absolutely fantastic and definitely suitable for the children. I wonder whether we would find nurture groups and the approach of looking at the causes of that behaviour in schools that have zero-tolerance behaviour policies.

Ben Bradley: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. The point that she raises may not be one for discussion now, but it is certainly interesting. There absolutely does have to be a balance. I am a firm believer—having been to a variety of schools, with different atmospheres—in discipline and teaching children the value of that, but equally in respecting the needs particularly of vulnerable children in cases such as these. I do not think that nurture care has to be a formal thing, but I do think that there has to be that flexibility of approach to give a more bespoke experience to children who need it.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is very kind; he has been most gracious to us all in taking our interventions. He mentioned Queen’s University. I made a contribution in a debate last year and used the statistics to which he referred. When it comes to summing up and integrating all the information from across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, there are many...
examples of good practice—the hon. Gentleman has used one from Belfast—and perhaps the Minister could take them on board.

Ben Bradley: I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Minister will do that. It is important to weigh up all this evidence when we are deciding where to put our time and energy in education. I certainly think that primary school and the early years environment should be a key priority.

Over the last three years, school exclusions have risen by more than 40%. If there is ever a time to invest in early intervention and nurture care, it is now. This early support, if properly managed, can set children up for their whole lives at school. Some will continue to need help, and it is especially important that those children who have needed this low-level, ongoing support throughout their time at primary school do not then lose all this help when they go to secondary school; that transition is vital. We can be more inclusive, support children to stay in school, and reduce exclusions, but we have to invest in that both financially and with the time and training for teachers.

The links between school exclusion and social exclusion are well known. Children who are excluded from school are far more likely than their peers to have grown up in the care of the state or in poverty, and they go on to have much higher rates of mental illness and are more likely to end up in prison. That cycle needs to be broken somewhere. These children are the most vulnerable in our society and need greater support. We need to do more to provide a supportive environment and to ensure that our education system provides a positive, safe and reliable space for the most vulnerable children.

Nurture care can turn around a child’s life and help secure a stable future in adulthood. This is not a debate about financial efficiency, but I would like to highlight a 2017 Institute for Public Policy Research report, which argued that every cohort of permanently excluded pupils will go on to cost the state an extra £2.1 billion. The Government should support nurture programmes because that is the right thing to do, but I also argue that spending on nurture care is one of the best-value options for education expenditure. It is proactive, preventive support. Just as we are looking at prevention in the NHS long-term plan, so we should be looking at it in education.

Emma Hardy: The hon. Gentleman is making an absolutely excellent speech. It is quite surprising for me to find myself agreeing so wholeheartedly with a Government Member, but the point that I would like to make is that there is not just a financial consideration, but an accountability consideration. Even if schools have the money that is needed to provide nurture care and even if, as the hon. Gentleman rightly suggests, they would have the money that would be used for exclusions to provide this early intervention and care, schools still might not want to do it unless the accountability system is changed to recognise this as good, worthwhile work.

Ben Bradley: I absolutely agree. We mentioned briefly the changes in Ofsted’s approach that I think are positive. We could do more to highlight some of the good practice nationally and to incentivise schools to do this. We talk a lot in the Select Committee about special educational needs and disability provision. I think that schools would love to have more independence in relation to how they provide this kind of support. I think that, if it came with the right accountability and the right financial support, teachers would embrace it.

At this point, I would like to mention the Select Committee’s recent report entitled “Tackling disadvantage in the early years”, which notes that there is currently not enough of a clear strategic direction in early years education. The report argues that the Government have to remove barriers to progression for early years teachers to encourage the recruitment and retention of a skilled early years workforce. We need experienced teachers who can provide effective nurture care and help with the transition from nursery to primary school. I welcome the recent announcements on recruitment and retention from Government, which have also been welcomed by the schools that I have visited since. Similar incentives and support in relation to early years could be equally helpful.

The report praises maintained nursery schools for ensuring excellent outcomes for disadvantaged children and argues that we need to fully fund maintained nursery schools by the end of the financial year. This is a debate about primary education, but the earlier we can start support programmes for vulnerable children, the more effective that intervention will be. As one of my constituents working in the nursery sector recently said to me:

“The early years of life are the most important of life, the building blocks for their future, miss these bricks and it all comes tumbling down.”

I thought that was quite a poetic way of describing it.

The report discusses the importance of a strong home learning environment and of reviewing the evidence in relation to interventions that support parents and families in creating a positive home learning environment. It is important that we continue to review best practice and share information about the forms of nurture care that are the most effective, and that they engage with parents to help to provide that.

Let me turn to alternative provision more broadly. It is often seen as somewhere only the worst behaved pupils should go, but alternative provision is much more than that and, done properly, can provide excellent education. It is important to remember that alternative provision also covers education for pupils who cannot attend mainstream education for a variety of reasons, including health reasons, and is not only for those who have been excluded from school. It includes pupil referral units, alternative provision academies, free schools and other settings, and there are some excellent examples of settings that provide tailored education to the pupils who have struggled the most in mainstream education.

The alternative school in Accrington, for example, offers a holistic and flexible full-time school experience, designed to respond to the needs of young people who are unable to remain in mainstream school. It caters for up to 90 pupils a year spread across three campuses in the north-west. It specialises in a curriculum designed specifically for people aged eight to 18 who require that smaller, more personalised and individual approach to their education. I think that is a positive path and example to follow.

Alternative provision, when done right, works well, but too often it is seen as a dumping ground for difficult children—a way to get them out of a school. We need that narrative to change. As I noted earlier, I believe
that schools should try to keep children in a mainstream setting where possible. The correlation between exclusions and problems in later life is significant. I have raised concerns previously with the Secretary of State in the Education Committee about interventions such as isolation.

Emma Hardy rose—

Ben Bradley: I know the hon. Lady feels strongly about that. I will come to her in a second. When done right, such interventions can be helpful, but too many reports suggest that children are taken out of the classroom not to be supported, but to be kept out of the way.

Emma Hardy: I was going to intervene just before the hon. Gentleman mentioned isolation rooms. One of the points in our Education Committee report was about bullying a mainstream school with an alternative provision school, so that teachers can share knowledge and expertise. I know that some initiatives are now happening, whereby mainstream teachers can teach in special schools for a while, and vice versa, so that they have that shared knowledge.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about isolation rooms. There is a world of difference between nurture and an isolation room, where children get no education whatsoever, but are made to sit there with a sheet to occupy them, not educate them, yet we wonder why the children have not made any progress at the end of that period.

Ben Bradley: I agree with the hon. Lady, and the Government have promoted partnership working between schools in some ways. We see that work between schools in the independent sector and comprehensives. I welcome that and I think teachers would welcome the opportunity to get a broader experience, and the training and development that comes with that.

Providing proper support to children, by not isolating but helping them, would be more effective and cheaper in the long-run than exclusion, but schools need investment to be able to do that. I would like to see alternative provision run more along the lines of a nurture care programme, where possible. Obviously, I acknowledge that separate settings can be the most appropriate option for some pupils. However, where possible, it would be good to do more to include, rather than exclude, pupils who are struggling in mainstream education. I would also like to see a focus on reintegration. Just as nurture groups tend to work as a short-term approach to alternative provision, rather than being a final, permanent destination for pupils, there should be a way of tailoring support with a view to bringing that child into mainstream education, at least for part of the time, further down the line.

The figures show that more than 77% of pupils in AP settings have special educational needs, so it is important to look at special educational needs and disability provision, and how it can effectively help pupils at risk of dropping out of mainstream education.

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend mentioned children with special educational needs. Does he agree that there is a significant problem when something like 4,000 children with special educational needs are excluded each school week? Unfortunately, they often go into a postcode lottery of poor alternative provision, if they get any at all.

Ben Bradley: I absolutely recognise that challenge. Our existing inquiry on SEND in the Education Committee highlights the postcode lottery element and the confrontational experience that many parents face in trying to get the support that they need. While it seems that a lot of those involved have recognised the will of the legislation and the ideas behind it to be right, there is a practical barrier, which causes problems so that it does not always offer the support that it should.

The Government’s vision for alternative provision, outlined last spring, was largely positive, with a commitment to ensuring that it becomes an integral part of the education system, with high-quality outcomes for pupils. It is positive that the Government increased funding for higher needs and alternative provision in Nottinghamshire. The budget has risen from just shy of £60 million in 2017 to £64 million this year. That is welcome and it will have a positive impact on pupils in my constituency. However, there is still far more to do. The SEND challenge is probably the biggest problem we face in our education system. It is not simple to solve, and it affects mainstream schooling and budgets across the board.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I visited a school in my constituency, St Anne’s Infants School, which won the Marjorie Boxall Quality Mark Award for its nurture group in 2016. I appreciate the really good work it does. Yesterday, I was in a Westminster Hall debate on special educational needs. There are real concerns around the country about the lack of funding for that. The hon. Gentleman just mentioned integrating this into the education service. It should not just be excellent groups that are getting excellent provision in some schools. We need to ensure that children—whether they have emotional or physical needs, or just need a decent education—get support in a joined-up way.

Ben Bradley: Absolutely. I welcome some of the things that the Government have done in recent pilots for mental health support in schools, and some of the positive things that are happening there, but the hon. Lady is absolutely right that that needs to happen across the board. Every child who has that need should be able to access the support, rather than its being a postcode lottery, as has been described.

The quality of alternative provision is too variable across the country. While some settings have brilliant teachers trying to turn around lives, others do not have that focus, and the most vulnerable pupils often do not get the education that others do. Both in SEND and behaviour management, one size does not fit all, so schools need to find and offer the right intervention.

In conclusion, I ask the Minister to look at ways in which the Government can do more to support nurture provision in primary schools, with a view to offering early support, particularly in deprived areas that are most in need, helping more children to stay on in mainstream education and cutting the number of exclusions, thereby giving children in my constituency better life chances, as well as saving the taxpayer money in the long-term. I would like to see more of that supportive focus within alternative provision, too: support for schools
to have more in-school alternatives to exclusion or outside provision. I believe that that approach is one of the most effective ways to support vulnerable pupils.

5.6 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) on securing this important debate. It is good to see so many fellow colleagues from the Education Committee in attendance.

Nurture groups are recognised as the best way forward for children, especially those from a disadvantaged background. In Scotland, we have a system that we call “Getting it right for every child”, which is the basis of how children are put at the centre of any educational initiative. Having been a member of the local education committee when I was a councillor, I can tell hon. Members that this GIRFEC policy is well thought of, well established and well used across Scotland.

Nurtureuk has pointed out that there are more nurture groups in Scotland, especially in Glasgow, Angus and West Lothian, than in any other part of the UK, which sends a signal that education in Scotland is setting about things in the best way possible. Indeed, the First Minister has made the closing of the attainment gap—the gap between children from the poorest and richest households in Scotland—the cause célèbre of this particular term of office.

All children and young people deserve to get the support they need to reach their full learning potential. The evidence for the use of nurture groups to do that is long-established. Children and young people should learn in the environment that best suits their needs, whether that is in a mainstream or special school setting. Ninety-seven per cent. of children with additional support needs are educated in mainstream schools in Scotland. The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 places duties on education authorities to identify, provide for and review the additional support needs of their pupils.

In my time on the Education Committee, in particular in this Session, as my colleague the hon. Member for Mansfield said, there has been a lot of focus on SEND issues. We are still taking in evidence. I do not think that there is any debate or difference across the Chamber on the need to focus on giving all our young children the best possible start in their educational life, even if they come from a background that does not lead them to know what education should be like.

The phenomenon is not new. I remember many years ago talking to a teacher who could not believe that young children were coming into school unable to hold a book. If that was 40 years ago and that experience is replicated across the rest of the UK, it must be even worse now. Children might well be able to use a tablet, but many of them do not understand the value of books.

Nurture groups also help to improve attendance and reduce exclusions, which is an important point, and they can help to provide a whole-school ethos. It should not simply be about those children in a small group in one area of the school. Where nurture groups work well, the whole-school ethos is affected and improved. I can give a simple example. My granddaughter, who is educated in Perth, comes home and says things such as, “I can’t do this yet,” which is a huge improvement on “I cannae dae that”—full stop—which I used to hear from students who came to me in further education in West Lothian. When people start to nurture young children by saying simple things like that, it really improves their life chances.

Emma Hardy: On school ethos, is the hon. Lady as concerned and deeply disturbed as I am by recent comments in the press about “flattening the grass” policies? The CEO of one academy trust advocates going into assemblies and bullying and humiliating a child until they are in tears as a way to intimidate the rest of the children into silence. Does she agree that that is not the kind of ethos that we want to promote in our schools—one where children are bullied or shamed until they cry if they do not behave themselves?

Marion Fellows: I totally agree that that is not the way that children should be helped to learn.

I do not want to stray too far from the point, but I did not know much about the English education system until I joined the Education Committee in 2015. It was a steep learning curve and I still struggle with the idea that schools are not run by local authorities, that different types of schools can be run differently, and that some schools are seen as “good” by Ofsted because there are not many exclusions and because they get high academic results. I agree with other hon. Members that it is better for everyone in the community, and for society at large, to have children who come out of school as better people, more enriched, curious and ready to learn in different ways, rather than simply being able to pass a standard exam.

In my experience of teaching in further education colleges, I saw many children who were damaged by a school system that did not suit them. I am not saying that the Scottish ethos and the Scottish way are perfect, because no education system can be, but putting children at the heart of the education system and committing to getting it right for every child is the best way forward. I would like to hear the Minister’s views on that.

5.14 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) for securing the debate, and the other hon. Members who have contributed.
We would welcome any proposal that supported children struggling with social, emotional or behavioural difficulties, especially when that approach is backed up by more than two decades of research and more than 60 academic studies that show its positive effects. Inclusion is at the heart of the nurture model and there is a wealth of evidence that it works.

In the early days of the coalition, the then Secretary of State for Education set the continued direction of travel when he stated that he wanted to remove the “bias towards inclusion”. Yesterday, the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, the right hon. Member for Guildford (Anne Milton), said:

“Inclusion is...not always the right answer for children or their families.”—[Official Report, 12 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 310WH.] Today, however, a member of the Minister’s party has brought forward this debate about the virtues of an inclusive policy. I hope that this Minister can clear up the confusion and clarify the Government’s policy on inclusion.

Nurture groups that are delivered in schools and supported by a teacher and teaching assistant cost about £10,000 to 12,000 per student and in excess of £120,000 per year. In the current climate, with cuts to schools’ budgets of £1.7 billion, coupled with a continually falling rate in real terms of pupil premium moneys since 2015, it is hard to see how the groups can be sustained, let alone expanded.

In fact, since 2011 at least 100 nurture groups have had to close as a result of a lack of funding. In a recent survey by the National Education Union, more than three quarters of teachers confirmed that there were now fewer support assistants and teaching assistant posts.

Kerry McCarthy: I was going to mention teaching assistants in my last intervention, because they are so important. For a child who needs extra attention and one-to-one support, whether because of SEND or emotional difficulties, they can often be the difference between their being able to stay in the class or needing to go to a nurture group. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a false economy to slash schools’ funding so that they cannot employ teaching assistants any more?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. In a recent survey, almost 100% of teachers said that the level of staff cuts was having a negative effect on the support that they can give pupils who need extra help.

Emma Hardy: One thing that we would perhaps all agree on is that the pupil premium has been effective in providing additional money and giving teachers additional support. Does my hon. Friend share my significant concern that some multi-academy trusts are operating their own funding formula and giving a school less core funding? They are saying to that school, “You get lots of funding through your pupil premium, so you don’t need as much core funding.” Within each multi-academy trust, the bulk of the money is not going where it should—to the school with the high pupil premium—but being reallocated. Does she agree that that is wrong?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: It will come as no surprise to my hon. Friend that I agree that it is wrong. There is a lot of mystery surrounding exactly where some of the pupil premium money is going. Perhaps the Minister can shed some light on that when he sums up.
All schools, including primary schools, should be safe environments, with good behaviour, where pupils are respectful of one another and able to fulfil their potential. An effective whole-school culture should set high expectations and standards for all pupils, while providing support for the most vulnerable children, including those with mental health issues, those in care and those with special educational needs and disabilities.

As the Secretary of State set out in his speech to the Resolution Foundation last July, one of our Department’s top priorities is to create a system that helps the most disadvantaged children to reach their full potential. So the question is: how do we ensure that we give children the best start in life?

I acknowledge my hon. Friend’s argument that too many children still fall behind with their communication and language skills early on. We also know that it is hard to close the gaps that emerge. Some 28% of children finish their reception year still without the early communication, language and literacy skills that they need to succeed. The Secretary of State has therefore set out his ambition to halve that figure by 2028. To support that ambition, we are investing more than £100 million in our social mobility programme, which includes £20 million for high-quality, evidence-based training and professional development for pre-reception early years staff in disadvantaged areas; £26 million for a network of English hubs, to promote effective early language and effective reading; and £10 million to understand what works, which will be deployed in partnership with the Education Endowment Foundation.

Emma Hardy: Unfortunately, the Minister has failed to address the other point that the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) made, which was about children with social and emotional problems. The Minister briefly mentioned children with SEND and children starting from a delayed academic standpoint, but what support will this Government give to children with social and emotional problems? Is it using initiatives, pilots or anything?

Nick Gibb: I will come to that point in a moment; if the hon. Lady will be a little patient, I will address that and the issue of mental health, in particular.

Of course, what happens in early years settings is only part of the story; what happens in the home is central to children’s outcomes. We can do more to ensure that all parents have access to the best advice, tools and resources to support their children in the earliest years. That is why we are inviting a broad range of organisations to come together as part of a coalition to explore innovative ways to boost early language development and reading in the home. Following the successful homelearning environment summit in November, we are developing a campaign that will be launched later this year.

It is clear that early education—from the age of two—has long-lasting benefits for children, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield intimated in his speech. It helps to promote a child’s physical, emotional, cognitive and social development. However, as he suggested, evidence shows that, on average, disadvantaged families are less likely to make use of formal childcare provision than more advantaged families.

That is why, in September 2013, the Government introduced 15 hours of funded early education for the most disadvantaged two-year-olds. Eligibility was expanded in September 2014 to include children from low-income working families, children with a disability or special educational need, and children who have left care. This early education programme for two-year-olds is popular with parents. In January 2018, local authorities reported that 72% of eligible parents nationally had taken up their entitlement to a place, which was up by 1% from January 2017, and take-up of the free entitlement for two-year-olds in Nottinghamshire is in line with the national average.

However, there is still more work to do, which is why we have commissioned our national delivery contractor, Childcare Works, to support local authorities to increase take-up of the offer for two-year-olds among disadvantaged parents, in particular. We have also commissioned Coram Family and Childcare to support the take-up of the free entitlements through their Parent Champions programme.

Of course, nursery schools also have an important part to play in ensuring excellent outcomes for disadvantaged children. I realise that there is uncertainty over the future of funding for maintained nursery schools. The current arrangements that protect maintained nursery schools’ funding provide nearly £60 million of additional funding a year, but they are due to end in March 2020, which is of course the end of the spending review period. This supplementary funding was a temporary arrangement, to ensure that maintained nursery schools did not miss out when we introduced the early years national funding formula, and we need to decide what should happen when that supplementary funding ends. As preparation for the forthcoming spending review, we are considering how best to handle transitional arrangements for a number of areas, including maintained nursery schools.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield talked about supporting children with special educational needs. The SEND reforms introduced by the Children and Families Act 2014, which came into effect in September 2014, brought in a new approach to supporting children and young people with SEND from birth to the age of 25 across education, health and social care. Our vision for children with SEND is the same as that for all children and young people: that they achieve well in their early years, at school and in college, that they find employment, that they lead happy and fulfilled lives, and that they exercise choice and control in their lives.

Those reforms represented the biggest change to SEND provision in a generation, and they are intended to improve the support available to children and young people with SEND by more effectively joining up services for children from birth to the age of 25 across education, health and social care, and by focusing on positive outcomes for education, employment, housing, health and community participation.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: On the point about SEND reforms, could the Minister shed some light on why children with SEND remain stubbornly over-represented in exclusion figures, and are six times more likely than their peers to be excluded? The system just is not working.
Nick Gibb: That is precisely why we asked Ed Timpson to look at why certain groups in society are more likely to be excluded than others, and he will publish his report soon.

Ben Bradley: I thank the Minister for his comments so far. I think I mentioned in my speech the positive intentions of the 2014 Act, which has been broadly well received—including in the evidence that the Education Committee received—in terms of the reasons behind it and its aspirations. When he talks about working together across different sectors and bringing different services together, does he recognise the element that is often raised as the problem, which is the challenge that local authorities face in getting the health sector genuinely to engage and to fulfil its commitments in education, health and care plans and in relation to the 2014 Act? How can we work to get those health bodies involved and more actively engaged in supporting children within SEND provision?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Those are the challenges that local authorities face, and we are continually working with them to improve the quality of the provision in their areas. As for SEND budgets, which I will come on to, we are concerned about the high needs budget for schools. That is why the Secretary of State recently announced an extra £250 million of funding—£125 million in this financial year and £125 million in the next financial year—to help local authorities with their high needs budget. I think that has been welcomed by local authorities.

Emma Hardy: I agree with hon. Members that the 2014 Act raised aspirations, but there were a few issues with it. First, it raised the entitlement to the age of 25, without any additional funding between the ages of 18 and 25 to meet that aspiration. It also hugely raised parents’ aspirations about what they are entitled to, without the ability to provide that entitlement. That is why parents are now taking local authorities to court, with huge, burgeoning costs in tribunal and lawyer fees. When we see the tip of the iceberg—those parents who have the social capital and knowledge to fight this—we know that there are thousands of parents underneath whose children’s needs are just not being met. I say to the Minister that this is more than just a small issue: a huge, fundamental rethink is needed in SEND.

Nick Gibb: Those issues, of course, are not new. They have existed for as long as I have taken a specialist interest in education; they were certainly key issues during the last Labour Government. One reason why we introduced the 2014 Act was to try to address the disputes that were taking place in tribunals, and to ensure much more co-ordination between the different services. We have increased funding for high needs education from £5 billion in 2013 to £6 billion this year, with the additional £250 million bringing the total up to £6.3 billion by next year.

We understand the pressures on high needs budgets, and the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) is absolutely right that one of the reasons for those pressures is the extension of the entitlement age of 25 for young people with special educational needs and disabilities. However, we do not apologise for that, because those young people need that support. [Interruption.]
All children have the right to a school environment that is safe, and conducive to effective teaching. Sometimes that will mean headteachers taking the difficult decision to exclude a pupil, and I fully support headteachers using exclusion where that is warranted. However, exclusion from school must not mean exclusion from education: when a child is excluded, suitable full-time education must be arranged from the sixth school day of exclusion. The Timpson review is considering how schools use exclusion and how that impacts on all pupils, but in particular why some groups of children, such as those with special needs, are more likely to be excluded from school.

Alternative provision is the system that is in place to educate those pupils who are unable to attend mainstream school. It is vital that those pupils who enter alternative provision following exclusion have access to a high-quality education, to help every child to achieve their potential. Local authorities or schools as commissioners must have regard to our statutory guidance, which states:

“Good alternative provision is that which appropriately meets the needs of pupils”

who require its use,

“and enables them to achieve good educational attainment on par with their mainstream peers.”

That guidance also sets out that the personal and social needs of pupils should be properly identified and met in order to help them overcome any barriers to attainment, and that AP should aim to improve pupil motivation, self-confidence, attendance, and engagement with education.

There are some excellent examples of AP settings that not only have high standards for behaviour, progress and attainment, but have strong therapeutic interventions in place to support pupils of primary school age. Ofsted’s report on the Hawkwood Primary pupil referral unit noted:

“Pupils understand the need to manage their own behaviour, and they are able to reflect on the choices they make. This is because boundaries are consistently applied and expectations are very high.”

One parent was moved to tell inspectors that the school had “made my son respectable.”

Another example is the Family School, an AP free school that opened in September 2014. Its ethos is built around supporting pupils to cultivate a productive lifestyle, personal resilience, and the values required to become responsible members of society. An innovative aspect of that programme is that it requires a parent or significant adult family member to participate in the classroom with their child. The focus is on families helping themselves and each other to create the conditions and changes necessary, so that children can resolve their problems and be better equipped to return to school, which I know is something that my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield is concerned about.

In both the schools that I have cited, a high proportion of pupils are successfully reintegrated into mainstream schools. We are determined to ensure that every AP setting is as good as the good examples that I have cited, and that their best practice is shared. As I set out in the AP vision document that we published last March, we want to make sure that the right children are placed in the right AP, and that they receive a high-quality education and achieve meaningful outcomes after leaving alternative provision. That is supported by a £4 million innovation fund, which includes projects that have a focus on reintegration.

In closing, I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield and other hon. Members who have participated in today’s debate that this Government are determined to do all that we can to support young people in achieving their potential, whether by providing continued support for early years services, supporting mental health services, reforming the special educational needs system or providing highly effective alternative provision where necessary.

5.39 pm

Ben Bradley: I am grateful to hon. Members who have contributed to the debate, particularly those from the Education Committee. They show a clear passion for the subject and for supporting young people. That is particularly so in the case of the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), who spoke with her usual passion for supporting the most vulnerable people in our society.

I was pleased to hear the Minister’s response, which made it clear that supporting disadvantaged people and a commitment to social mobility are key priorities for Government. He highlighted investment in many different areas, which is welcome. I would like to see that investment going directly to schools, and for schools to be given the ability to make independent decisions more often about personalised interventions for our children. I recognise the positive aspirations of the SEND reforms that the Minister talked about and the 2014 Act, and I look forward to the outcomes of the Timpson review.

I also thank the Minister for his kind words about Forest Town Primary School, which I am sure will make those there very happy. It is an excellent provision and there are a number of such schools across my constituency. I hope we can meet the Minister’s expectations with positive alternative provision examples. They should be encouraged, matched and talked about across the rest of the country.

I recognise the work that the Minister does behind the scenes making the case for education with the Treasury in terms of the forthcoming spending review. That is difficult in the current climate, and I hope he continues to make that case. If I can help him in any way with making the case for education’s being a huge priority for the rest of this Parliament, I certainly will. It would be very welcome. I thank everyone for their contributions. In particular, I thank the Minister for his time and you, Sir Christopher. It has been a pleasure.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered nurture and alternative provision in primary schools.

5.41 pm

Sitting adjourned.
As I mentioned, when the closures were announced, my immediate concern was for the almost 1,300 Santander staff in the 140 branches in these islands. I know from speaking to staff at the branch at Parkhead Forge that the announcement on 23 January came as something of a bolt from the blue. When I met Santander executives the following week, I was disappointed to learn that although about a third of the staff may be redeployed, a deeply uncertain future remains for the other two thirds. Given that there are almost 6,000 fewer bank branches and building societies in the UK compared with 2010, those staff cannot exactly just move their skills to another local bank. That is obviously a key problem. Other banks have abandoned high streets and shopping centres, closing thousands of branches and abandoning the customers who stood by them during the financial crash. Abandonment is exactly what Santander proposes in the east end of Glasgow.

Unashamedly, as a constituency MP, I want to use some of my time today to make the case for keeping the Parkhead Forge branch open. I cannot fathom why it was selected for closure, given the widely known demographic issues in the east end of Glasgow. When I met Santander senior staff, I made the point that the Parkhead branch, situated in the busy Forge shopping centre, appears to have a heavy footfall, with customers like me often having to queue before seeing a teller. Frustratingly, I have still not received the transaction and footfall data I asked for from the bank, which makes me question whether Santander has looked at it at all. Surely if the branch were not being used enough, Santander would be content to demonstrate that by releasing the data.

In its initial impact assessment, and somewhat to my surprise, Santander suggests that east end customers should go to their next nearest branch, Rutherglen, which is not actually in Glasgow. The journey could perhaps be done by train. Of course, if Santander had bothered to do more than a mere desktop exercise, it would have realised that Parkhead does not have a train station and that the journey would take well over an hour and mean travelling through Partick, in Glasgow’s west end, which is simply ludicrous.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman makes a good point about the insensitivity of the one-size-fits-all letter that everyone was sent. We are losing two branches in my seat—not only in Acton High Street, which recently lost NatWest and HSBC, but in west Ealing, where we have lost Halifax and Lloyds. Our streets are being turned into ghost towns. The recommendation in Acton was to go to the post office. That has closed too. Where are people meant to go?

David Linden: Absolutely. The hon. Lady makes a powerful point. I intend to come on to the recommendation that people go to the post office, because the argument is weak and does not stand up to scrutiny. She is right to point out the mass exodus of banks from high streets. Banks are a major part of the local economy, and it does not do them any good if they abandon the high street.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The closure of the branch in Helensburgh in my constituency means that the nearest Santander branch will be 25 miles away...
in the west end of Glasgow. I have serious concerns about the so-called impact assessment, which has been carried out only after the announcement. Does my hon. Friend share my fear that it will be little more than an exercise in justifying a decision that has already been made?

David Linden: Absolutely. My hon. Friend does a power of work in his capacity as chair of the all-party group on rural poverty. He speaks powerfully about the impact the closure will have in his rural constituency. In my constituency, customers are not quite being asked to go 25 miles, but the point is well made, and I hope the Minister has taken it on board.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): As I outlined in my Adjournment debate on this very subject last week, the impact on rural Lanark will be devastating for the local economy and the high street. Does my hon. Friend agree that banks should do more to consider the economic impact?

David Linden: Absolutely. That is one reason why I am delighted to see the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) here for the debate. His private Member’s Bill looks specifically at the impact of such closures, particularly on rural communities. My hon. Friend’s point is well made.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is being extraordinarily generous in taking interventions. Does he agree that if local impact assessments are done, they are ignored, and not just by Santander? Banks want to force people into online banking, and the real threat of that is that they will move towards allowing algorithms, not human beings, to take decisions. It is not just the high street that goes, but the personal interaction and the ability to appeal to a human being if things go wrong.

David Linden: Absolutely. That fits nicely with the next point I want to make, which is about impact assessments. The bank conceals that only half of the customers who use the Parkhead branch use online, mobile or telephone banking services. The data concerning digital exclusion in the east end is widely available, so it beggars belief that Santander has overlooked it and still plans to pull down the shutters on a branch that serves some of the most vulnerable and isolated people in the country.

I want to turn now to the issue of reliance on the post office network to deliver banking services. Having asked the Minister about it during Treasury questions a couple of weeks ago, I can almost anticipate his response: that Santander customers can just do their banking at the post office. I think my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) felt frustration about that during her Adjournment debate last week.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I have a background in the Post Office. All we see is closure after closure, and now that WHSmith—the worst retailer on the high street—is taking the contract, it could also close post offices. The excuse given by the banks—that if they close down, people can use the post office—needs to be looked at seriously.

David Linden: Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman, my constituency neighbour, hits the nail on the head. There are flaws in the argument that the post office network can just replace local banking services.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a great speech. The branch on Renfrew High Street in my constituency is also earmarked for closure, and Santander suggested that customers use the post office network or the branch in Paisley. However, as many people will know, given the representations we have made, the fees the banking industry and Post Office Ltd pay postmasters to carry out this function are ridiculously low and unsustainable. The contracts are currently being renegotiated with the banks. Does my hon. Friend agree that the banks need to step up to the mark and pay post offices fairly for carrying out their banking functions?

David Linden: That is an excellent point, and one I intend to come on to later. My hon. Friend has been a doughty campaigner on this issue, not only in terms of post offices, but in fighting a good campaign against the Royal Bank of Scotland closures in Renfrew, and we should pay tribute to that.

Brendan O’Hara: My hon. Friend is being incredibly generous in giving way. Before we move on from the role of the Post Office, I would like to share some information I received this morning. In a letter to me on 24 January, Santander assured me that it was working closely with post offices near closing branches to keep them informed and supported. This morning, the Post Office wrote to me saying that, due to commercial sensitivities, Santander does not share customer numbers with it, and therefore that it “is exceptionally difficult to model the impact...on any given branch without having information on numbers and amount of cash withdrawals”.

Does my hon. Friend share my concerns about the veracity of an impact assessment that encourages customers to use the Post Office’s services, when Santander does not even share basic information with it?

David Linden: Herein lies the issue that hon. Members on both sides of the House want to raise today. The Government’s line so far has been, “Oh, well, it’s fine—we’ll just shunt this issue on to the Post Office.” I am grateful that a number of hon. Members are homing in on the question of the Post Office, because that is the key weakness in Santander’s argument. First, there is a capacity issue because, given the rate at which banks are closing, we are expecting post offices to adapt to a significantly higher number of counter transactions within the same constraints as previously.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman yet again. I completely understand why the focus of this debate is on Santander, but from the point of view of the Government’s response, is Santander not taking the hit for a whole range of other brands that have been gradually leaving the high street over the past few years? Santander is almost the last man standing, so it is getting more adverse attention than it perhaps
deserves. The blame the hon. Gentleman rightly attributes should be spread across all major banking brands and not just attached to this one.

**David Linden:** The hon. Gentleman is right that other banks have been complicit in abandoning our local communities. I do not know whether he is due to lose a branch in his constituency, but the vast majority of hon. Members here are. As constituency MPs we have the right to come here to challenge not only the UK Government but Santander, which is planning to abandon our communities. I think we are spot on to be tackling Santander.

**Ged Killen** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Gentleman for being so generous in giving way. On the point he made about abandoning communities, there are two former bank branches currently lying empty in my constituency, and there is about to be a third. Does he not think that banks leaving high streets owe it to their customers to invest in the community again in some form, whether by helping to get a new tenant into the closed branches or by providing some other investment in return for the loyalty they have been shown?

**David Linden:** I am grateful to another constituency neighbour for making a powerful point. It is great that the hon. Gentleman is here, because, with the planned closure of the Santander branch in my constituency, people have been moved to the one in his. The point that my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) made was that, even if certain branches—such as the one in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency—have been saved this time, that does not mean they will not be at risk in future, so I am glad he is here to make his point.

**Angela Crawley:** My hon. Friend has been an absolute champion for his constituency in this campaign. Does he agree that post offices simply cannot provide the same level of service as a bank branch, and that it is insufficient for the Government to use post offices as some sort of response? If it is not Santander, it is every other bank abandoning the high street, and post offices simply cannot provide the same service.

**David Linden:** That is spot on, because there is a question of sustainability for postmasters. We know that a huge number of previous Crown post offices have been transitioned to franchise partners, and we are seeing evidence that those partners may no longer find the offering attractive. Interestingly, Martin Kearsley, the banking director of Post Office Ltd, gave evidence to the Treasury Committee. When questioned on whether the Post Office makes a profit by offering basic banking services on behalf of providers, he answered:

“It does not currently. We are in discussions with the banks to change that position…What we do is charge the banks for the provision of the network and the transactions their customers do with us. We then share that model with our postmasters.”

We know that profitability is an issue for postmasters, but it is not the only one. When questioned about the fairness of postmasters having to offer banking services, Mr Kearsley said:

“We have seen a huge increase in the amount of cash coming into our branches. That is challenging, we recognise that and we are working hard to address it. That means postmasters spend a lot of time counting cash. We have provided new equipment to try to help. We have modernised and streamlined the processes, so that that can be done more effectively and rapidly, but we recognise that that is a challenge for them right now and we continue to innovate to fix those problems.”

The question is how on earth we can reasonably expect the post office network to pick up the slack from banks that have abandoned their customers, when the current model is demonstrably not sustainable.

That leads on to the question of the level of service provided. Although many everyday banking transactions can be completed at post offices, there are restrictions on what can and cannot be done. There are limits on deposits and withdrawals, for example. Currently, only 5% of consumers withdraw cash, and 2% deposit cash, primarily at a post office, and there is anecdotal evidence from Citizens Advice to suggest that level of service may be a major factor in that.

The lack of regulation is also concerning. While banks are regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority, the Post Office is not. Banking customers are not necessarily Post Office customers, so the same duty of care simply does not exist. Let us face it: franchise holders are in this to make a living, and banking is not profitable for them. When staff costs and training costs are factored in, banking can be loss-making for post offices. All things considered, while I am sure that some postmasters will go above and beyond, they are certainly not compelled or incentivised to do so.

When all is considered, it is little surprise, then, that post offices suddenly close. There are 35 fewer permanent post offices in Scotland today than there were in 2011. On top of that, communities continue to be plagued by temporary closures. In my own constituency, Tollcross post office closed in December 2017. Although the Post Office calls it a temporary closure, in reality it has still not found someone willing to take the service on, 14 months later. That is just one community suddenly left without service.

In the neighbouring constituency of Rutherglen and Hamilton West, I gather that the post office in Rutherglen closed suddenly without explanation last June, leaving thousands of people without service in what is a highly populated area with a busy high street. In the Glasgow North West constituency, the Dumbarton Road post office closed suddenly in November last year, with local residents left in the lurch ever since. When these offices shut, there is no replacement service. The Post Office does not offer a mobile service in the interim. There is no universal service obligation in place to ensure that an alternative service is offered on a temporary basis while the problem is fixed. In reality, communities are simply left without.

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. He makes the good point that when branches close, there are often no alternative sources for people to access cash and banking services. My hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) fully supports the hon. Gentleman’s endeavours, but unfortunately he is engaged in the debate in the main Chamber. My hon. Friend has seen, just as I have in Ceredigion, that when branches close, the post office network is often simply not there, and communities are left in the lurch.
David Linden: I know the hon. Gentleman has had experience of banks fleeing his constituency, where the local economy was already quite fragile, so he is right to put that on record. It is great to hear that input from him and from his colleague the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards), because Wales is also seeing this happen.

While banks will point to the post office as a convenient replacement when they bail on communities, post offices certainly cannot be relied on to bail out the banks. I understand that banks need to look at economic viability when deciding whether to keep branches open, but they cannot fully replace a critical service with something that does not provide the same level of service and that cannot guarantee that it will even be able to keep its own doors open.

Brendan O’Hara: My hon. Friend is making a powerful case, and he is right to point out the lazy assumption that the post office will always be there to pick up the slack. I know for a fact that that is not true: in my constituency, in the village of Tighnabruaich, the post office ran out of money, and pensioners could not pick up their pensions last month. The postmistress did everything she possibly could to mitigate the circumstances, but while they were unusual, they were not unique, and they will be repeated time and again if we allow banks to assume that post offices will be there at all times to pick up the slack.

David Linden: Absolutely. Such is my friendship with my hon. Friend that we share a psychic bond. He probably knows that I will come on to speak about access to cash.

The Access to Cash Review’s interim report from a couple of months ago makes quite stark reading. Despite more and more services becoming cashless, approximately 8 million people—around 17% of the UK population—say that cash is an economic necessity for them. However, that 17% is not evenly spread. Scotland is much more open to economic damage from the transition to a cashless society than other parts of the UK. The statistics show that cash use in London declined by around 8.5% in the 2017-18 financial year, compared with only 3.3% in Scotland. Scotland is still much more reliant on cash, and it is therefore vital that we are not pushed to become cashless at the same pace as other parts of the UK. Quite frankly, that cannot and should not be forced on people, particularly some of our older, disabled or more vulnerable people.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): As a London MP, I would like to see the figures broken down by ward. I am sure we would find that everyone uses a card in central London, for example, whereas many people in my constituency still rely on cash.

David Linden: That is a powerful point. I suspect that if we broke those figures down, we would see a different situation in Kensington and Chelsea from that in Hornsey and Wood Green. That point was well made.

Research published this week by the consumer champion Which? found that 339 Scottish bank branches have closed their doors since 2015. However, we need to remember that this is not only about branches closing. When banks leave, they all too often take cash machines with them, and at this stage I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen), who I know has done a lot of work on the situation around ATMs.

The rate of loss of cash machines across the UK should alarm us all, with LINK reporting that the UK lost more than 2,500 free-to-use cash machines last year. Financial exclusion is soaring and is fuelled by the transition from cash, hitting certain sections of society harder than others. For example, I regularly make home visits to constituents with physical disabilities, who tell me they rely on taxis for their freedom. I do not know what it is like elsewhere in the UK, but few taxi companies in Glasgow accept card payments. I also still encounter many constituents who have had a struggle even to open a bank account in the first place, so we really cannot assume that everyone has a debit card. Some of these people will quite simply lose quite a big element of their freedom if they lose easy access to their cash. Others might even be driven to high-interest credit cards or pre-pay debit cards that charge people a fee simply for accessing their own money.

Mental health is also all too often overlooked. The Money and Mental Health Policy Institute report “Seeing through the fog” contains startling testimonies from people with mental health problems. One says: “I find doing things face to face much easier and better for me. I hate doing things over the phone and can get quite anxious when doing so… I don’t trust online banking and will avoid this for as long as I can.”

Another says: “I can’t handle the internet, I need human contact.”

Another respondent says: “I need to see a person. I can’t cope with all this online banking stuff.”

It is little wonder that the institute’s evidence to the ongoing Treasury Committee inquiry into access to financial services concluded:

“Bank branch closures may particularly disadvantage people with mental health problems who struggle with remote methods of communication and rely on face-to-face support from firms to manage their finances.”

We cannot ignore people like this as society moves away from cash, and we certainly cannot treat them as collateral damage in the march of progress.

We have heard time and again that the UK is sleepwalking into becoming a cashless society, but that is no longer the case, because the evidence is there. We are here to discuss the issue today, and Ministers should listen and react, because we cannot afford to sleepwalk.

Simon Hart: The closure in my community of one high street bank, and the removal of its cash machine, had a profound effect on the profitability of other businesses within just a couple of hundred metres, which rely on cash circulating. They noticed within a day the negative impact of that development.

David Linden: The hon. Gentleman is spot on and really hits the nail on the head. That point was made me by the Federation of Small Businesses. The reality is that someone going out to buy a couple of rolls and a newspaper will probably not want to tap their debit card to pay; they will want to use cash. If millions of
people are left behind in the move away from cash, I am afraid that the blame will lie squarely at the feet of the Government.

That brings me to my final point, which is a direct appeal to the Minister. I do not think that the Government and Ministers can sit back and say that this is a commercial decision for the bank. Put simply, allowing banks to bail out on our communities has a detrimental impact on the economy, which should concern the Government. When the Minister gets to his feet later, I want him to address some of the fundamental concerns I have raised, and which others will doubtless also raise, about how these planned closures will have such a detrimental impact on our economy.

Dr Huq: The hon. Gentleman talks about internet transactions and shrivelling high streets. Does he agree that another solution for the Government is to look at business rate reform? The transitional phasing system means that places like Stockport subsidise the City. Businesses tell me that re-evaluations should be more frequent than every five years. In fact, a consortium of 40 retailers, including WHSmith, which has been mentioned, and River Island, whose head office is in Hanger Lane in my seat, is campaigning for that reform. Does he agree that it would be a good idea for the Minister to meet those 40 retailers?

David Linden: Absolutely. As a Scottish National party politician, I am more than happy to talk about business rates, given that my party has lifted 100,000 small businesses in Scotland out of paying them. If the hon. Lady wants a debate on that, I am happy to talk about it.

Finally, my parting message goes to Santander itself. If it proceeds with these closures, Santander customers like myself will be forced to consider abandoning it. The message from all of us in this Chamber, I am sure, is crystal clear: save our Santander.

Several hon. Members rose—

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Order. I will call the Front-Bench spokespeople no later than 4 o’clock. I will not put a time limit on speeches at this stage, but to give Members a guide, it looks as if they will have roughly 10 minutes each.

1.56 pm

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing this important debate; we can see from the number of Members present the powerful cross-party consensus on the impact of bank branch closures on our local communities.

The most recent closures in my constituency and across the UK continue a worrying trend of declining public services. In Angus, 2015 saw the closure of the Royal Bank of Scotland in Brechin, 2016 saw the Edzell Bank of Scotland branch close and in 2017 it was TSB in Kirriemuir. In 2018, RBS in Montrose and the Bank of Scotland in Kirriemuir closed, and it has now been announced that there will be two further Santander closures by the end of the year.

From 2015 to 2019, my local authority saw a total of 12 bank branches close. Looking at the wider picture, from 2010 to 2018 the country as a whole saw a 35% decline in bank branches, but Scotland was above that national average, at 38%. Angus now has one Santander branch in the constituency catering for a population of 100,000 people, although obviously not all of them are its customers.

I was disappointed, as the local Member, to hear about the closures in my constituency through a local news outlet, as opposed to from the Santander public affairs team; I believe Members of the Scottish Parliament heard through that route. I got a letter through a few days afterwards. I have not been given the opportunity to meet Santander until a few weeks from now. I am very disappointed by the way in which it has treated this serious issue.

The closures have an important impact on communities across the UK, with rural communities affected slightly differently. Both customers and staff find themselves in incredibly difficult situations, as the hon. Member for Glasgow East pointed out. Of course, the solution to all this is digitisation, but that does not help everyone. I was quite surprised when I went to bank a cheque in my local branch the other day and was told that I did not need to do that in the branch because it can be done via phone. Even at 29, I was surprised by the level of technology that some banks have pushed forward. However, those options are not available to all.

People in rural communities increasingly feel that they are being penalised because of where they choose to stay, whether by bank closures or through other services being taken away from them. These bank branches are in the heart of communities and they cannot simply be replaced by the cited alternatives.

Let us look at the digitisation offering. In an area such as Angus, there is not fantastic mobile coverage or broadband across the whole constituency. In fact, my constituency was ranked 612 out of the 650 constituencies in the UK—one of the worst—for the roll-out of superfast broadband. People simply do not have access to it, so although yes, more people are using the internet for their personal needs—the figure went up from 63% to 83% between 2007 and 2016—that provision is not available to all. As much as banks are keen to highlight the digital offering, they have to recognise that that cannot be used by everyone. We also have problems with mobile coverage. I know that it can be suggested that people phone the bank on a landline to raise their issues, but between 2012 and 2017 landline minutes declined by about 50% because people are using their mobiles. But in Angus, we still have many footspots, where people simply cannot get through.

The other alternative that hon. Members have mentioned is the use of post offices. As much as I welcome Santander’s provision to help the more vulnerable to understand how they can access post office services, Santander will not be able to do that with them every day. There are post offices in the towns where my closures are, in Brechin and Forfar, and I have been assured that they will be able to deal with all Santander customers wanting to deposit and withdraw cash, to pay in cheques and to check bank balances, but what if they need to print a statement or transfer money to another person’s account? What if they have questions about their mortgage? Those are all issues that people need to deal with day to day.
day. Santander needs to look into those specific issues and how it would expect people without connectivity and without a post office nearby to be able to carry out those tasks.

Ged Killen: The hon. Lady makes a powerful point about the things that people need to do in a bank branch. I recently met Bank of Scotland representatives in my constituency and they spoke at great length about how wonderful the banking protocol was and how they had used it to stop transactions by vulnerable customers who had been sent along there by rogue salesmen or whoever to lift money out of the bank. They were able to spot that because they knew the customers; they had a relationship with them. Shortly thereafter, the Bank of Scotland announced that it was closing a branch nearby. How can the provisions of the banking protocol possibly be being met if everything is done online?

Kirstene Hair: The hon. Gentleman makes a vital point. Many people want face-to-face interaction. For some people, the person they speak to when they go to the bank might be the only person they speak to all day, so it helps with combating loneliness, which we all know is so important. The hon. Gentleman makes the very valuable point that these staff get to know people; they create a relationship with their customers and look out for them on a personal basis.

As for the Post Office offering, one in three rural post offices closed between 2000 and 2009, and that decline has continued. We have to understand that post offices cannot always and will not always be able to accommodate all those who want to use them. It just seems to me that this is such a short-term approach, because if we have no post offices, if we have poor broadband and if we do not have mobile coverage, the digitisation method and post offices do not support all customers but support only a proportion of them. It is really important that Santander tries to explain to customers who do not have those points of access how it will still be a banking provider that those customers would want to deal with.

Protecting our high streets is also incredibly important. My high streets across Angus and in constituencies across the country are struggling very much. Post offices and banks are central to our high streets. They ensure that we have continued footfall day after day. When these sites are lost, the potential for these areas is hampered. Let us take the town of Kirriemuir in my constituency as an example. Kirriemuir was nominated in the Great British High Street Awards in 2018; in my eyes, it was robbed, because it did not win. The area has a fantastic variety of high-quality local businesses that support numerous initiatives, for local residents and benefit the community. I am thinking of the efforts of the Kirriemuir and Local Business Association and Kirrie Connections. That is a high street shop, but in fact it is a dementia hub, which I visited only last week. People go there to spend time with those who are going through similar experiences to them.

I had the pleasure of being there when the judges were in Kirriemuir and looking round the town, which has so much pride in its offering. But now, it has lost its last bank. It will lose its ATMs. Businesses are forced to react because, as hon. Members have said, where will customers get their cash? Will investors be put off from coming to the town? Where will local businesses deposit their takings? When I was going round as part of small business Saturday, businesses raised with me the issue of again the fact that there are more card transactions because less cash is available and the fee on those card transactions is absolutely hammering them at a time when things are very difficult on our high streets. In addition, what of those constituents who want to use only cash? I understand that elderly people do not want a bank card or credit card; they want to pay only with cash. Why should we suggest that they should not be able to do so, if a bank and ATM are removed?

At a time when we should be doing everything for our high streets, we should be encouraging more footfall and not increasing the pressures, difficulties and uncertainty. One suggestion has been put forward time and again by my constituents: why cannot banks operate out of one building? Why can we not have a banking hub whereby all banks are located in one building? That means we keep a set of premises going, we keep choice for constituents and they do not have to travel as far as they might have to if a bank closed down.

Ben Lake: The hon. Lady makes a very important point about banking hubs. Mine is just a point of information. It is ironic that some co-located branches used to exist in my constituency in the 1970s; two or three different banks would share the same location. Perhaps it could be a case of back to the future.

Kirstene Hair: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, which shows that banking hubs would work. They would work in many communities. They would keep that vital place on the high street. They would keep choice and keep accessibility. Those who cannot log on online or do not want to could of course come and have a face-to-face discussion with someone in the bank. That is a really important point that we should be putting across, and I would be keen to know what my hon. Friend the Minister thinks of that proposal.

My final point is about transport, which I know other hon. Members have already discussed. Those who do not want to or cannot use phones or computers to do their banking will of course need to travel to the nearest bank branch, but customers who were using the Brechin branch will now have to travel 15 miles—it is a 30-mile round trip—to Arbroath, and those in Forfar will have to make a similar journey to get to Dundee. What about those with mobility issues? What about the elderly? What about those who do not have their own car? What about those who rely heavily on public transport links, which are also in decline? Those people have to rely more heavily on family and friends. Indeed, vulnerable groups perhaps have no choice but not getting to the bank.

It is really important that we look into all the aspects that affect our constituents. An elderly lady who came into my constituency office the other day remarked that the whole situation was crazy. I agree with her: it is far from desirable. Although I have been in this place for just over 18 months, I have always felt that the most powerful debates here are those in which we have cross-party consensus. I look forward to the Minister’s reaction on the impact that these closures will have on our high streets, on post office support—because we also see
post offices in decline—and on the idea of banking hubs. We all need to work together to ensure that we soften the blow of bank closures for each and every one of our communities.

2.8 pm

**Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank the Backbench Business Committee and the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for securing this important and very relevant debate.

In my constituency of Heywood and Middleton, we have sadly been through all this before. The Heywood branch of Santander was closed in 2017 in a similar exercise to the one that we are seeing now, although at that time customers of the Heywood branch at least had the option of using the Middleton branch, and they were told that during the consultation. Now, it seems that that option is also about to go, leaving my constituency with no Santander branches whatever.

I look at Heywood town centre now and I can see how bank branch closures contribute to the decline of our town centres. In Heywood, NatWest closed its doors in 2015, Santander in 2017 and Lloyds Bank just recently, in January this year. The town centre is in decline, with many shops and small businesses closing. I am not laying the blame for that solely at the doors of Santander—obviously there are many other contributory factors—but I do think that the big banks need to acknowledge their community responsibilities. When they close a branch, they cut footfall, reduce access for elderly and disabled customers, and cause problems for small businesses in the area. Each branch closure chips away at our once thriving town centres.

In my constituency, the Rochdale Development Agency is currently making plans for Heywood town centre, deciding whether it should be residential, retail, or a mix, and it is in the council’s capital programme for the next financial year. It is vital that we regenerate our town centre and I hope that we can achieve this. I do not want the same thing to happen in Middleton, but the closure in July this year of the Middleton branch of Santander has been announced.

The announcement was accompanied by helpful advice on nearby branches, all of them more than a three-mile bus ride away, plus the information that banking could be done at Middleton post office. The powers that be at Santander seem oblivious to the fact that Middleton post office, in its turn, is being franchised into WHSmith in the town, with an expected reduction in service, as well as problems with accessibility for elderly and disabled customers. One of my constituents, Karen Dicken, tells me that once the post office has moved, she will no longer have access to post office services, as she cannot get her mobility scooter into WHSmith. Yet Santander appears to think that offering banking services via a Crown post office that is soon to be relocated is adequate. Clearly there are failings here on the Government side, as highlighted by their refusal to perform an equality impact assessment on the franchising of the Crown post office, but I find it staggering that Santander is so blithely unaware of what else is going on in Middleton town centre that it honestly thinks that offering post office banking services in the town is a viable proposition.

Santander UK is a member of the British Bankers’ Association and is a signatory to the access to banking protocol, which was introduced in May 2015. The protocol states that it is “an industry-wide initiative, which aims to ensure that where banks close branches they do so responsibly and with consideration of the impact on customers and local communities.” Santander says, “we do not take the decision to close any branch lightly”, yet it seems to me that this decision has been taken lightly, judging by the lack of attention to local issues, such as the impending closure and relocation of the Crown post office in my constituency.

I urge Santander to think again. I also urge my constituents to respond to the consultation. When the Heywood branch closure was announced, only six letters were submitted from constituents, with one more letter submitted from me. However, I have had a complaint from a constituent, who said that she has responded to the consultation and has simply been sent a repeat of what was already stated in the initial letter. She thinks it is a fait accompli. She says that she will move her account to a bank that does have a branch in the town.

Notwithstanding that, I urge all my Middleton constituents who want their town centre to continue to thrive to get their comments in now. I have also launched a petition to save Middleton’s Crown post office from back-door privatisation, which has attracted over 1,000 signatures, and I will present it to Parliament in due course. I do not want to be here in another two years’ time talking about the decline in Middleton town centre, and I urge Santander to fulfil its responsibilities under the access to banking protocol.

2.14 pm

**Paul Scully** (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I add my thanks to the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and congratulate him on securing this debate. I am delighted to support him. As my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) said, bank branch closures affect the constituents of hon. Members on both sides of the House. It is important that we stick together to represent people and stand up for the most vulnerable in our society.

In 2016, not long after I was elected, I was faced with a couple of bank closures in my constituency, in Cheam. The high street there thrives on independent shops. First, Lloyds Bank came to the end of its lease. I would give the constituent of the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) the same counsel that I gave my constituents who were upset about losing Lloyds Bank: vote with their feet and go to HSBC up the road. Unfortunately, just a few months later, HSBC decided to close, too. Constituents can be pulled from pillar to post, continually having to move, to chase the exodus from the high streets. Banks do not want to be the last bank on the high street, because all the focus would be on them when they eventually respond to a changing market.

I retain a good relationship with my local Santander branch in Sutton, which looks after customers of the two that are now closing. I remember a tweet that I sent to a constituent on 19 May 2016, in which I said that I had had a chat to Santander, which was closing quite a
small branch in North Cheam, but was committed to its main Cheam branch. Fast-forward only three years: that branch is now closing. The last bank in Cheam will have gone.

When Lloyds Bank and HSBC were closing, residents set up petitions, but petitions only have so much value. Yes, they can show the weight of opinion and ask the banks to please be considerate, but when a banking chain has made a corporate decision, a petition will generate heat but not a lot of light, so we need to look at other ways to respond. Can we encourage customers to move elsewhere? Can we work on the post office network, despite the restrictions on that, which we heard about from other hon. Members? Are we putting an unfair burden on the post office network and the Government in relation to decisions made by corporate organisations?

In the case of the Santander closure in Cheam, three local councillors, Elliott Colburn, Holly Ramsey and Eric Allen, have taken a different tack. Metro Bank is looking at expanding its network in other areas, so they have made a direct approach to Metro Bank, saying, “Here’s a space. There are no banks. It is an area where there are a lot of independent shops. Metro Bank takes a different tack in its approach to attracting customers—it is a bit of a disruptor bank—so why don’t you come in and consider Cheam as an option?”

What more can we do? We have talked about the pressure being put on to post offices. In Sutton, it looks as though our Crown post office will be moved to WHSmith, which will cause angst and concern to a number of people there. On the other hand, not far away in Belmont, a village to the south of my constituency, a post office has just been opened at the back of a pet shop, and it is one of the best-used post offices. It won an award from the network as one of the best new post offices in London, coming second only to one on Oxford Street. That is pretty impressive. If it is put in an imaginative place, it will be used.

What more can we do? Should we look at the banking hubs and a return to the ’70s, or some form of technology to move banks from making corporate decisions to making marketing decisions, which can go a totally different way? If the bank takes a marketing decision to look at innovation, its corporate social responsibility will move the decision away from just being a box-ticking exercise for its shareholder report to being something that can actually add value to the high street and tackle the issues such as loneliness mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Angus. By making the high street a hub and a community centre and bringing in other businesses to work with the bank, the bank can become the centre of the high street, which has to be good for that bank.

Paul Scully: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. We have talked about how moving Crown post offices into WHSmith branches across the country will limit their structure, because they have some big buildings at the moment. The massive floor space of the one in Sutton is well used, so I am not sure how it will cope if it is restricted at the back of somewhere. It might be a regressive move. There is a limit to how much the Government can direct the Post Office and banks, but they must have a significant influence. They should treat the issue holistically as they look at the future of the high street in general.

We have talked about the access to banking standard. At least Santander now has to go through the process of mitigating the results and looking at who the most vulnerable people are—I hope it would want to do that anyway. The people using bank branches these days tend to be older people, who do not necessarily have access to technology or are not as good at using technology as others, and retailers, especially the independent retailers that I was talking about that are still cash-heavy and need to bank their cash.

For the two branches that are closing in my constituency, the alternatives to Cheam are 1.3 miles and 3.3 miles away, and the alternatives to Worcester Park are 1.8 miles and 3 miles away. For a small business that wants to pay cash in at the end of the day, if there is no post office near enough, that is some distance to go with what might be quite a lot of cash, which is not very secure.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I support the hon. Gentleman’s point about the distance for small businesses. We have that issue in my constituency with the post office closure, which relates to the bank closures. There is a village a mile away from Reading town centre, a separate entity, where three banks and a post office have closed. That is a considerable amount of travelling time for a small business trying to bank cash. We have lost other banks in locations near Reading University and we have lost further facilities in other areas too.

The hon. Gentleman makes a good point about the need to look holistically at the whole parade of shops, the needs of vulnerable local people, particularly the elderly, and the needs of small local businesses. I urge him to raise with his hon. Friends in Government the possibility of an area-based approach, whereby those different needs are taken into account as part of banking or post office regulation.

Paul Scully: In Reading, as in Sutton, the difference in mileage is relatively small, but congestion and extra traffic mean that it represents significant travel time. We cannot compete with the 15 miles that people have to travel in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Angus.

I will make a final point and then let other hon. Members speak. When banks decide to close, we have to make sure that there is still access to a cashpoint network, so people who rely on cash—all that is dying down a bit—have access to it. When I was a local councillor in the neighbouring constituency of Carshalton, I spoke to a baker who had been badly affected when Barclays and its cashpoint closed there. That village relied on its independent shops, but after the cashpoint closed, people tended to turn left, towards the larger supermarkets, rather than right, where the smaller

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point about hubs, as have other hon. Members. What role does he think the Government should play in that? We have heard about the closure of Crown post offices, which the Government own, but surely hubs could be there, because they are well located and owned by us. We are the taxpayers and our constituents need those services.
independent shops are. Previously, people had walked past the independent shops to get their cash and would spend money in the bakers and the other smaller shops on their way to do their main shop. Branch closures have a detrimental effect and we need to look at the issue holistically to make sure that we have a thriving, albeit changing, high street.

2.24 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): This is an important issue for me. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for securing the debate and thereby giving us a chance to contribute. Let me also put on the record my congratulations to Scottish National party Members for continually raising issues about bank closures. Every time they have brought such debates to Westminster Hall or the main Chamber, it has come from their constituents. I thank them for highlighting bank closures, because, in doing so, they illustrate how important the banks are, including in my constituency.

I have a real issue with banks closing branches and leaving the most vulnerable in our society without access to their cash and savings. It is all well and good to say that the number of transactions carried out at Santander branches fell by 23% over the past three years, while transactions online and on mobile phones soared by 99%, but that does not say that staff members have been pushing to get that figure up, as I am sure they have.

In the last few months, the Santander branch in Newtownards, which is the major town in my constituency, moved less than 100 yards from Conway Square in the centre of town to the High Street. It has a considerable customer base and very good connections and contacts with the commercial sector. At a Santander event at the branch before Christmas, I met a young lady who was there alongside Santander to state how well it had helped her to start her business from home. That is an example of how things can be done. I put that on the record, because Santander in Newtownards is obviously in touch with its customer base. It is not one of the three branches closing in Northern Ireland.

On bank closures, the fact that a large amount of people use internet banking tells a story, but does it say that they will cease to use their local branch? I do not believe it does. They will still use the branch for all the necessary things, but now they will have to go for miles to find new branches.

The hon. Member for Rutherfden and Hamilton West (Ged Killen), who has left, unfortunately, tabled early day motion 2057 on access to cash. I was more than happy to sign that early day motion, as I always am on important issues. As I have said in other debates here and in the main Chamber, I understand how important it is to have access to cash. I am one of those old-fashioned guys who like to pay their bills by cash—perhaps that is the economy in Northern Ireland.

David Linden: The hon. Gentleman is doing himself down. It is not just an old person thing—not that he is old. Perhaps I should not be saying this from a security point of view, but for about 10 years, since I have been married, I have operated on a jam-jar basis where I take my money out at the beginning of the month and then I have my shopping budget and my fuel budget. I wanted to put that quaint point on the record.

Jim Shannon: I do not feel old, but perhaps I am of a different generation. As always, I thank the hon. Gentleman for reminding me that such things start young, as it did with my mum and dad as well. As an Ulster Scot, as I have said in the Chamber before, and perhaps in the main Chamber, “Every pound’s a prisoner.” Well, it is to me, and it probably is to the hon. Gentleman as well.

I thank the hon. Member for Rutherfden and Hamilton West for tabling the early day motion on access to cash, because it is important to have it recorded. There are 23 signatures to it so far, which indicates the deep interest in the issue.

I remember when First Trust, a local bank, hired a special adviser to get people out the front of the bank au fait with online banking—the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) referred to the online banking issue. Within six months, the news was out that the branch was closing due to an uptake in specialist online banking. Hon. Members can draw their own conclusions about how and why that happened. That was the third bank to close in the main town of Newtownards and the sixth to close in my constituency of Strangford; I have had a lot of bank closures. That is why every time SNP Members have raised issues with bank closures, I have wanted to make sure that I was in there fighting for my constituency as well. As I say, over time we have had a number of banks close.

I am really quite intrigued by what the Library briefing information that we have received says, statistically and factually. Page 3 of the briefing says:

“The only region or country of the UK in which the number of bank and building society branches increased between 2010 and 2018 was Northern Ireland.”

There must have been a lot of other constituencies getting lots of banks, because I was losing them all while they were getting them all. I am not quite sure if the statistics are correct—no, I am sure they are. I am not saying they are not true; I would not say that for one second. The briefing continues on page 3:

“Northern Ireland has 405 branches, 21.6 per 100,000 residents—the highest rate of any region or country in the UK.”

That prompts the question of what is happening in my constituency in Newtownards? Why have seven bank branches closed over the past number of years, including Danske Bank, Bank of Ireland, First Trust, and Ulster Bank?

According to Which?, the consumer group, nearly two thirds of the UK’s bank branch network has been lost over the past 30 years. The number of bank and building society branches stood at 20,583 in 1988, according to our own parliamentary records, but an up-to-date analysis by Which? of current account providers suggests that that figure has dwindled to 7,586.

I understand, again from the Library information, that three Santander branches will close in Northern Ireland: in Antrim, in Ballymoney, and on Newtownards Road in Belfast. Those branches are not in my constituency, but this year Santander is due to close 140 branches in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the reason given is that there has been a marked decrease in the number of transactions. I must say that I do all my banking in the bank or on the phone, and by physical means—using banknotes—on most occasions. That is not simply to keep business in our local branches, although that plays a part. It is also...
because—honestly—I do not fully trust online banking security. The hon. Member for Glasgow East referred to this issue at the very beginning of the debate and I agree with him, and some of my constituents do not trust it either.

Brendan O’Hara: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and no one can doubt how hard he fights for his Strangford constituents. To justify the closure of its branch in Helensburgh, Santander’s review said that 59% of its customers have used online banking, mobile banking or telephone banking, which means, by its own calculation, 41% of its customers have not. My constituents are predominantly elderly and they are being completely left in the lurch by this branch closure in our town. That is why on Saturday I will be outside the Santander branch in Helensburgh collecting names on a parliamentary petition asking Santander to reverse this deeply harmful decision.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I commend him for his industry and for the fact that he will be there on Saturday. He will have no bother getting the signatures for that petition; I have no doubt about that whatsoever. However, I hope that Santander is listening to what he says, because that situation clearly illustrates to me that his bank needs to be there and the customers want it to be there, and we are all here for the same purpose. That is the critical issue for me and for others who are here in Westminster Hall today.

I often think that if the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority can allow my staff members’ names and addresses to be released by accident, or whatever way it happened, what chance does our money have of withstanding banking attacks? That did happen—it was an oversight, it was a mistake, but it still happened. Honestly, that is why I just have this wee doubt about online banking and other things.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for giving way; I usually get his constituency the wrong way round. After some of the scandals that we have had with TSB and others locking their customers out of their online banking, is it not the case that for all this digital innovation we are nowhere close to it being reliable?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. In my first year and a half here in Parliament, there were a number of banking breakdowns—one would say—within the Ulster Bank. It happened not once, but twice, and perhaps even three times. Honestly, customers could not access their accounts by any means and it was absolutely ridiculous.

I am coming to an end, Mr Davies; I am very conscious of the time. Santander will retain a network of 614 UK branches, with its customers also having the option to bank using more than 11,000 post office sites across the UK. It is very important to have the post office. I have to say that the post offices in my constituency have been geared up to fill some of the gaps—in Ballynahinch, Killyleagh, Portaferry, Kirkcubbin and in Newtownards town—where there are post offices. Credit unions have also filled some of the gaps; it has been incredibly important to have the credit unions, as well.

I still have a real fear that this consolidation of banks to cities further isolates rural communities and adds to people’s sense of being alone, with no one to talk to and no one to help, and I believe that we are further isolating an older generation, which cannot be acceptable. That is the critical fact for me. I look to the Minister, as I always do, for a comprehensive response to the issues that we are all bringing collectively to his attention today.

I conclude by saying that I believe we must put in place a minimum expectation of service provision for customers, and if we do not ask the financial institutions to step up and step in, the service provision will continue to dwindle, jobs will be lost and the only winners will be the shareholders and those who get the dividends. I believe that reform must take place and that banks must fulfil obligations to people, and not simply to profit margins.

2.35 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for securing the debate.

I want to speak first about Santander in particular and then I will have a general go at the banks, because I will feel much better when I have done that. Being a farmer, I have always had very mixed views about banks, one way or the other. They can offer someone an umbrella when the sun is shining, but they are very good at taking it away when it starts to rain.

On Santander in particular, I have had a letter from the Axminster branch—incidentally, it is interesting, because I have not actually had it from the Axminster branch but from the “Head of Branch Interactions”, which is one of my points. The letter says that the Axminster branch will close on 2 May, which is a great shame for the staff, a great shame for people in Axminster and a great shame for the businesses there; naturally, Axminster is famous for its carpets, but there are also Axminster Tools and Machinery, and many other businesses. There are also lots of surrounding farms and businesses in lots of villages, with lots of people coming in to Axminster. There is no sort of local manager in Axminster; there is no local anything, is there, anymore? That is partly the trouble.

What I have been sent about the reasons why Santander is shutting the branch is quite interesting. First of all, the letter says that “89% of customers transacting at Axminster branch already use a variety of ways to complete their banking.”

That is an interesting way to run a business, is it not? Santander is actually saying to people, “Well, because you haven’t done all your business with us, we’re going to close the branch down.” I mean, I do not think that supermarkets or anybody else would go in for that line of business.

The letter also says that “38% of Axminster branch customers also use an additional Santander branch.”

I might occasionally visit Sainsbury’s, I might occasionally visit Tesco—I occasionally visit a number of supermarkets, in a number of towns and in a number of places, but I
would not necessarily expect to hear, “Well, because you’re a loyal customer to Sainsbury’s all over the country, I’m going to shut that branch down, because you’ve used another one.” Again, the logic is somewhat odd.

Then the letter goes on to say that “54% of customers have transacted using our Online, Mobile or Telephone Banking services”.

That is great, but of course what banks have done—have they not?—is to make it more difficult for customers to get cheque books, or anything physical from them, and therefore they drive more and more people online. When people have gone online, they say, “Well, that’s great. You’ve all gone online now, so we’ll close the branch.” This is happening everywhere and although I am having a particular go at Santander today, it is a general malaise in the banking system.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The reasons that Santander gave the hon. Gentleman for the closure of its branch in Axminster are the same reasons it has given for the closure of branches in the market towns of Otley and Yeadon in my constituency. I would like Santander, and the other banks and building societies, to look at the Yorkshire Building Society model, whereby it has co-located with estate agents. Branches can co-locate with other businesses if there is not sufficient footfall. Before banks start closing branches, they need to look at all the options and not just close branches.

Neil Parish: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman, because I just do not think that enough thought is being given to this process. Naturally, it says in this letter I received from Santander that its customers in Axminster are able to go to the post office for cash, to put in cheques and to make withdrawals. Again, however, it is not like having a banking service. That is the other reason that I wanted to speak in this debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) made the point that we should not just highlight Santander. If I go back to the issues in Axminster, we have had branch closures there for Barclays and NatWest, and the one we have left is Lloyds. Let us hope that Lloyds stays in the town and indeed I hope that all the Santander customers pile along to Lloyds. As Members well know—putting my farming hat back on—it is not always easy to change banks. I used to have a very large overdraft with NatWest, and they did not always want me to transfer it. When a person has a business, they want personal attention; they want to be able to see somebody; and they want to get some sort of decision not only on their everyday banking, but their business building or their business. That is just not there anymore.

I wonder, as the banks contract, whether there is one bank out there—they all advertise that they are going to listen to us more and have more local services, but they all close them—that will listen to this debate and think, “Perhaps we can work in the other direction. We will offer some sort of personal attention and look after people and businesses, and actually be there. We might open on a Saturday morning after 12.30.” Most of us work, but the banks close their branches at 12.30. Some of my Axminster constituents can go to Honiton, which is quite difficult to get to but is not that far away, but that branch will be closed at 12.30. What is the point? If a bank is going to provide a service, why does it not open and provide it?

Hugh Gaffney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point, because we did have a network: it was called the Crown post offices. They are closing them down. If the banks want to shut down, give us work in the post offices. Let us stop the closure of Crown post offices, get them reopened, and give the Communication Workers Union the work.

Neil Parish: The hon. Gentleman is attempting to entice me down a route that I do not quite want to go down, but I agree with him in many respects. Post offices provide a great service, and if we are to lose them as well, that is a real problem. However, at this moment in time I am in full flow about the banks, so I ask the hon. Gentleman not to put me off that particular subject.

Dr Whitford: I want to pick up on the comment that the hon. Gentleman made about people going to another town. If someone goes to another town on a Saturday morning to get their money, that is where they are going to shop. That is exactly the impact that bank closures have on our small towns and independent shop owners.

Neil Parish: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. There no longer seems to be any strategy among individual banks that would allow them to work out that closures affect not only their business, but many others. The more branches they close down, the more they will lose business, and other people will also lose business.

I am privileged to have quite an elderly population in my constituency, and that population is getting older all the time. Many country towns and rural towns in Devon are in the same interesting position, because people are getting older, and older people do not necessarily trust online banking. They like to be able to bank physically: going back to my previous comment, they like to see a person occasionally, not a machine. I am making light of these issues, but they are not really light, because so many of the older generation think that they can never see anybody or get an answer, and that everything is put in their way to stop them getting anything. We are working hard to get broadband and internet connection in rural areas—in particular, in the Blackdown hills in my area, around Axminster—but it is quite difficult. We will get there, but it is taking time.

I would like to see a strategy, not only from Santander but from all of the banks. Can we have a hub? Can we have something that actually works? Can we have a facility to which people can go? Banks might be prepared to let post offices do a certain number of transactions, but they do not like other banks doing them, yet they close their branches down. If they want to keep their competiveness and—for want of a better way of putting it—their intellectual property rights, they should not close their branches and make it more difficult for the population to transact with them.

As I have said, I support this afternoon’s debate. It is quite difficult for the Minister, because he cannot say to banks, “You must put a branch there and keep it there.” However, what we must do as a Government, and what
I ask the Minister to do, is ask the banks generally, “Do you have a policy that means that you look after people, get people into your branches, and create a business model that works and encourages people to bank at Santander, or any other bank that happens to be in a town?” I do not see anything at the moment that is proactive: everything is rather negative, and that is a great shame. It is our older population, in particular, that will suffer.

Businesses also suffer. I probably had too good a relationship with my local bank manager, because he probably lent me too much money, but a person should be able to actually see somebody and get a decision. If someone goes to a bank now, they will not see a manager: the decision will be passed up the line, and someone goes to a bank now, they will not see a decision. If I thought I had been lent too much money, I would probably say, “Mr Owen, would you like to move to online banking?” and I say, “No, thank you.” Then they are told who I am, and they discreetly go to the back and say, “Oops, I’ve made a mistake.” I have been arguing for frontline services for many years, because people need that interaction. They need the privacy of speaking to somebody they know when dealing with sensitive financial issues.

Santander has shot itself in the foot with this exercise, and it is going to get no credit here for the way it has gone about it, but it is not alone. We do not have accurate figures about bank closures—there has not been a central source of data about them since 2014, and maybe the Minister can help me—but we all know they are real and they are in our communities. There should be a central source of data, because we should have facts and figures about financial exclusion. Which? is very good at helping us out and has said that there has been a decline of around 35% in banking since 2014. I did some research in my own periphery constituency, and more than 46% of banks have closed in the area—nearly half in two and a half years. That is the trend.

I am not a luddite. I can download an app and use an Apple phone, but like many of my constituents I choose not to. Broadband is not as great in my area as it is in central cities, for example, so it is difficult to use alternative banking methods. I do not want to make a bank transaction and then go offline and become stuck, or to do one draft and then another. It is a serious problem. I think the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) mentioned that the broadband distribution in her area is not suitable. There needs to be some joined-up thinking here.

The Government have played a role in the trend I mentioned. Colleagues have rightly mentioned the shrinkage of the post office network over many years. Yet the standard letters that Santander and other banks have issued say, “Go to your nearest post office,” without the banks’ having researched whether there is a threat of closure to the Crown or sub-post office in that area. That illustrates the lack of joined-up thinking.

The central negative element is the reduction of our town centres, with footfall seriously affected. I have seen it in the towns in my constituency. Llangefni is a market town. Farmers used to go there, although, unlike the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton, not to pump up their overdrafts. They used the banks regularly, as well as the shops, cafés and pubs.

Footfall is also being reduced in Amlwch, a town at the northern tip of my constituency that now has no bank at all. It has a sub-post office in a retail shop that is not as effective—no disrespect to the staff—as the post office that was closed. There is also a lack of cash machines. A lack of access to such machines has already been mentioned. I was given a letter by a very able councillor who pointed out that ATMs are often broken, and the ones that work make a charge. The surcharge is 95p on a transaction. The reason given for that is that banks now give less money to the LINK fund for ATM operators. Not only are banks closing branches, but they are cutting the money they put towards running ATMs. I am sure I am not the only one experiencing that.
Jim Shannon: I should have mentioned in my earlier contribution that ATMs in Northern Ireland have been targeted by criminals and thieves. We have the largest number of ATM break-ins and thefts across the whole of Northern Ireland, and the Police Service of Northern Ireland has set up a taskforce to take that on. It is happening with regularity. The people who run the ATMs then say to themselves, “Why should we bother putting an ATM there at all if it’s going to be broken or stolen from?”

Albert Owen: That is a very strong point, but I think the banks themselves are ripping people off if they are not giving money. Cashzone machines are charging 95p per transaction. Often they are in poorer communities. The Which? research I referred to earlier highlights that almost two thirds of bank closures have been in the poorest areas of our country—those with an average household income of less than £26,000—so the closures affect our poorer constituents.

We need to look for solutions. We have heard a few ideas about financial hubs, for example. I seriously put to the Government the proposition of using Crown post offices, because we need to look for solutions. They are closing down these buildings, which they often own and which often lie empty for some time, as in Holyhead in my constituency. Such buildings could be used as financial hubs.

I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) will be very happy that I agree with our Labour party policy to re-establish a Post Office bank—a people’s bank—and to have regional banks so that regional business can benefit. We need to go beyond just blaming the banks; we need to have a proper Government policy and framework.

Dr Whitford: We used to have the Girobank, and people’s “giro”, as their unemployment benefit or pension was called, used to be paid through it. The Government’s policy is that people receiving social security need to have a bank account. They then get sent back to the post office. Is that not Kafkaesque?

Albert Owen: I absolutely agree. The role of the Post Office is important, and the Government are the owner. We are the shareholders, and we need to look at this in the long term. Banks, whether Santander or any of the other major banks, think in the short term; they look at their shareholders and at cutting costs. If we had a people’s bank—a Post Office structure and network across the country that had the same rates—it would be fair and even for all our constituents across the country. They would have better access, and we could invest as a country in the infrastructure and the broadband. In the digital age, it could be as modern as any other bank.

That is the way we need to move. I am pleased that the Opposition Front Bench will agree with me, but I want the Minister, who is very diligent, and who looks for solutions—I am trying to help him in doing so—to stop closing the Crown post offices that we own. He should use them as major financial hubs across the United Kingdom, so that when banks are closed, we do not get bog-standard letters telling us to go to a nearby post office that is also closing down. We need a people’s bank. I say to my constituents who use Santander in Llangefni: “Don’t travel 15 or 20 miles to your nearest post office. Change banks. If Santander won’t stand up for you, stand up for yourself.”

I pay tribute to the staff who work in banks across the country. They are the face of the banks. During the banking crisis, they took a lot of flak. It was nothing to do with them. They are diligent workers, but I am afraid that, when it comes to these large banks, these staff are just pawns in the game. They will lose their jobs, and people will lose their financial services. I want the Government and all of us to work together to stop that.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing a really important debate, as has been shown by today’s speeches. He opened it with a fantastic, detailed explanation of why it is so important to talk about how our communities will be affected by what is happening. The Backbench Business Committee must also be thanked for allowing the debate.

Last month, like everyone else, I was disappointed to receive a letter from Santander telling me that it had taken the difficult decision to close its branch in North Shields town centre on 9 May and that it was writing to all branch customers to let them know of the closure. Santander was keen to point out that it had reviewed the usage of the bank, quoting figures on the various other types of banking facilities of which customers who use the branch avail themselves. Sadly, it was clear from the letter that, without any prior customer consultation, Santander had decided that the North Shields branch did not fit in with its future plans for small digital branches or with the focus on larger community branches.

The letter went on to explain that, in accordance with the access to banking standard, the branch team, whose jobs we must remember are now under threat, will be advising branch customers about their options and, in particular, helping vulnerable customers to find alternative ways to bank locally. I am not sure that customers will be happy to learn that they have to change their banking habits. Many people do not trust online banking, as has been said, or telephone banking, because they do not see it as secure. Moreover, I do not think many people want to join the already long queues in our town centre post office, which is in the Co-op, to do their banking business over the counter. The case has already been made about the sensitivity of banking business.

The message in the letter is far from what is conveyed in Santander’s statement of vision and strategic priorities for 2016 to 2018, which remains on Santander’s website. Perhaps the bank changed that two-year vision at midnight on new year’s eve, but the statement, which I recommend that colleagues look at, is still there in black and white. It states:

“Our purpose is to help people and businesses prosper. Our aim is to be the best retail and commercial bank, earning the lasting loyalty of our people, customers, shareholders and communities. The Santander Way is how we do things in a Simple, Personal and Fair way.”

Importantly, its list of laudable strategic priorities includes communities. The bank states:

“We provide support to communities around the UK because we believe it helps us to build a successful business. By being
deeply engaged in the communities where our branches, banking centres and offices are located, we can better understand and serve our customers.”

The customers of the 140 branches earmarked for closure may take that with a pinch of salt. Given that the Government supported the access to banking standard, will the Minister comment on whether the bank has shown that it is merely a tick-box exercise that is of little help to the people who are about to lose personal access to their bank?

[ANDREW ROSSINDELL IN THE CHAIR]

I accept that fewer people use banks and that many people trust them to operate their accounts online, which has affected banks’ decisions to close branches in recent years. However, Office for National Statistics figures cited by the Library reveal that my area in the north-east has the lowest number of bank and building society branches in the UK and the second-lowest number of branches per 100,000 residents. That is of great concern to me, as I hope it is to the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), in his role as Minister for the northern powerhouse.

When I consulted the very proactive North Shields chamber of trade and commerce about the branch closure, it made the important point that the town has a fairly high percentage both of customers who do not use the internet and of elderly people. Those are not necessarily the same community, but in both cases they rely on being able to go into the branch to conduct their banking business. The closure will result in significant difficulties for them, especially if they want to continue using counter services at Santander. They will have to travel either three miles up the coast to Whitley Bay or eight miles west to Newcastle city centre—and that is as the crow flies. Access to transport may be another problem in terms of their ability to bank locally.

The chamber also points out that the many local businesses that have to deposit cash regularly will now have to move bank or travel to another branch. When Santander leaves North Shields, we will be left with only two banks in the town centre. The chamber, which represents a number of businesses in the town, makes the solid point that closing a branch of a national bank has a disproportionately adverse effect on town centres. Sadly, a small shop whose owner has no other resources may have no choice but to close, but banks are bigger. They should avoid sending the message that they have lost interest in a community and that they prefer to do the business of other people. As those things are eroded, our communities will bear the brunt.

Bank closures are affecting our already suffering high streets and town centres, which should be helped to remain the hub of our communities, as every speech in this debate has pointed out. We must stress to the Government the need for their support. My plea to Santander is to work to its own values in relation to the proposed closures of the branch in North Shields and the other 139 branches. I hope the Minister will do all he can to urge the bank to reconsider its decision. If Santander truly wants to be “the best bank in the UK”, as it says it does, it should deliver on its own “Simple, Personal and Fair” culture and keep those branches open.

3.4 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Rosindell. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for securing and organising this debate, which I was happy to support.

To strike a note that may be slightly discordant with the speeches of other hon. Members, I must say that I really value online banking. It has been transformative for me personally in terms of ease of access to finance, and we should not forget how many people’s lives it makes easier. I am cautious about unduly amplifying people’s fears about the security of transactions. Yes, there is clearly a big problem with online fraud—I myself was recently a victim to the tune of several thousand pounds—but it is a very small percentage of the overall number of transactions, and the risk lies squarely with the banks themselves. A genuine and proportionate look at the risks associated with online banking suggests that they are often outweighed by the level of convenience that it can bring if we increase people’s online access and computer literacy and ensure that they have a proper understanding.

It is ultimately futile, although it may be gratifying, to rail against individual banks every time they pull out of a high street. I am deeply disappointed that Santander is pulling out of Ulverston, especially given the track record of other banking institutions that have said they foresee only one set of closures, but then, a couple of years down the track or even sooner, close other branches as well. I am waiting for the figures that Santander said it would try to get for me about the busyness of the Barrow-in-Furness branch that customers will be transferred to.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making a good case. Given the nature of his constituency, which in some ways is very similar to mine, does he agree that the branch network is particularly important to rural areas? In places such as St Andrews and Ulverston, having that rural network goes beyond the personal banking that people can do online; it connects small businesses.

John Woodcock: It absolutely does, and let me say a little more about that point before I go in what may be an unexpected direction and ask whether beating up the banks will really work. The banks on our high streets in communities such as the hon. Gentleman’s and mine are so important for individual customers and businesses. Businesses need access to cash. At the meeting we had last week on the closure in Ulverston, I resolved to help the local business improvement district to survey its businesses about their priorities and needs.

Businesses report a loss of footfall every time a high street branch goes; the evidence is anecdotal at the moment, but we want to put more data behind it. There is also a community aspect. Every bank has a cohort of relatively vulnerable people who rely on it, not only for financial transactions but because it gets them out of the house and, basically, enables banking staff to check that they are okay. As those things are eroded, our communities themselves will bear the brunt.

We will not get anywhere if we do not properly acknowledge the drivers of change within our communities, where people increasingly go online. We have to see
what genuine levers we have to change things. That does not mean coming into the House of Commons and shouting at institutions; none the less, we do have levers if we are prepared to come together to demand that the Government use them. For private sector institutions, of course we can do our best to promote the business value of a high street presence. I said last week and I say it strongly again, let us be loyal to the banks that choose to be loyal to our areas.

At the meeting I mentioned, I was impressed to hear from individuals such as the mayor of Ulverston, Dave Webster, who says he has tracked his finances over the years as more and more banks have closed, and will do so again as a Santander customer moving to a branch of a bank that is prepared to have its roots in the town centre. It is good to have the Cumberland Building Society there, which prides itself on keeping footfall in the area. Let us vote with our feet and for institutions that are prepared to root themselves in our areas.

Ultimately, it will be down to the Government to respond. Some Members have rightly mentioned the Post Office. We were pleased and proud to be able to save Ulverston post office from the threat of closure. My goodness, how much more important it will be now as Santander becomes the latest branch to pull out of Ulverston. We require a loss-leading investment in communities and I suggest the Government should ultimately be the guarantor of financial services in an area through an expanded post office network.

I very much add my voice to those speaking out against further branch closures, but I want to add two more elements. First, we have the Post Office card account. I realise that primary responsibility for that lies with the Department for Work and Pensions, but I remember my time in the Department, where I was an adviser to the Secretary of State between 2005 and 2007. Back then, the civil servants, whom we generally worked with very effectively, made the tactics of “Yes, Minister” look timid as they tried to bounce through a policy that radically reduced reliance on Post Office card accounts. Frankly, in the first drafts that we saw, they were not being straight with Post Office card account customers and what their options were. The Minister might like to correct me, but I understand that that process has resumed.

It is outrageous if Post Office card account customers are not clearly told in their advice from the Government and the Post Office that they can maintain a Post Office account. What was put to us back then and I understand may be being put to the Minister now is advice to customers on how to change from a Post Office card account to a bank account, without telling them explicitly that they have the ability to stay.

Secondly, if the policy is be loss-leading, we cannot just rely on the good will of private banking institutions. Let us put in place an ongoing levy for high street banks to make sure that an institution is rooted in communities, guaranteed by that, and let us strongly consider that institution being the Post Office.

3.14 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate my fellow Instagram lover, the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), on securing this debate. We have more in common that just posting fun pictures.

Banks are a really important part of our communities. When they close they leave a hole not only in our high street, but in our community as well. The reasons for that have been stated to a considerable extend in this debate already. I am deeply concerned about Santander’s decision to close branches at the scale proposed. In the area that I represent, it intends to close the New George Street branch on 5 December this year, which is quite some Christmas present for local customers, and it is not good for the staff who will lose their jobs just before the festive season.

In Plymouth we like to think that we have a special connection with Santander because we are one of only two places in the country where you can actually get a ferry to Santander, so to see the closure of branches in Plymouth is deeply worrying, and what that means has not been lost on the good folk of Plymouth.

Who do we need to aim this debate at? The remarks made by Members of all parties have been focused on the banks, but I want to focus on the Government, because the banks have had a good kicking already and certainly my fellow Devon MP, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), did a very good job of explaining why banks deserve a good kicking at times. However, we need to be cautious about what can be done to reverse the decline in branches on our high streets.

We need to make sure that people can access the services they need and that the personal touch is there, but I believe that there is something missing from this debate so far: consideration of the social purpose of banking. Banking has a financial purpose: it enables us to trade, to borrow, to invest, to save, but the social purpose is also important. It is about pooling risk, coming together, having access and being able to speak to someone to get advice on borrowing, investment and saving, and making sure we get the best financial products, but all that diminishes hugely when branches close.

I am a big fan of online banking and challenger banks. I really like my hot coral Monzo card. I like the way that I can access financial services online and in many cases get a better and faster service than I can get elsewhere—but I am not the same as everyone. We need a market within our financial services that recognises that online banking and quick dynamic services in the modern age need to sit alongside traditional high street banking that is fit for purpose. There is no better example of that than on Mutley Plain in Plymouth. I use Mutley Plain as an example because I know that the Minister was a Conservative candidate in Plymouth before he found his current seat, so he will know Mutley Plain well. When he was a candidate, Mutley Plain was full of banks. It now has hardly any banks. We have seen HSBC, Halifax, Lloyds, Barclays and NatWest all leave Mutley Plain, effectively leaving the entire community without banking services.

Not only has the community been left without the ability to access a cash machine or to get advice, but people have been left without the ability to go in and speak to someone. That is why we need to look at the importance of local banks and local services. The banks need to rediscover their social purpose. It is not sufficient
to have social purpose in PR and marketing if it does not extend from the communications department through to the boardroom and the branches themselves.

**Luke Pollard**

The idea about banking hubs is a good one. In Plymouth, we are doing something similar in bringing together health and wellbeing services. City centre hubs will bring together all the aspects of the public estate that need a front door in the city centre, and I hope the Department of Health and Social Care will fund that. The principle applies to financial services, just as it does to dentistry, GP services, sexual health and mental health provision, and we should look at that.

One element of hub services is about using empty buildings. My hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) talked about empty buildings. In many cases, the buildings left vacant by banks still have an ongoing lease—they are still paying for the lease of the buildings. There should be questions about the social purpose of an empty building, and about how we as parliamentarians can put pressure on, as we have done on empty homes, to rediscover the social purpose of empty buildings with an ongoing lease.

The post office network has been mentioned, which reminded me of a visit I made to the Efford Road post office in Compton ward in my constituency, just before Christmas. I spoke to Michael Zheng, the postmaster of that small but well-loved post office. He described how since the banks have closed locally, he has taken on the financial transactions for local shops and has huge amounts of cash deposited with him, but the contract for local post offices for processing cash transactions has changed recently, which means that in many cases it is not viable for him as an employer to pay someone to spend the time processing the cash in and out and providing banking services for local businesses; the agreement between his local business and the Post Office no longer makes that worthwhile. That needs to be looked at.

The health of our high street depends not only on shops where people want to spend their money, banks where they can access their money, borrow and save, a culture where people can enjoy shops, and restaurants where they can eat and drink. We need to look at how we repurpose the high street in those terms, but there are also regulatory protections that deserve consideration. We are not in a normal time for Conservative party thinking in respect of allowing the free market to do its thing on high streets, where financial services can come and go as they please. We are now seeing the forced financial exclusion of people in our communities because banks are exiting our high streets. That demands a different approach, which we need to identify before we get to the point where we have lost banks entirely from our high streets.

There are alternatives and there are models of investment in our high streets. I mention in particular South West Mutual, a co-operative that has formed in the four counties of the far south-west to provide high-street banking services on a mutual model. As the big multinational banking giants are exiting our high streets, in many cases, it is the small mutuels—the people with social purpose—that are coming to replace them. I commend the work that South West Mutual is doing. I love it when it says:

“We believe that bank managers who know their communities well make the best lending decisions, and we are committed to providing branch facilities so that you can choose how you want to bank.”
That is precisely the type of ethos we need to see lived and breathed by those big financial giants, not just the mutuals. If we keep seeing TV adverts from big banks telling us just how much they care about us and our communities at the same time as they close our banks, more people will take their custom away from those banks, and rightly so. We deserve better, they deserve better, and our high streets and our communities deserve better than the high PR spend trying to tell us something different from the lived experience of far too many people in our communities.

3.25 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I am pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who always speaks with so much authority on matters not just in his own constituency, but across the piece.

The Santander branch in Crouch End in my constituency is one of the 140 scheduled to close. One hundred and forty is quite a large number and I am pleased to see how well attended the debate has been. I have heard from elderly constituents who are devastated by the news that the Santander branch is going to close. One constituent who got in touch is 88 years old. He is uncomfortable using computers and prefers to do his banking in the branch rather than online. He said that it is always busy when he goes there, but now he will be forced to get on the bus and travel all the way up to Muswell Hill. His friend changed her bank to Santander because her local bank branch had closed, and now Santander is doing the same. She is elderly and disabled and feels betrayed and let down.

I met with Santander bosses this week to express my opposition to the plans. At the meeting, I asked about the impact on staff. I was told that the branch has 10.8 full-time equivalent staff, and while they hope to redeploy some, there are no guarantees. In the meantime, the bank has put new staff on to short-term contracts, so that when those contracts finish, other staff can be put into those roles. That leads to lack of security in the workforce, something that many of us have campaigned very hard to counter.

The Communication Workers Union is working hard to defend its members nationwide. It says that the reductions to the Santander UK branch network place 1,270 workers at risk of redundancy and the bank expects to be able to redeploy only around a third of those affected, so hundreds of qualified hard-working employees will be out of work. Elderly and disabled customers will have to travel further to access vital services. Crouch End will also lose its ATM, so thousands of shoppers, workers and local residents will be inconvenienced.

Bank branches are disappearing at an alarming rate—a whopping 40% have closed since the Conservative Government came in in 2010. That is symptomatic of a wider problem in the banking sector, and is a quiet scandal that has seen many people lose their local services.

All too often, big banks have put their own profits above the needs of their customers. Think back to the origins of banking, with good banks, originally run by Quakers such as the Barclays; then look at the recent stories of Barclays, where the chief executive was forced to pay fines to the Financial Conduct Authority due to bad behaviour. Look at the banks flogging dodgy mortgages, a major cause of the crisis in 2008. Look at the LIBOR scandal or the exorbitant fees. We used to have bank robbers; now the banks rob us. We had foreign exchange manipulation. We had overdraft charges, ripping off customers. We had the payment protection insurance mis-selling scandal, which has been going on since 2005 and which I believe is at £40 billion so far—the shadow Minister may correct me. Furthermore, there are charges on withdrawing cash from ATMs, and operators fail to repair ATMs in a timely manner. Just how low can the banking sector get?

What can the Government do? Well, they could do much more. They are being a bit too laissez-faire, considering that closures of bank branches are landing blow after blow on the high street. The Minister will correct me if I am wrong, but I think there have been three reviews of the high street since 2010. Rather than launch just another review, why not play a key co-ordinating role between banks and stop the closures of Crown post offices, or at least support credit unions? I believe that another credit union has gone out of business this year because it was slightly overleveraged, and because so many people cannot afford to pay back very small loans. A number of small loans have led to certain credit unions not being able to survive. What are the Government doing proactively to support credit unions in areas where we know they can do so much good?

I would like to see a much more proactive approach. My colleagues mentioned the Labour approach to regional banks, which is a very good idea. I had a good look through the Minister’s written parliamentary responses to Members’ questions on bank closures and I have to confess that I found them mealy-mouthed—“Well, it’s the commercial decision of banks. We haven’t got anything to do with it.” Is that not the attitude that has got us into so much hot water since 2008? Have we learned nothing about the attitude of banks? Do they care about their customers? No, otherwise Santander would not be closing 140 branches. It might be acceptable to close a few, or to close the same number at a slower pace, but there will be 140 bank branch closures. Despite being in a different party, I completely agree with the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on the dreadful treatment of customers, the fact that there is no personal approach to banking anymore and the fact that so many customers are being let down. I very much look forward to hearing some really innovative, far-reaching and radical suggestions from the Minister.

3.31 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I pay tribute to my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), for securing this debate. He spoke very powerfully about the impact that these bank closures will have on the city of Glasgow and further afield.

As I listened to my constituency neighbour’s comments, I reflected on the picture in Glasgow. By my calculation, there are five Santander branches in the city of Glasgow, yet the two that have been earmarked for closure are in Springburn in my constituency and in Parkhead in the
hon. Gentleman’s constituency. They just happen to be the two worst areas of Glasgow for social multiple deprivation, which leads to me to look at the wider programme of branch closures. In the last four years there have been four branch closures in my constituency, including two run by the Royal Bank of Scotland—one in Dennistoun and the other in Possilpark, directly opposite my constituency office—and the Clydesdale Bank in Springburn, just around the corner from the Santander branch that is earmarked for closure. The only branches left will be the TSB in Dennistoun and in Springburn. We are down to some of the last banks in the poorest communities in Scotland, which is a great tragedy. What does it say when we exaggerating that observation across the country?

Of the five branches in Glasgow, the ones in Shawlands, Byres Road, Argyle Street and Sauchiehall Street are staying open. They are in quite prosperous parts of Glasgow, and I think they are staying open simply because the current accounts held at those branches are much more valuable to the bank. It is profit-seeking behaviour, and there is no legislative imperative for the bank to correct it. The bank will therefore seek to maximise profit at the expense of its customers.

Mr Sweeney: A rare collegial moment for the Chamber, perhaps. I agree entirely, and I was just about to come on to that issue.

When I met with Santander management last week to discuss the closure of the Springburn branch, I made the observation, “I recognise exactly why you’re doing this.” They did not deny it. I also said, “You have to have total visibility about the economic impact and the disparity in terms of the demographics of where these bank closures are happening, because there is no visibility of that pattern.” This was recognised long ago: in the 1970s in America, there was a practice called red-lining, which involved American banks deliberately blacklisting poorer communities and withdrawing banking services.

In 1977, the Carter Administration passed the Community Reinvestment Act. As a result, commercial banks in America are obliged to redistribute their profits into sponsoring co-operative banking services and mutuals, and to promote credit unions. There is therefore a much more diverse range of banking services as a result of direct Government intervention to redistribute those services, which dates back to the 1970s. As a result of the Community Reinvestment Act, Santander will invest £1 billion in sponsoring co-operative banking, mutuals and other sustainable banking activity. That is a hefty redistribution and is in stark contrast with what happens in the United Kingdom, where there is no legislative imperative for banks to do it. We need to address that yawning chasm in legislation.

I made the point to the Santander management that the root cause of a lot of these problems is the increasing monopolisation of the banking sector in the UK. We have five major clearing banks, which hold 85% of all current accounts. By comparison, in Germany there are 400 local Sparkassen banks and over 1,000 co-operative banks. Clearly the picture there is very different, because there is legislation in place to redistribute the holding of capital in the banking system, so it is done more sustainably and is more responsive to local communities and to sectors of industry. As a result, Germany has a much healthier and more balanced economy.

I also made the point that Santander’s origins lie in the Abbey National, which was demutualised in 1989, the year I was born. We have seen a pattern of demutualisation across the banking sector, which has been negative for the UK economy. I would seek legislation to reverse the demutualisation of the British banking system.

Catherine West: Is it not particularly galling that a bank that used to be a building society with a sense of social conscience is inflicting this huge series of bank closures on our local communities?

Mr Sweeney: Absolutely. It is a stark example of the exploitation that we see on multiple fronts. We see it not only in universal credit, jobcentre closures and post office closures, but in things such as fixed-odds betting terminals and bookmakers being concentrated in poorer communities and high streets. We also see a stark contrast in microcosm in Springburn shopping centre. Right next door to the Santander branch is a branch of BrightHouse, which is a rapacious lender exploiting the poorest communities in our country. In my opinion, its practices should be illegal. It is just as bad as the payday loan lenders. That is a good example in microcosm in Springburn of what is wrong with the British economic system, writ large. We need to address that.
I hope the Minister will reflect on the reality. He is welcome to come and visit my constituency and see what it looks like on the ground. If we do not fix it, we will entrench economic division, alienation and the sort of social tensions that exist in our country, and which might have erupted as the reason why so many people voted to leave the European Union. A source of their frustration was an economic system that does not serve their interests. This is all connected; there is a complex interdependency. We need to address the wider tensions in society. This is yet another example of what is wrong with the state withdrawing from regulation and permitting neo-liberal practices to prevail. It is a major concern and needs to be addressed.

In the case of Springburn, the bank justified its closure programme by saying that there was a 25% reduction in footfall. I accept that the industry is subject to disruption due to changes in technology, as the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) said. However, the curve is way ahead of where people are at on the ground. The Government should be involved in closing down that gap, so that it reflects the real transitions that people make, particularly elderly people and disabled people.

It was claimed that 91% of people use a variety of other ways to engage with the bank in Springburn, but that includes phoning up the local branch to make an enquiry and using an ATM. Those are not mutually exclusive activities, so that is a questionable statistic. A minority of users—only 46%—use another Santander branch. The nearest branch is in Glasgow city centre, which is an expensive bus ride away for many people, particularly given that the community has a very low car ownership rate. A minority of customers—only 49%—use online or telephone banking services.

The Springburn branch is proposed to close in June this year, yet Santander’s lease will not expire until December, so for six months it will be a blight on the community with boarded up frontage. I want the bank to address that, as a minimum. If it is going to close the branch, it should ensure there is a transition. I appeal to it to realise its social responsibilities.

Ironically, at 2 pm today the Springburn Regeneration Forum kicked off across the way from the Santander branch in the Springburn shopping centre that is proposed to close. It is a community-led approach to bring together the council and other stakeholders to plan the regeneration of Springburn. What a blow that on the same day that that is happening the bank across the way in the Springburn shopping centre has announced that it is pulling out of the community. That is a sad illustration of our commercial banks’ lack of social conscience. That should be addressed. If the banks do not do so voluntarily, it should be done through legislation.

In a nutshell, that is what I think is wrong with the UK banking system and what the Minister should reflect on. I am sure our Front Bench team will do so, too. I am a Labour and Co-operative Member of Parliament. We are committed to a massive restructuring of the UK banking system in favour of co-operative banking, mutuals and a more equitable form of financing our economy. That is what we are supporting.

3.41 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I thank my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), for securing this debate.

In my constituency of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill, we have seen the loss of local branches in recent years. Recently, Stepps, Tannochside and Bellshill have all seen their local Royal Bank of Scotland close down, despite the fact that the Government own the majority stake in RBS and could have kept some of those branches open and protected those jobs. We have also seen the collapse of Scotland’s oldest savings bank, the Airdrie Savings Bank, which led to the loss of branches in Coatbridge and Bellshill.

The loss of those branches in my constituency are just a snapshot of what I have heard today and what is happening throughout the whole country. I repeat that the rot started with the Crown post office closures. Now Santander says, “Let’s turn to the Post Office. It can help us.” Too little, too late.

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend is making a very important point about the post offices. One of the justifications for the Santander closures was, “Don’t worry. The bank service can transition over to the post office.” The Springburn post office has been put up for franchising and will be in the back of a grocery store somewhere. That is hardly a place that someone is going to go to take out a mortgage, is it?

Hugh Gaffney: That is exactly what is happening up and down the country. I have seen many fighting for people’s jobs in Crown post offices, which have good terms and conditions that are not matched by WHSmith.

I asked the Chancellor in a written question whether the Treasury had made any assessment of the impact of Santander’s decision to close branches on consumers’ access to money. I received a reply from a Minister who stated that the Treasury had made no assessment, and that it was a commercial decision for Santander. How often have we heard that? I would like the Chancellor and his Treasury Ministers to tell the affected communities that the Government have made no efforts to determine the impact of the proposed branch closures on their ability to access their money. That is their written answer: no effort, no access. That is shameful, but it is an all-too-common attitude for this Government.

The impact of the branch closures has been worsened by the loss of cashpoints. Figures released this week by Which? show that 280 cashpoints were lost across Scotland in 2018, 203 of which were free to use. Despite the growth of online and telephone banking, 73% of the public continue to use cash frequently to pay for goods and services. My children still use cash; the elderly still use cash. This is not a cashless community yet. The branch closures and the loss of cashpoints only make it harder for people to access their money. The branches and cashpoints are being lost in the poorest and most vulnerable communities in the UK, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) pointed out, and as many others up and down the country know.
Which? has asked the Government to appoint a new regulator with sole responsibility for cash infrastructure. I think that is a much-needed step forward to ensure that consumers and businesses can continue to access cash. I urge the Government to take action by creating a regulator, so we can begin to reverse some of the devastating effects that our communities have experienced because of the branch closures and the loss of cashpoints. If they are not listening today, when will they start listening?

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and the other Members who supported his bid for this debate. It is great to see this Chamber so busy, as it often is not. That shows the strength of feeling and how much the closures will affect our communities.

The letter that I received was sent to me as a customer. That was the first that I heard that our Santander branch in Troon was closing. I was previously a customer of RBS, and, like some other hon. Members, I moved my custom to Santander. I am not really sure where I am heading next. That is one of 140 closures—one fifth of the Santander network—15 of which are in Scotland. Some 1,300 jobs are now under threat, and only one third are likely to be reemployed. In the meeting we were told that a third of those staff are looking to retire, get a package and get out. Have those discussions taken place, or is that a presumption?

Catherine West: Does the hon. Lady agree that it is inappropriate for an organisation to put staff on to less secure contracts in the knowledge that it will make 1,200 staff redundant, and might need those jobs later? It is not just a slap in the face to customers but to the 1,200 staff redundant, and might need those jobs later?

Dr Whitford: Absolutely agree. I pay tribute to the staff in my branch, who were very helpful when we opened our account and are always cheerful. They are not about to retire. They are young working people who are not looking to take a package, but will need a job. They are being made unemployed, and they are deeply shocked by that.

There have been 3,000 branch closures since 2015, 230 of which are in Scotland. Two thirds of branches have been cut since the end of the 80s. By the end of this year, we will have fallen from 21,000 to less than 7,500 across the UK. That is an incredible change. I totally accept that banking is changing, but, like many others, I use mixed banking. I will use an ATM, go into my branch and do online banking, but it is important that I have that choice. We are talking about choice being taken away.

This change is 20 years too early; we are not yet cashless or online. My mum, who is 84, and most people over 70 are not happy to do banking or any sensitive financial transactions online. My mum has her iPad and can do emails. It is not stupidity. She simply does not trust it. In making this change, we are leaving two decades’ worth of older citizens feeling uncomfortable and like they have had things taken away from them.

When banks move out, they do not leave their ATMs behind, which means that there is less access to cash in community after community, and the ATMs that remain are running out. Troon has already lost three banks. This is our fourth. I went through all this with RBS, which tried to use a unique customer identifier. It told me that only 97 customers a week went into the branch. I found that really strange, because every time I went in, I was in a queue. It only counted people who only went into that branch and went into the branch every single week. As was said, no other business would count custom in that fashion. When I finally got the correct figures out of RBS, that number was 10 times as high. Yet the bank would not reconsider its decision.

Although my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East has highlighted the issue of vulnerable people who have poor internet access, in Troon, a place to which many people retire, the issue is the elderly. In the impact assessment, it says that 58% of people have, on at least one occasion, used online, mobile or telephone banking, meaning that 42% have never used those methods. There is no quantification, so we do not know—as the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) said—whether someone used telephone banking to ask what its opening hours are or when they could go in to get a statement. The idea that that means someone is suddenly ready to manage all their finances by phone or online is just a fairy tale.

The problem we have is that our elderly population is suddenly being told, as I was assured, that the closest branches are within a 10-mile radius—it is seven miles in one direction and 11 miles in the other—and for most of the elderly who live in Troon, however, that means taking two buses and more than an hour’s journey on a bus that is not frequent, so a visit to the branch could mean a three-hour round-trip. As was highlighted earlier in the debate, that also takes footfall out of Troon’s town centre, because if someone takes the trouble to go to Ayr, the chances are that they will shop in Ayr. They will not come back, go in to the middle of Troon, shop, and then get a bus home. That is gradually killing our high streets.

The access to banking standard and the need for an impact assessment were mentioned. We have all been sent little infographic-laden impact assessments, but it strikes me that they are largely about the impact on the bank. They are not really about the impact on customers, staff or our high street. The hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) mentioned the idea of having a hub. The obvious way to do that would be to bring back Crown post offices, but why do we expect post offices to co-locate with other businesses, but not banks to co-locate with each other or with post offices? It is absolutely vital that communities have some form of safe and secure access to financial services and advice.

Post offices are proposed as the answer to everything, but we cannot use them to open new accounts, carry out bank transfers or, if trying to manage our money, get full bank statements—only a balance. We certainly cannot arrange loans. Many of us used to go into a bank to speak to our bank manager, who was very strict about the income that we needed to obtain a mortgage. Part of what led to the 2008 crash was random decisions to lend people three, four, five, six or seven times their income, so that they could get a mortgage, instead of giving them the chance to sit down and talk with someone who could see their financial performance. That applies to
business customers who, at the early stages of development, need really personal input from someone who manages their service.

Quite apart from being the answer to all those problems, post offices are struggling financially. Previously, postmasters would get a fee, but funding for that is being cut from £210 million to just £70 million. As this is the fourth bank to close in Troon, all of that work is going to the post office. It has the same number of counters that it has always had, and it had a two-year gap of struggling to find a new postmaster when our previous one was ill and found it frankly all too stressful. In the Which? survey, 42% of those not happy about the move to the post office were concerned about queues. If the post office has the same number of counters but is suddenly doing the work of four banks, queues are inevitable.

Our closest town, Prestwick, has also lost three banks. When I met our postmaster after the most recent closure, he was initially quite positive, because he saw it as a business opportunity. I met him recently, however, and the bank transactions actually take money out of his business. Cash deposits are time consuming and he has had to take on an extra part-time member of staff. He does over 500 extra banking transactions a month and takes in £1 million a month. While Santander charges 7p per £1,000 deposited, the postmaster is paid 37p per £1,000 deposited. The Government subsidy for the 3,000 community post offices that are protected as the last shops in the village will end in 2021. We will literally have dead and empty communities with no access to anything and nothing to maintain footfall in a town centre.

We need to reward and support the post office. Santander is one of the biggest users of post office services, because it makes its business customers deposit cash in the post office. The fee paid to post offices for those transactions is currently being renegotiated. It is critical that that fee be fair, because otherwise we will see the last remaining Crown post offices not redeveloped as banking hubs, but shut down. Frankly, post offices wedged in corners of shops are not always accessible, are often cluttered and do not offer privacy to carry out financial decisions and management.

Albert Owen: Is there not an additional risk of going in with one retailer—WHSmith, for example—because many high streets brands are closing down, meaning the whole service could go?

Dr Whitford: That is the problem. We almost have that tumbling effect—the work is just passed to someone else, who cannot maintain it, and it is passed on again. It is important that there is a different way of looking at the issue. I agree with the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney). That is quite a coalition, by any measure of parliamentary activity. Each of those speakers articulated very well the impact of bank branch closures—not just by Santander, but more widely—on their communities. Each speech raised several issues of public policy that I certainly agree need to be addressed.

The debate has shown that the challenge to maintain a banking sector that works for everyone at a time of rapid technological change is not being met and that the balance between digitisation and traditional banking models is not being got right. I want to say a few words to concur with the sentiment in the room today, but also a little about some possible solutions to these problems.

In advance of the debate, Santander provided some statistics on how people use its services and how that has changed. It said it has experienced a decline of about a quarter in branch transactions over the past three years, including for branch ATMs. It went on to say that that trend is expected to continue, with a projected 37% decline in branch visits across the industry in five years’ time. That is an empirical case for branch closures. We understand that—it is based on numbers and projected future demand. Those numbers alone, however, do not tell us the real story of how people depend on some of those services.

Today we are here specifically to debate the impact on local communities, and to do that, I want to share with colleagues and with industry, which will listen to the debate, the experience of my constituents and what bank branch closures have meant for them. Thankfully, the Santander branch in Hyde is not earmarked for closure in this round, but in recent years my constituency has lost branches of RBS, Lloyds, HSBC and Yorkshire Bank. Yesterday, on my Facebook page, I asked my constituents to share with me some of their direct stories of what that has meant for them. The first comment was:

“The losing the Lloyds in Stalybridge has been a blow. Yes there is one in Ashton”—the town next door—

“and there is online banking. But there is no substitute for making an appointment you can walk to, talking to an actual human being.”

Another constituent, from Droylsden, which is just outside my constituency, said:

“Here...we now don’t have a single bank! We’ve gone from having Lloyds, NatWest, Royal Bank of Scotland and Halifax to having none!!! Our infrastructure dwindles by the day.”

The problem is even more acute for colleagues in more rural constituencies.

We have heard some very good speeches today from the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), the hon. Members for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), my hon. Friends the Members for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) and for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon), the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), my hon. Friends the Members for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) and for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney). That is quite a coalition, by any measure of parliamentary activity. Each of those speakers articulated very well the impact of bank branch closures—not just by Santander, but more widely—on their communities. Each speech raised several issues of public policy that I certainly agree need to be addressed.

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The problem is even more acute for colleagues in more rural constituencies.
For businesses as well as individuals branch closures have posed particular challenges. One business owner—an existing Santander customer—said:

“You can do banking at the Post Office but, in order to pay things in, you have to get in touch with your bank first and get paying in slips sent out. Santander would only send me 5 and I have run out now. It means that I can’t accept cheques for my business easily, and I don’t have time to keep ringing up for more paying in slips.”

Someone else said:

“It’s a killer for small businesses, who have to close their shops to go and stand in a queue for a lengthy period of time just to get change.”

Catherine West: Given the history over the past decade of how small businesses have been let down by the big banks, does my hon. Friend agree that this is yet another slap in the face for small business?

Jonathan Reynolds: I agree with my hon. Friend. She is right to highlight—she did so in her speech—the many difficult issues with conduct in the UK banking industry, and specifically the abuses of lending to small businesses, which we have had many debates about in this Chamber and the main Chamber. Such abuses are particularly difficult to hear about—people have suffered some real abuses—and compounding them makes things especially difficult.

I have heard some particularly moving stories from those who care for others, who have borne the brunt of some closures. This comment choked me up:

“My mum with Alzheimer’s relied on her Lloyds branch in Droylsden before it was shut. The staff knew her well and helped her. They knew her condition and if she was in a bad way they would phone me and give her a cup of tea while they waited for me to arrive. The staff said there were lots of other people like my mum. The closure really affected her.”

Such stories show that we are talking about real people and the impact on their lives. Those are real experiences. The data do not always reveal that. The banks, of course, have the right to present that data to us, but our job is to tell the human side of the story.

We cannot hold back the tide of technological change—like some of my colleagues, I am not a luddite, and I love technology—but we can stop to think about how to make it work for us, not the other way around. Without protection the move to online as a default to make it work for us, not the other way around.

Given the history over the past decade of how small businesses have been let down by the big banks, does my hon. Friend agree that this is yet another slap in the face for small business?

As we have seen in the debate around ATMs—which were raised several times in this debate—the risk is that we will sleepwalk into a society without access to cash at all, with the industry realising that we need those safety nets only when it is too late. Access to cash is becoming an increasing challenge for people, following bank closures and the decline in our high streets. The chair of the Payment Systems Regulator, Charles Randell, was right to ask in a Treasury Committee evidence session earlier this week whether access to ATMs should be seen as a universal service. I am sympathetic to that.

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No one wants to prevent innovation. Indeed, some technological advances, such as remote video appointments or audible speaking ATMs, could for the first time help to include people who have historically had trouble interacting with traditional banking. Our objective, however, must be to use technology to benefit all customers, rather than creating a pared-down, automated banking sector that leaves people without the support they need.

The bank branch network has been shrinking at an accelerating rate. In December 2016, Which? reported that more than 1,000 branches of major banks had closed between January 2015 and January 2017. Banks stopped publishing data on closures in 2015, and there is now no central source for it, so the exact number of closures becomes more and more difficult to find out. Since those figures were published, however, we have seen multiple further closure announcements from banks, including Yorkshire Bank, RBS, Lloyds and now Santander.

The scale of the closures seems disproportionate and does not necessarily match how people want to use their bank branches. Also—this has come out in the debate—some of the modelling around the closures does not reflect the fact that branches are all closing at the same time. That was particularly the case in Scotland with RBS. Research conducted by the Social Market Foundation in 2016 found that strong consumer appetite remains for a physical presence. Nearly two thirds of consumers would prefer to talk to someone face to face when making a big financial decision.

A report by Move Your Money, published in July 2016, made the damning assessment that, far from responding to market pressures, the major UK banks are simply closing branches in poorer areas and opening or retaining them in more affluent ones. That is simply not acceptable. The same report mapped bank branch closures against the postcode lending data from the British Bankers Association, which is now UK Finance, to show that bank branch closures dampen SME lending growth significantly in the postcodes affected. The figure grows even higher for postcodes that lose the last bank in town. At a time when we all want to stimulate more lending to SMEs and to encourage growth, a sustained programme of bank branch closures risks taking us in precisely the wrong direction.

Labour’s answer to that is a proposal to change the law regulating banks so that no closure can take place without a real local consultation or the Financial Conduct Authority approving the tranche of closures. A future Labour Government would obligate banks to undertake a real consultation with all customers of the branch proposed for closure, including local democratic representatives on the relevant local council. The bank would be mandated to publish details of the reasons for closure, including the financial calculations showing the revenues and costs of the relevant branch. The share of central costs such as accounting systems, IT, cyber-security and personnel would have to be identified separately, because many of those costs are relatively fixed and not proportionate to the number of branches. The FCA’s approval would be needed for any bank branch closure.

We think that is the right balance. It accepts that, as technology changes, there might be some closures, but it would ensure that customers are not forgotten about or taken for granted.

That is our policy on closures, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn said, we wish to go further. The Post Office is often referred to as the solution to bank branch closures, through its relationship with the Bank of Ireland. That is better than nothing—something like £14 billion in deposits is held in accounts linked to
the Post Office—but there are clearly shortfalls. The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire highlighted some of those in her speech.

The potential exists, however, to build on that model and to create a genuine Post Office bank, which would ensure universal access to banking services for every part of the UK. It would be a standalone institution; it would pay the post office network for use of those branches, and it would therefore replace the network subsidy payment. It would offer a future for the Post Office, as well as for financial services in every part of the country. It would be held in a public trust model, with 100% of the shares held in trust for the public benefit, ensuring that no future Government could seek to privatise it. I plan to develop those plans and to present them in more detail in the near future, alongside our plans for the future of the public stake in RBS and other measures designed to increase plurality in the banking sector, including the return of new post offices to the UK.

Albert Owen: Is not one of the problems—perhaps a future Labour Government could address this—that so many different Departments are involved? We have heard about the Department for Work and Pensions and about the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, with its responsibility for the Post Office, and the Treasury Minister is responding to the debate. Would my hon. Friend include in his plans a responsible Minister so that there is accountability to Parliament?

Jonathan Reynolds: That is an interesting submission. Ultimately, if we wish to see the kind of developments that my hon. Friend and I would like to see, we have to have the Treasury behind them, in whatever way Whitehall responds to that. Clearly, there are lots of different aspects; some are about the legislative environment, some about the regulatory environment and some about the spending decisions that need to be made if we are serious about ensuring universal access to financial services.

In every debate such as this, we all recognise that the financial crisis has had a severe and long-lasting impact on communities in Britain. That fallout has damaged the banking sector in the public’s eyes—we cannot get away from that—but banks must not compound that damage with an overly aggressive and sustained programme of closures, which risks being another step in leaving the high street as an empty shell. Regulators, banks and policy makers need to work together to build a viable banking infrastructure that works for all customers and all communities in a way that will ultimately restore trust and confidence in the UK banking sector.

4.09 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): May I say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell? I commend the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for securing this debate and the 28 colleagues across the House who have made speeches or interventions in what has been a thorough examination of this important issue. As well as a Minister I am a constituency MP, and I recognise the pressure on us when our constituents are not happy with decisions.

Since taking up the position of Economic Secretary last January, I have become well acquainted with branch closures. They can be very difficult for the communities affected and, as we have seen this afternoon, they arouse strong passions across the House. I have taken time to speak with affected customers and businesses, including on my visit to Scotland last August, in order to really understand the concerns. I frequently raise this topic in my regular meetings with banks and the Financial Conduct Authority.

I will seek to address the points made by the hon. Member for Glasgow East and others across the Chamber. He referenced his community in Parkhead and the issues of staff, the impact assessment, the limitations of the relationship with the post office network that many Members have mentioned, and access to cash, which falls under the Treasury’s remit, although the Exchequer Secretary is responsible for that.

Closing a branch is never an easy decision, but it is one that banks take based on their assessment of current and future branch usage and customer behaviour. It is an assessment that they, as commercial businesses, are better placed to make than Government. That is why the Government do not intervene in individual branch closure decisions. However, the Government should not abdicate responsibility for some of the issues that arise.

Catherine West: In his reply to a written question by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), the Minister said: “the Treasury does not collect data relating to bank branch closures or related job losses.” Does he believe that is an adequate Government response to 1,200 job losses and the closure of 40% of bank branches? Does the Minister believe that the Treasury should collect that kind of data?

John Glen: As I was going to respond to the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), who also raised that point about bank branch closure figures, the FCA, which is the regulator responsible for regulating banks, did some analysis of branch closures as part of its “Strategic Review of Retail Banking Business Models” published in December last year. The full research can be found in an annex to the review. The analysis looks at the number and pattern of closures, how they affect urban and rural areas, the age of the customer, the level of deprivation and income levels. It is a thorough analysis across multiple banks and it very much informs Government policy.

Neil Parish: How much do the Government ask the banks to co-operate with one another, so that there is some sort of service from whichever bank denomination it might be? At the moment, they are just closing and there does not seem to be any pattern to help our constituents who want to receive financial services.

John Glen: My hon. Friend’s intervention picks up on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) and others about hubs. The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) raised it to, and I think in his maiden speech he talked about the need to bring banks together. There is no regulatory bar to that and it might be a model that banks will wish to reflect
on. As has been pointed out, representatives from Santander are in earshot—that may be a model they wish to take forward.

Neil Parish: You should encourage them to do so.

Jonathan Reynolds: Will the Minister give way?

John Glen: In deference to my esteem for my shadow Front-Bench colleague, I will.

Jonathan Reynolds: I am very grateful. The idea of banks collaborating and having hubs that would be the joint front end of their back-office functions comes up time and again, but it has not happened. There is no work being done to deliver that. Surely, there are issues to do with competition law, regulatory compliance and liability for mis-selling that simply make it quite unlikely. That is why a serious alternative is required.

Jonathan Reynolds: I respect the concern that the hon. Gentleman has raised and I will respond to it.

Before I get into the detail into what I am trying to do as the Minister with responsibility in this area, I want to reflect on some of the facts of changing banking practices. More of us choose to bank online or on an app, but the point made by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) about a mixed appetite for banking services is important, as is the intergenerational point. Between 2011 and 2016, branch usage declined by 42% whereas mobile banking usage increased 354% between 2013 and 2017. Cash was used in 61% of payments in 2007, but it is projected that by 2027—in just eight years—it will go down to 16%. There is a significant and rapid change.

Dr Whitford: I must highlight that 2027 is eight years away. We are talking about elderly people now.

John Glen: I was laying out the statistics to show the rapidity of the direction of change. On the point made by the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), we must look at alternative provision. I recognise the point made by the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) about South West Mutual. I will meet Tony Greenham, the executive director of South West Mutual, on 26 February, to discuss regional mutual banking in the era of expansion of alternatives. I will attend the Annual Conference of the Association of British Credit Unions Limited on Saturday 9 March, to look at how to expand the role of credit unions. When I visited Glasgow I met the 1st Class Credit Union and saw its appetite to develop new delivery models. I recognise it is an area we must invest in.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport made the point about learning from overseas: I recognise that is important, too. That is why the Chancellor’s Budget of 29 October included pilots for interest-free loans. We looked at the way credit unions function so they can be given more freedom to develop an alternative presence and range of services. At a micro level, that will sometimes be a relevant alternative to provide for communities in difficulties.

Luke Pollard: It is really good news that the Minister will meet South West Mutual. It is important that credit unions and new regional co-operative banks are seen not just as a nice periphery exercise in corporate social responsibility, but as a genuine mainstream alternative to financial services, and they need to be structured as such in Government policy.

John Glen: I am doing all I can to work towards a situation where the best credit unions can see a way to grow and to provide more. The money from dormant assets can be used to help them grow.

David Linden: I am grateful that the Minister is talking about credit unions. The only major job I have done other than being a politician was to work in a credit union. On Monday I have a meeting with a local credit union that is pretty much on the brink of bankruptcy. Part of that is because of a lack of succession planning in the credit union movement and a culture issue about governance. If the Minister is so keen on working with credit unions, what practical support will the UK Government provide, specifically for governance and succession planning issues that challenge them? It will not be just that credit union in my constituency.

John Glen: I am anxious not to make my response completely about credit unions, but the 146 credit unions that exist have a whole range of governance models and levels of confidence about the future. I do not think it is my role to dictate how they change, but I am trying to find a model—there are many in Northern Ireland, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) will know—that can be used as a viable alternative.

I want to move on and make a little progress if I may. I said I would respond to the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock).

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

John Glen: I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, but I want to focus on the thoughtful point made by the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness. He referred to his time as an adviser in the Department for Work and Pensions, and to joined-up Government and the Post Office card. It is true that universal credit will have to be paid into bank accounts, but basic bank accounts, which do not involve any fees, are available. Those a viable and accessible alternative. I am happy to take up any further points he wants to make about that, and to learn from his experience in government.

John Woodcock: It would be useful to understand why universal credit is not being made available for payment into Post Office card accounts, but I wanted to intervene on another issue relating to the Post Office.

The Minister said the Treasury has a policy on access to cash. One of the big issues with Santander going from Ulverston and, I imagine, other areas is that the cash machine will go as well. We have a post office without a
cash machine. That will really damage Ulverston, which is a fabulous market town. On festival days, there are huge queues at the existing cash machine. Can the Government direct the Post Office to increase its cash machines in such areas?

**John Glen:** I am very happy to look into that. On access to cash machines, as I mentioned in the Adjournment debate last Thursday, we set up the payment systems regulator, which is responsible for overseeing payment systems. The regulator is closely monitoring the situation with LINK and the commitments it has made to maintain the spread of ATMs across the UK. I recognise that the pressure on that network is growing. However, I need to reflect on the relationship with the Post Office rather than trying to answer the hon. Gentleman’s question now.

I am going to make some progress, because I need to leave time for the hon. Member for Glasgow East to respond. Given unparalleled consumer change, the banks have adapted to keep competitive, including by taking some of the decisions we have discussed. That has meant investing unprecedented amounts in digital development, financial capability and tailored support for vulnerable consumers so banking is more personalised, on-demand and flexible, which many people expect in the modern world.

Let me address the impact on the franchising of Crown post offices, which a number of Members raised. Prior to finalising its plans for franchising, the Post Office runs local consultations to engage the local community and help shape its plans. That is in line with its code of practice and has been agreed with Citizens Advice. Indeed, Citizens Advice reported that the Post Office’s consultation process is increasingly effective, with improvements agreed in most cases, demonstrating its willingness to listen to the community.

The Government acknowledge that the post office plays an important part in the lives of customers, and accessibility of post office services is a key Government priority. That is why we have set specific access criteria, requiring 99% of the UK population to be within 3 miles of their nearest post office. Despite the point made by the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) that legislation does not impose a specific requirement for Post Office Ltd to undertake an equality impact assessment, the Post Office considers the impact of proposed changes to the network on its customers, and the Post Office and all its franchise partners, including WHSmith, are subject to all relevant accessibility legislation.

**Liz McInnes:** Will the Minister give way?

**John Glen:** I am not going to take any more interventions, because I only have four more minutes.

**Liz McInnes:** I just want to raise the issue of disabled access, which would be covered by an impact assessment.

**John Glen:** I will take that matter away and respond to the hon. Lady by letter.

The Government recognise that there are people who are struggling to adapt to new ways of banking or just prefer to carry out their banking in a more traditional way, over the counter. Members made powerful representations on behalf of constituents who find the closure of their local branch an inconvenience at best and a severe obstacle to their daily business at worst, so I want to take the time to reassure them that there is support available to minimise the impact and disruption of those changes.

I recognise the points made by the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) and others about the access to banking standard, which I mentioned in a previous debate. The access to banking standard is an important tool for ensuring that customers feel informed and supported when a branch closes, and all major high street banks are subject to it. It is my view that Santander adhered to the letter and the spirit of the standard when providing support to customers. I cannot account for every individual branch, but I am sure Members will be able to take that up with Santander, who were here to hear their representations.

I recognise that it is important that the standard is adhered to in both letter and spirit, and that support is given, but the Post Office’s commercial agreement with 28 high street banks and building societies enables 99% of personal banking customers and 95% of small business banking customers to carry out their everyday banking at one of the Post Office’s 11,500 branches, which provide an excellent alternative to a bank branch. Everyday essential banking services, such as cash withdrawals and deposits, cheque deposits and balance checking, are all available in every Post Office branch, including those located in retail facilities. Since 2010, the Government have invested close to £2 billion in the Post Office, and we have provided an additional £370 million from April last year until March 2021 to ensure the network can continue to modernise and maintain suitable coverage across the UK. That has meant post office numbers have been at their most stable in decades.

This issue is not just about individual customers; it is about businesses, too. Santander has long had an arrangement with the Post Office for its business customers, who currently cannot deposit cash at a Santander branch and must use the post office instead. Indeed, a third of SMEs visit post offices every week, highlighting the Post Office’s value for business banking. The Government believe that too few customers know about those excellent services, so, at my predecessor’s request, UK Finance and the Post Office worked together to launch an action plan to raise awareness of Post Office banking services. I encourage every Member to support their local post office and make their constituents aware of those banking services.

I also hear Members’ concern about the depletion of the high street. That is why, in the last Budget, the Government introduced a £675 million future high streets fund—not another review but a fund—that seeks to make high streets and town centres fit for the future. Alongside that, we are helping smaller retailers by cutting their business rates by a third for two years from April 2019.

I am conscious of the time, so I thank all Members for taking the time to speak in the debate on behalf of their constituents and local communities. I fully respect the fact that bank branch closures are a symptom of wider changes in our economy. It is important that, in response to those changes, we strike the right balance between promoting a dynamic and competitive financial services sector and ensuring that customers are treated
fairly. I take my responsibility for supporting the development of alternatives to banks across the United Kingdom very seriously.

Andrew Rosindell (in the Chair): I call David Linden.

4.27 pm

David Linden: Thank you very much for calling me, Mr Rosindell. You have taken over in the Chair since I opened the debate. It is a pleasure to see you in your place; thank you for chairing the remaining proceedings.

Westminster Hall debates on a Thursday afternoon tend not to be the best attended, so the fact that no fewer than 29 Members took part in this debate highlights the seriousness of this issue. I was reflecting that when the votes are called in a little over half an hour, we will return to the main Chamber and go our separate ways into different Division Lobbies. The fact that we have come here on a completely cross-party basis and spoken with one voice is incredibly powerful. The House is at its best when we come together and speak with one voice, and I am pretty certain that today we have spoken with one voice. I know that Santander are in the Gallery. I hope not only that have they been listening but that they will act and save our Santander.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the effect of Santander branch closures on local communities.

4.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 19 February 2019

[GERAINT DAVIES in the Chair]

Free Childcare: Costs and Benefits

9.30 am

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the costs and benefits of free childcare.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I probably ought to declare that I am father to 14-month-old Ophelia and expectant father to another child, which is on its way, so I have a vested interest in this topic. Somewhat ironically, a number of colleagues asked me to express their disappointment at not being able to make the debate, given that this is half-term week. This week was supposed to be a parliamentary recess, but the Government cancelled it, so the debate was drawn for a time when lots of colleagues have to look after their children.

The motion refers to free childcare. Clearly there is no such thing, given that someone will always have to pay—parents directly, the state or a bit of both—but the premise of my argument is that childcare that is fully using, that is not sustainably funded and that is deeply mired in IT problems since its launch. Parents now have to make the debate, given that this is half-term week. This week was supposed to be a parliamentary recess, but the Government cancelled it, so the debate was drawn for a time when lots of colleagues have to look after their children.

The motion refers to free childcare. Clearly there is no such thing, given that someone will always have to pay—parents directly, the state or a bit of both—but the premise of my argument is that childcare that is fully funded by the state should be seen as a redistributive investment rather than a cost. Such an investment could create a more productive, more equal and happier country due to the contribution that fully paid childcare can make to the economy, the impact it can have on tackling class and gender inequality, and what it can do for family happiness.

It is worth summarising where we are today. I think it is fair to say that most parents, if not all, would say the childcare system is far too confusing. Someone with a two-year-old child can get 15 hours of childcare per week if they receive certain benefits or have a child with disabilities, or if the child is looked after by the local council, but parents who do not fit into those categories have to fund the equivalent childcare or not be in work to look after their children. For children aged three or four, parents can get 15 hours of childcare per week until reception class for up to 38 weeks each year, and an additional 15 hours per week can be claimed by a single parent in work, a couple of parents earning less than £100,000 a year—that is, of course, a generous income bracket—and those in some other technical situations.

On top of that, we also have childcare vouchers, tax-free childcare, working tax credits and universal credit. Childcare vouchers are claimed through work, but the Government are phasing them out. Tax-free childcare involves a prepayment top-up by the Government, with parents using an online system to make payments to registered childcare providers, but is only for those who do not receive childcare vouchers. People on low pay can claim universal credit or working tax credits, but doing so means they cannot claim tax-free childcare.

All those schemes rely on someone receiving a regular income from employment, creating difficulties for those who rely on commission—one of my constituents, who is an estate agent, found it very difficult to evidence her income to fit into some of those categories—who are in flexible work or who are self-employed. I recognise that the Government have made welcome changes to tax-free childcare for those in self-employment, but those difficulties come up frequently in my constituency surgeries. That is especially true for tax-free childcare, which has been mired in IT problems since its launch. Parents now have to take the time—every three months, I think—to look in, register their children and make payments into the system, and must find a childcare provider that is able to receive money through the system.

There were significant problems, which have now been fixed, for people with children with disabilities. Those people get a 40% top-up rather than a 20% top-up, but that was not calculated properly on the system. Constituents in well-paid jobs told me they were having to think about selling their car in order to pay for their childcare and stay in work. That just cannot be right. Not only is the system too confusing but parents do not use it because it is too much hassle. Only last week, we heard that only one in 14 eligible families claim their tax-free childcare. The system is too hard to use—it is too confusing—and parents are not using it.

All that is in the context that childcare is an enormous cost in the family budget. In 2014, which I appreciate is now some time ago, the Family and Childcare Trust conducted research into the cost of childcare across the country and concluded that, on average, families pay about £10,000 a year. That cost will now be higher, because of welcome changes such as having to pay the living wage and other costs faced by childcare providers.

Even with families paying such large costs, however, the system is still not sustainable. Childcare providers tell me that they cannot afford to make ends meet without applying additional costs to families, on top of the core costs of childcare. A Twitter follower of mine made the point that, under Government-funded childcare, and obviously with the right ratio of staff to children, her childcare business receives only £3.84 per hour per child. She says she is on the brink of closure. We have a system that is too complicated, that parents are not fully using, that is not sustainably funded and that is bringing the childcare system to the brink of closure.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an eloquent speech on the realities that parents face. I congratulate him on his wonderful news. The situation in Wales is different, and I may come back to that in a later intervention.

I have anecdotal evidence that, in order to reduce the pressure on family budgets, lots of my friends who are our age and who have children find it more cost-effective to work part time or to rely on elderly relatives—not just grandparents but great-grandparents in some cases—for childcare. Does my hon. Friend agree that, in the long term, regardless of which Administration lead on childcare, that is simply not sustainable?

Darren Jones: I agree with my hon. Friend and thank him for his intervention. It has been shown that parents—especially mums, as I will come on to in a moment—often go from working full time to part time and do not return to full-time work until their children are in primary
education. They are out of the labour market for years when they may wish to be in it. That is a systemic issue associated with the pressures of childcare.

I am not moaning about looking after children; I enjoy looking after my children. However, the fact of the matter is that I also want to contribute and to have a career, as does my wife. We should not have to live in a system where having a career is a trade-off between one and the other; where the childcare system is not fit for purpose; and where our way of life does not allow us fully to contribute to the success of the economy. The system is ripe for reform, not only so that we can help families or spend taxpayers’ money more efficiently but to create a country in which we can all be happier and more productive.

Moving on to the economy, OECD research shows that moving to a culture in which men and women are able to share parental duties, without mum or dad trading off who looks after the child, and therefore creating equal participation in the labour market, would increase GDP by about 10% by 2030. Under their current policies the Government seem to be in the mood to surrender GDP growth in the coming years, so reform of the childcare system may be a welcome contribution to increasing GDP.

This issue is particularly relevant to parents of children with disabilities, who find the system even harder and more expensive. I am proud that the Flamingo Chicks charity in my constituency teaches ballet to children with disabilities because there was no such provision. It not only provides excellent services for young people in Bristol and across the country—it is a growing organisation—but does research, too. I hosted the charity in Westminster a few weeks ago, when it launched research showing that only one in 10 dads feels able to tell their employer that their child has a disability. They fear telling their employer because they think that it might impact on their career. How sad is that? People ought to be able to tell their employer that they need to claim their right to flexitime or childcare leave in order to care for their children. In order to maintain their career, they should not feel pressured into putting their job first and hiding the fact that they have children who need to be looked after. That is entirely incorrect.

I am also pleased that several Bristol businesses have signed up to the new Flamingo Chicks employers’ charter, under which employers should proactively encourage their staff to take flexitime, if required, to look after their children—whether they are disabled or otherwise—and which encourages policies to support staff in playing a more positive and proactive role in looking after their families without it having an impact on their career.

If more parents are in work, it has the obvious benefit of more people paying tax, which is welcome and helps to fund systems such as these. That is especially true for in respect of properly funded childcare providers. If we have a sustainable, fully funded childcare provider system across the country, we will create lots of reasonably well paid jobs that people value. Creating a public service we can be proud of will help us to rebalance the regional economies, invest in the next generation and help families to do better today.

Some have suggested that fully funded childcare could increase economic productivity because it would give parents more flexibility around their working days and around the way in which they take time off work to care for their children. That means that we would get more output from them at work, because they would not have to take so much time off at short notice or reduce their hours to fit what the current childcare facilities provide.

The Minister may wish to refer to some studies, including that from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, that say that there is little connection between childcare policies and parents in work. Of course, some parents will choose to stay at home and care for their children, and it is absolutely their right to do so, but surely we would not wish to miss the prospect of increasing GDP, tax returns and productivity. Surely we should aim to help those who want to be in work to lead more productive and meaningful, less discriminatory and happier lives.

Not that long ago, the Government started to measure happiness—I think it was under Prime Minister Cameron. I do not know whether they still do so, but it would be interesting to see the statistics.

Moving on to gender and class, we should not shy away from the fact that the childcare system facilitates discrimination in the workplace and the education system. Gender inequality is obvious, isn’t it? The Government admitted that in testimony for the Treasury Committee’s excellent report on childcare of March last year. In that inquiry, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said: ‘women having children end up on the “mummy track”—that well-known phrase—doing less skilled work than they are perfectly able to do, for a salary that is less than they are worth.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies, in its report on wage progression and the gender wage gap, said that by the time a woman’s first child is 20, she will have lost on average three whole years’ worth of salary compared with men, and will have spent the equivalent of 10 years out of work in terms of time lost, loss of progression and lack of career development. Those are enormous numbers; it is an enormous impact. Even in our increasingly modern society, it is disproportionately applied to women and mums.

In my view, we should talk more about class inequality. The childcare system has a really important role to play here, too. The Sutton Trust and others have shown that, by the time children leave secondary school, the attainment gap in terms of education, training and skills, means that children from disadvantaged backgrounds have lost nearly two years’ worth of schooling, compared with those from more advantaged backgrounds. That has to be unacceptable in our country. We know that the class gap starts from the earliest of ages, with attainment gaps of more than four months of equivalent schooling having been noted at the compulsory education age of five.

I saw that frequently, because I used to be the chair of governors at the primary school that I used to go to in what is now my constituency. Everyone who has been a governor knows that they look at lots of data on progression, attainment, attendance and all that stuff. The primary school is in Lawrence Weston, where I am from, which still has one of the lowest levels of attainment in the country for education, training and skills. When children come into the reception class, the gap between those who are the most prepared for mainstream education and those who are the least is really quite significant. Primary schools like Avon Primary School when I was there and it was
not an academy—put in enormous effort to try to bring children up to the average by year 6. Primary schools do a really good job, but it takes a huge amount of effort and support from teaching staff and teaching assistants to get them there.

Then, of course, the environment changes in the secondary education system—there are more children and less one-to-one support—and the children who were brought up to the average in year 6 start to fall back again. That is when we get an attainment gap at the end of secondary school of so many years’ equivalent of educational outcome, compared with those from more advantaged backgrounds.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. We should target childcare at the poor more comprehensively, because as he has described, when children arrive in school they are sometimes not ready—they are not even properly toilet trained and they cannot use a knife and fork. Does he agree that we should lament the number of Sure Start centres that have gone to the wall recently? They provided the foundation for better preparing those children for school.

Darren Jones: I agree entirely. I am pleased that, in Bristol, we have managed to keep our children’s centres open by coupling them with nursery schools in the majority of cases, and by creating a funding environment that means we have not needed to close them.

We do not need to look far from my constituency, however, to see how many centres have closed around the country under the current Government. I wish that my predecessors in the Labour Government had thought about the scheme sooner, because they introduced it late in their time in government. It was the right thing to do and I hope that we will be able to reintroduce such schemes under a future Labour Government. The evidence is clear: intervention at an earlier age is essential for tackling the inequality gap.

I will touch on maintained nursery schools and the link to childcare.

Chris Elmore: My hon. Friend talks about the closure of centres across England, but of course things are different in Wales. In my constituency, two new Flying Start centres have opened in the last two years. I was previously a cabinet member for education in a local authority in Wales and we continued to open such Flying Start centres.

All the evidence from Welsh Government analysis and local government analysis shows that early intervention works. It can be clearly shown that, where early intervention takes place around potty training, interaction with adults and early learning, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) mentioned, it makes a huge difference. Things can be done differently and are being done differently by the Labour-led Welsh Government.

Darren Jones: I declare an interest because there are two islands within my constituency—Steel Holm and Flats Holm. One of them officially belongs to Wales, so I class myself as a Bristolian and a Welsh MP. I take great pride in joining my hon. Friend in recognising the achievements of the Labour Government in Wales and I long for such achievements in Westminster too.

One issue with the Sure Start centres was that some data suggested that they were being utilised most by more middle-class families, although the policy intention was to tackle the inequality gap that has been identified. My argument is that a fully funded childcare system, because it is considered a public service, is not seen as a nanny state or someone trying to intervene to tell people how to parent; it is just available and it is what it is. We could have a more mainstream application of early years intervention in this type of system, which would tackle some of the challenges of the past.

I return to my soapbox on maintained nursery schools, which I and my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), and other hon. Members, have talked about frequently. We have some excellent maintained nursery schools in Bristol, which have the costs of and are regulated as schools, but which are funded as private childcare providers. Some of the Minister’s colleagues have recently responded about them in the House of Commons.

The evidence from maintained nursery schools clearly shows that putting in the intervention and assistance before mainstream school has a huge impact on bringing those children up to the average when they get to mainstream education, which helps to tackle the inequality gap. We should take that evidence seriously and apply it to our public policy, to show that it could be done not just in cities and regions that still have maintained nursery schools—they do not exist everywhere in the country—but across all the regions and nations.

On happier families, the Resolution Foundation produced an interesting report last week that looked at wellbeing markers for the happiness of families. To no one’s surprise, it concluded that being in meaningful work and having more disposable income generally makes people happier. It specifically showed that an extra £1,000 a year of disposable income can have a measurable impact on the wellbeing and happiness of someone’s family life, especially for those on the lowest incomes. To perhaps no one’s surprise, as income gets towards £100,000 a year, extra disposable income has less of an impact, but it can have an enormous impact for someone on £13,000.

Helping parents to be in work and providing fully funded childcare could have an impact on the average cost of £10,000 a year for working families [Interruption.]. One of the consequences of reading a speech from an iPad, Mr Davies, is that pressing the wrong place on the screen returns the speech to the start, rather than staying where I was speaking from. Reducing the amount of disposable income that working families spend on childcare, especially those on the lowest incomes, would have a measurable impact on their wellbeing and happiness. In many situations, parents are having to trade off between each other’s jobs, after-work arrangements, work trips, having to look after children, who does the school run and all those things. We could make a difference not only to family life planning, but to their income.

I do not have any evidence for this, and I would be interested in the Minister’s view, but surely fully funded childcare is an investment in the country. If we allow parents to work, reduce the amount of disposable income they spend on childcare, give them more money to spend on the high street or elsewhere in the market, allow them to pay taxes and VAT on the products they buy and fund properly paid childcare providers which
then pay their own income tax through their workers in a fully funded childcare system, that money will not just go into a black hole, but will create a system that could help us achieve public policy priorities on gender, class, economic productivity and all the issues I have raised today. It seems an obvious thing for the Government to want to look at and reform, because it will mean something to so many people across the country, while also stimulating all those important factors.

In conclusion, it is clear that the current childcare system is too complicated, does not work and is not sustainable. When we speak to anyone involved, that is what they say. Parents are not aware which system is most relevant to them. It is very confusing. People might think they are on a better scheme with childcare vouchers, which are easily done through work, and they are being told that is coming to an end and they should consider tax-free childcare, but then the IT system does not work and they cannot calculate which scheme is better. If someone is about to be or has already been pushed on to universal credit, they are told they cannot get tax-free childcare, even though they may have been able to get childcare vouchers if they were on working tax credits. It just does not work.

As a consequence, the Treasury has been saving money. The budget allocation for tax-free childcare alone—that is just one aspect of this complicated service—went from £800 million to £37 million. The Treasury has made a saving of hundreds of millions of pounds. Where has that money gone? Why is it not being invested back into reforming childcare systems? The fact of the matter is that while the Treasury is clawing back this money and spending it on God knows what—ship companies with no ships, or whatever it might be—childcare providers are having to charge parents on top of the already expensive price of childcare, whether it is for food, activities or private hours outside of the hours provided by the system.

We see that time and again. Whether it is policing, council services or childcare, the Government cut the funding to public services and those who provide for our constituents, and then push those costs on to hard-pressed families, whether it is through increased council tax to pay for the police funding that the Government have cut or to cover their cuts to the core grants to councils, or passing on more costs to parents from the attempt to save money on childcare systems. Enough really is enough.

We should be aiming for a fully funded childcare system, with qualified and decently paid childcare professionals. It is an investment in our future. It will break down gender and class inequalities and will help foster happier and healthier families right across our country. I do not see why it is even a debate. I hope that the Minister will set out today what he will do to make it a reality.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I will impose an advisory time limit of nine minutes.

9.55 am

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) on securing this important debate. I am pleased to speak today, particularly following the debate that I secured here last week on nurture care and early intervention in primary schools, which feeds nicely into this subject.

Early years education and nursery provision are crucial to ensuring that every child has the best start in life. Last week I spoke about that with reference to primary schools, although I said that the need for such support starts even earlier. As the hon. Gentleman said, free childcare is considered important because it allows parents to return to work and—for me, this is even more important—it ensures that children receive a good educational foundation. Without the right support in early life, children suffer, challenges become more complex, and costs grow. That is why I am an advocate of early intervention and proper support for disadvantaged and troubled families.

Across Mansfield and Warsop many low-income families rely on free childcare, and would certainly benefit from greater support with those costs. We have a relatively high take-up of the free childcare offer for two-year-olds, but I continue to have concerns that those most in need do not take up such support. The financial viability of those free places is a huge challenge for nurseries. Costs for nursery owners have increased because of payroll costs and other elements of inflation, and the funding offered by the Government to support childcare providers has not increased proportionately. That issue is consistently raised with me by local providers, and one local nursery owner also raised a valid point about wages and staffing.

In general, nursery staff are not particularly well paid, and progression can be unclear. That means there is a high turnover of staff, and providers cannot retain their best and most experienced people. After a few years working in childcare many people leave the sector and go elsewhere looking for better wages, and when we discuss the costs and benefits of free childcare we must also consider those aspects. I know from my experience with my now five and two-year-old boys that the attachments children make to nursery staff are important and emotional. My boys come from a safe and loving home, and it stands to reason that for children from the hardest backgrounds with problems at home, those relationships and the structure and safety of nursery are even more important. High levels of staff turnover are not helpful in delivering that continuity of care.

The Sutton Trust has been campaigning on that issue, and it argues that we should consider giving early years teachers qualified teacher status. The increase in pay, conditions and status that that would entail would help to retain a skilled and experienced workforce in that sector, although it would need funding to make it work.

I welcome the commitment by Ministers in autumn to support early development at home, including funding for additional training for health visitors to identify speech, language and communication needs. That is a good step towards tackling disadvantage and helping to identify special educational needs, in order to offer the best and earliest interventions. I would like early years education to be part of a formal intervention to which those children who most need it can be referred, following those early identifications. Giving children access to such support as early as possible, perhaps in a more formal and directive way for parents, would be helpful.

Alex Cunningham: The hon. Gentleman makes a good case for those who are less advantaged than most of us. Does he share my view about Sure Start centres?
They were developed to provide outreach, yet we have lost a lot of that. Will he encourage the Minister to encourage greater outreach into those communities, as we had under Sure Start?

Ben Bradley: That is an interesting prospect. Sure Start centres, and the ideas behind them, are positive, and we need that early support and intervention for families, and that hub for them to receive such support. I do not know whether Sure Start centres are always the right place—as the hon. Member for Bristol North West said, take-up at those centres is often by middle-class families and people who perhaps have the social capital to go out and find that support, when perhaps it could be more focused and targeted on those who most need it.

It is good that we are spending more than any other Government on supporting early years education at around £6 billion a year by 2020, and it is positive that more than 90% of all three and four-year-olds are accessing Government-funded early education. We are heading in the right direction in many respects, but we need to look more carefully at the impact of such provision, especially when it comes to the existing childcare offer. The Government’s policy of 30 hours of free childcare amounts to just over 1,100 hours of free childcare a year for many families, including my own—indeed, I count down the days until September when my youngest will be eligible for free childcare, and all the holidays I will be able to go on with that extra money. That perhaps identifies the problem—the funding should not necessarily pay for my holidays, which might be what it is used for.

The Education Committee, which I have the privilege of sitting on, noted in our recent report, “Tackling disadvantage in the early years”, that the policy might have entrenched inequality, rather than helping to close the gap. The Committee argued that the Government should reduce the upper earnings cap for 30 hours of childcare, the extra funding providing more early education targeted at the most disadvantaged children.

In 2016, a two-parent family on the national living wage with an annual wage of £19,000 a year, received 6% more in childcare support than a two-parent family on £100,000 a year, but now the former receive 20% less childcare support than the latter, because support has increased for wealthier parents, not the other way around. That is according to the Education Policy Institute. There is a balance to all such things. An important element is to provide value and support for those in work, so that people feel the benefit of work, but perhaps support has moved slightly too far from prioritising children who most need early intervention and support from the education system.

The social mobility index places Mansfield 524th out of 533 constituencies in England. I care passionately about social justice, an issue that is at the centre of my work in Mansfield and Warsop, and one of the best ways to tackle that low social mobility is to improve education, and early years support and intervention, focused on those most vulnerable children and families. I hope that the Minister will commit to look at ways in which we can reform education right from the start, from those early years, in order to support the most disadvantaged children, including many from Mansfield.

10.1 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) on bringing this issue to the Floor for consideration. I deal with this issue every week in my office, and in particular with my staff. I will give the Chamber an example of how the matter works in practice.

I have six staff, five of whom are ladies, so the issue comes through clearly. They are of differing ages, though I will not mention their names or refer to their ages, because that is something we do not do, if we want to live well. My part-time worker is in her 50s and is a grandmother. I allow her flexibility to change her days so she can mind her grandchildren and come into my office on the days or mornings that she does not have the children. That is a practical arrangement that works for her and for me—that is important.

A further two staff members in their 40s have children in the last year of schooling, so they are able to work their normal full-time hours. It is easier when children attend secondary schools and further education. I also have a staff member in her 20s who is due to marry next year, and she has informed me that I should be prepared for her maternity announcement the following year, as she wants children right away after she gets married. Again, I support her wholeheartedly in that.

My parliamentary aide is in her 30s, and has a three-year-old and a four-year-old. Her childcare arrangements are more pressing. They are all key members of staff, but she is in particular. When she returned to work after her second child, we came to a flexible working arrangement that allows her to work at home on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursdays, when I am at Westminster.

In practice, when my aide’s kids are at nursery in the mornings, she works away for me, and when her husband gets home at 6 pm, she works on. She is my speech writer, preparing many of my speeches, so she probably has little to do—I jest, because I keep her busy. I talk the speeches over with her, but cut and add to them as I progress through the time. She is kept very busy, and her workload means that I sometimes see work coming through to me at 1 o’clock in the morning. That is a fact; it is how she does it with her flexible hours—I am very fortunate to have her working for me.

When I asked my aide about childcare, her answer was simple: “Jim, I earn too much to get help from Government but not enough to pay the £300 a week for someone else to mind the children. I am holding on for the P2s”—primary school—“when the kids are in until 3 pm, and I can then cut back on night-time hours.” That has made me ask some questions. How many young families working to pay for childcare are holding on by a thread until they get the care? How many grannies and grandas are missing out on actually relaxing at 5:30 pm, and there are a greater number of them, and every one of us could probably reflect that and illustrate that in
our constituencies. I believe that if the burden of childcare was lifted, there would be benefits for the quality of life for so many families throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We need more schemes such as the tax-free childcare scheme, which puts 20% of Government funding alongside someone's 80%. The fact is that, although that is good, not many people are aware of it and I look to the Minister to give us some illustration of what can be done to improve that. There are many people who just do not know about the scheme.

Some 91,000 families made use of the new tax-free childcare system in December, which is far below the expected number. What are the Government doing to increase that number and increase awareness, because official figures show that the Government had planned and budgeted for 415,000 families? We are far off that figure, for a scheme that was launched in October 2017. It is a gentle question, but hopefully it will receive an answer. At one point, 3 million could qualify for the help, meaning that only about one in 14 eligible families had applied for it. So we really have an issue to increase that number.

When we look at countries around the world, we see that we are at the top of the league for costs, and they must come down. Just yesterday in the provincial press back home, there was an illustration of the cost of childcare per child across Northern Ireland. In my constituency of Strangford, and in mid and east Down, we have the highest levels of childcare costs anywhere in Northern Ireland. We have a middle class that is squeezed beyond control, with rising rates, rising insurance costs for their home and car, rising food prices and rising petrol prices. Everything is more money, apart from their wages, which remain the same.

It is little wonder that so many people believe that it is better not to work. We have mothers and fathers who slog it out at work, and then try to cram in time with their children in the evening hours, and stay on top of housework and mundane issues. I believe that they need help.

I will finish with this comment: childcare is one way we can help and encourage women with young children to have a career, and find a way to do it all. So I urge the Government to expand the 20% help for childcare and bring us down in the global charts, instead of our being top of the Pops for all the wrong reasons.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Thank you very much. We have still got a lot of time.

10.7 am

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Davies.

I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) on an excellent speech. It is a shame that he was not around a few years ago, because he could have been on the Bill Committee that considered the Childcare Act 2016. He would have been a tremendous asset at that time.

Although I would prefer to see a Labour Government delivering big on childcare, I, for one, recognise how the last Tory Government built on the legacy of the Blair-Brown Government—they most certainly did. I know that they like to pinch our policies, but I am always happy when they pinch the right ones.

I am saddened, however, that despite the Government’s policy of expanding childcare, which was progressive and actually made some progress, we are in danger of failing to land the kind of childcare provision that we want, because the implementation has fallen short. It has fallen short because the Government failed to engage properly with the sector originally. They failed to recognise the challenge they were facing in building capacity; they failed to understand the need to develop a sector that would be even more professionally led; and, despite the very welcome cash that came with the policy, they failed to recognise the need for professional staff to be paid a decent wage for looking after all our children.

I am a dad and a grandad, and my sons and grandson are the most precious of precious people to me; I am sure that there is not an MP here in Westminster Hall, or across the Estate, who does not think of their family in that way. Yet as a nation, we seem content to leave those most precious young members of our families to be looked after by people who are often on the minimum wage and discontented with their working lives. The hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) referred to that issue in some detail, and I am sure that he agrees that we need much more action on it.

After all, childcare staff are some of the most loving and dedicated people that we have in our country. They do the job because it is their vocation. They do it despite a system that does not appreciate them for not just looking after our children, but keeping them safe. Should we really devalue them so much?

We know why we believe in childcare. It allows parents, especially mothers, to go back to work, which is important not just so that they can earn, but because it gives them the fulfilment of a challenging daily routine beyond childcare—believe me, I know that that too can be challenging—the fulfilment of earning their own living and supporting their family, or perhaps the fulfilment of doing work that they feel passionate about.

We must ensure that parents have a choice, which the 15 or 30-hour offer provides, but we need to make sure that it is easily accessible and well resourced, and that we create happy spaces for children that result in happy parents who are content to leave them there. If the free childcare that we all like to boast of is not resourced properly, parents end up subsidising it through expensive contributions to meals and the provision of nappies and materials—even wet wipes.

Not everyone is covered, of course, and childcare can be expensive for those who are not. Some rely on family, but not everybody has family members who they can rely on or expect to take up childcare responsibilities. It is also important to recognise the specific needs of adoptive parents. If we are serious about encouraging people to foster and adopt, we must ensure that the law and regulations are favourable and provide them with an environment that supports them and enables them to do their jobs as well.

When I served on the Childcare Bill Committee—I lament the fact that my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West was not there—one area we looked at was the costs associated with the provision for disabled children. Parents of disabled children need an extra level of support. Often, going back to work is not an
option for them, but they are in desperate need of respite care. From talking to my own local authority, Stockton-on-Tees, I know how difficult it can be to provide adequate respite services to all the families who need it. Last week, the Government passed yet more cuts to authorities, particularly across the north, which does not help to deliver on that agenda.

As another hon. Member has said, in the mainstream, we have a system of childcare vouchers and tax-free childcare. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West that the new tax-free childcare system is less favourable than the voucher system we are moving away from. In a previous debate on childcare, I reminded hon. Members of what the Prime Minister said on the steps of Downing Street after she entered office:

"We will do everything we can to help anybody, whatever your background, to go as far as your talents will take you.”

Perhaps the Minister can share with us how the Government are actually helping poorer families who are in desperate need of childcare but do not currently qualify for the scheme. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West referred to the Treasury Committee’s report on childcare, which found several gaps in the Government’s childcare schemes, including that one.

Access to childcare support while training is a real issue. Mothers who opt to do a nursing degree are particularly badly hit, especially with the advent of universal credit. There are women in my constituency who struggle to qualify for universal credit because, despite the fact that they work—and I believe they do work—on the wards during training, they do not accrue sufficient working hours, which has a direct knock-on effect on their entitlement to childcare. They are left to survive on child benefit and a student loan that they will have to pay back one day. We all know about the loss of the bursary scheme.

Parents aged 20 who wish to take on training can seek support only if they are on a further education course and are facing financial hardship. Childcare costs are a barrier to the participation of parents, especially young parents, in courses. Those costs actively prevent them from taking on the training that could advance their careers and give them more money to support their families.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West also mentioned the gig economy. Zero-hours contracts are notoriously inflexible, no matter how much people try to portray them as the opposite. Shifts are offered at the last minute, so staff who can drop everything to come into work at the drop of a hat are prioritised. Workers are also told at the last minute that they are not needed, so they lose out on a day’s expected pay.

There is a real risk of a parent needing last-minute childcare to be able to pick up a shift, but that flexibility does not exist in the system. Parents have to pay for childcare, but they frequently get to work and find that they are not needed, so they are shelling out money that they do not have. Not every worker knows their shift pattern two weeks or a month in advance—a bit like MPs, perhaps. Sometimes, workers are lucky to know 48 hours in advance. I am repeating myself, but we need childcare provision that matches the economy people work in.

During the Bill Committee a few years ago, Pat Glass, the then MP for North West Durham, and I challenged the then Minister time and again on building capacity, on the need for a professional-led service, on engaging with the sector and on so many other things. I know that it was not the Minister before us today, but the former Minister gave reassurances that have proved to be no more than fantasy. We were told that the market would sort it out, that there were people keen to enter the market—many did—that there were sufficient people coming through to staff the system, and that all would be well.

Sadly, that has not really happened. We have seen nurseries close, and we still see demands from parents for more and more support. We have a long way to go to ensure that we have that professional-led service. I would never do down our nurseries, which do tremendous work, but professionals should be leading that service. We need that provision to help people on the bottom rung of society who cannot get a job because they cannot get the training they need, since they do not qualify for the comprehensive childcare they need.

It is time to look again. We have a vast wealth of talent sitting dormant at home, often on social security, because our system does not recognise their need the way it should. We should concentrate resources on those people—starting with childcare, to allow them to get on with work. I also say to the Minister: please look again at the provision for people with disabled children, which remains totally inadequate. We really need action in that area.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I call Thangam Debbonaire. I will call the first of the Front Benchers at 10.30, so you have a reasonable amount of time.

10.16 am

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Davies. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) and to other colleagues, who made excellent points. I will try to do what I always swore I would and not say things that others have covered.

Both parents and early years providers in Bristol West report problems with the current system, including the cost to the economy in lost work and skills when parents are unable to take up childcare because of the complexity of the system or its inappropriateness for their needs. However, I will focus on the social costs, in particular the social cost to gender equality and the social and economic cost to lone parents.

In 2015, the OECD published statistics on net childcare costs as a percentage of average wages for a two-earner, two-child couple. The eurozone average was 14%, but in Malta the cost was 0%, in Austria 3%, in Sweden 5%, in Iceland 5% and in Germany 5%. In the UK, the cost was 55%—higher even than the United States. I just put that down as a marker for two-parent families. For single parents, there are of course often benefits and benefits in kind that help even out the additional burden of being the sole provider and income earner, but there is no doubt that free or very low-cost childcare is a great contributor to gender equality and to single parents’ ability to provide for their families.

Other Members have mentioned parents using childcare for economic benefit, so I want to focus briefly on its impact on gender equality, and particularly on its use for training, job interviews and voluntary work, which
are essential for women re-entering the workforce, leaving violent partners or needing to fit childcare around being a lone parent. A single parent cannot get free childcare to go to a job interview or just to clean up the house and go to the shops, which is unbelievably difficult for a lone parent with young children. Free childcare also helps those starting up in business. Again, that has a particular impact on women, who often choose that route into employment after having children. Of course, all that benefits the economy, but there are also social benefits, which include older relatives’ ability to participate in the workforce or in other activities when they no longer have to offer to provide free childcare to enable their daughters or female relatives to do training, job interviews and so on.

Continuing on the theme of gender equality, of course men and women love their children and want to be with them, but men and women also want to provide for them, contribute to the wider world and develop their skills. If high quality, affordable childcare is widely available—the OECD defines “low cost” as less than 10% of average wages, although in the United Kingdom it is nowhere near that—that allows men and women to make decisions based on what is best for them and their children, rather than on the probable inequality of their wages, which further reinforces the inequality of their wages.

I have friends in the Netherlands, where the childcare system is far from perfect, but where there is at least a cultural understanding that when someone becomes a parent, whether they are a man or a woman, they should work fewer hours, and that men and women have an equal responsibility for picking up children from childcare or school. I am constantly amazed that, when I pick up friends’ children from school in the Netherlands, there are roughly equal numbers of men and women, and nobody notices because it is not a thing. I have friends who moved to four-day working weeks after they became parents. That is the norm. That means that each child is in childcare for three days per week and with parents for a total of four, but it allows both parents to maintain their work and play a full and active role in their child’s life, as so many parents deeply want.

In my constituency of Bristol West, childcare providers and state-maintained nurseries report problems with the take-up of free childcare by families on low incomes in general, but particularly by single parents—usually women—who struggle to fit the complexity of the system around their needs and those of their families. The OECD has documented the consequent restrictions on their economic participation.

There are other social benefits involving gender. Childcare that is free at the point of delivery, such as Sure Start—a wonderful achievement of the previous Labour Government, of which I will always be proud to bear the fact that she had come to see me. Such opportunities are absolutely critical.

I have several questions for the Minister. I believe he is an honourable gentleman who wants the best for children and families across the country. I have asked Treasury Ministers and other Children’s Ministers—not this Minister—about funding for early years, and I have not really got satisfaction. There is a tendency for each to refer me to the other side. I raised early years childcare funding two weeks ago on the Floor of the House when the Education Committee presented its report on the subject.

I will ask the Minister a few questions. First, what will his Department do about the exclusion and complexity of the current system, particularly for women and lone parents, that other hon. Members have described? Secondly, what will he do about the difficulties for lone parents in getting childcare and its impact on their getting training and job interviews? That is critical for getting lone parents, who are often skilled but unable to work owing to childcare problems, back into employment. Thirdly, has his Department carried out a gender impact assessment of the current childcare system? Fourthly, has his Department assessed the impact of the system specifically
on low-income families? Fifthly, has his Department had time to review the Select Committee report? It is not all about funding; there are related issues.

I plead with the Minister to consider what has been said today. The impact on families of high quality childcare that is free or affordable at the point of delivery is immense.

Chris Elmore: As ever, my hon. Friend champions the people of Bristol West and those in our society who most need help and are most vulnerable. Does she agree that the Department for Education could learn from what is happening in Wales? The Welsh Government announced yesterday a 30-hour offer and investment in 150 new or redeveloped childcare centres, to ensure that all working families benefit. It will not be based on income but on genuine need, which will be met via Government intervention. That shows the difference that a forward-thinking and progressive Labour Government can make.

Thangam Debbonaire: I applaud the Welsh Government and I look forward to seeing the impact of that, which may have lessons for the UK Government.

I believe that, like the Labour party, the UK Government want to champion people getting into work. We are the Labour party—the clue is in the name—but the Tory party also says that it wants people to be in good quality jobs and to be able to do those jobs without constantly worrying about what is going on at home or about childcare, or about not being able to make it to childcare. I have heard that as a Whip, when people I am whipping say to me that they need to leave before a vote otherwise they will not be able to pick their child up from childcare. That is manageable as a Member of Parliament—just.

I urge the Minister to answer my questions and those of other hon. Members, and to recognise the economic and social value of free childcare to the entire country.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): On behalf of the Scottish National party, in a late change, I call David Linden.

10.27 am

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, as always, Mr Davies, and I thank you for your forbearance, as I did not intend to sum up the debate, hence I am sat next to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) in our usual season ticket seats. I extend my sincere congratulations to the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) on securing the debate and, on behalf of my party, I wish him all the best for the impending arrival of his next child.

It has been an excellent debate. The hon. Gentleman gave a thorough speech and spoke about some of the economic arguments—that more people in work means more people paying tax and increased productivity. I certainly agree. He also challenged some of the gender inequality, which I thought was a powerful point. The hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) has a strong track record of speaking in debates on family issues. He spoke powerfully about early intervention, which I definitely agree with. He also spoke about the need to pay nursery staff better and about some of the impacts of current pay rates, such as the high level of staff turnover. I shall come on to my experience of that.

The hon. Member for Strangford spoke about his experience of employing six staff, five of whom are women, and the need for employers to be flexible. He has obviously grasped that as an employer. We, as Members, are all employers, and we know that it is better for staff productivity if we can be flexible. He also spoke about the mysterious Strangford speechwriter, who I think will be the only person furoius that this week’s recess was cancelled because it means their having to write more speeches for the hon. Gentleman as he continues with his impressive speaking record.

The hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) spoke powerfully about his experience, particularly in the Bill Committee. He gave a fair critique of the Government’s policy and particularly the link to the gig economy—an additional dimension to the debate that I do not think anyone else raised. He, too, hammered home the need to pay nursery staff better; I want to come to that later. He also spoke powerfully about something that I see in my own case load—the need to support in particular parents of disabled children. I would like to hear the Minister refer to that point when he winds up the debate.

Lastly, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) spoke about childcare for people attending job interviews and some of the social costs associated with childcare. She also spoke about her experience of seeing how things in the Netherlands work, particularly the equality between men and women. That is another issue that I want to come to. Finally, she spoke about some of the challenges experienced by lone parents.

At the outset of my remarks, I should probably, like the hon. Member for Bristol North West, declare a personal interest, in that I am already a beneficiary of free childcare for my son, Isaac, who since August last year has been part of Glasgow City Council’s expansion of nursery provision.

I want to break my remarks into three sections. First, I want to give the context of what we are doing in Scotland to try to revolutionise childcare. We have heard from Northern Ireland, Wales and England, so to complete the set, I will speak about Scotland. Secondly, I want to talk about some of the data picked up by CHANGE—Childcare and Nurture Glasgow East—which is a lottery-funded project in my constituency. Finally, I want to touch on one or two of the key challenges in this policy area.

The hon. Member for Bristol North West very eloquently set out the situation in the context of England, so I thought that it might be helpful if I set the scene in Scotland. The Scottish Government are pressing on with the implementation of their commitment to double the entitlement to funded early education and childcare for eligible two-year-olds and for all three and four-year-olds, taking that up to 1,140 hours by August 2020.

My own son, who attends a Scottish Gaelic-medium nursery, is already at nursery from 8 am to 1 pm five days a week, and my wife and I have greatly valued the flexibility that the current system allows us. As parents, we were able to decide whether we wanted him to attend for five half-days or whether it might be better to block-book two and a half days a week. In the end, because of my role as an MP and hers as a teacher, we decided that it would be best to spread the care over five days, but it was good to have that choice, which meant that we could tailor the care to our needs as a family. It
[David Linden]

is estimated that, in essence, the current investment in early learning and childcare is saving each family approximately £4,500 per child each year. That is certainly good news for families in my constituency of Glasgow East.

Having set the scene, I want to turn to some work that has been undertaken by an organisation doing work in my constituency and funded by the Big Lottery Fund. In a debate such as this, it is important that we look at the challenges, as well as the opportunities, that the provision-of-childcare policy will provoke. Although we have the ambitions that have been stated, there are also challenges, as I think we would all accept.

First, I know from my own constituency casework and the data collected by CHANGE that there are still challenges with nursery provision for children aged from zero to two. Fundamentally, fewer places are available and waiting lists are much more common. In the Parkhead area of my constituency, there are some outstanding nurseries, but there are serious supply and demand issues, on which I am currently lobbying Glasgow City Council; I hope that we might see action before long. When I met Anthony O’Malley from CHANGE, I was concerned to learn about the limited availability of childminders in my constituency, and it is now down to single figures. Certainly when I was a child growing up in the east end of Glasgow in the 1990s—I feel a bit strange talking about growing up when it was not that long ago—childminding was much more prevalent. We ought to be asking ourselves why the provision of that hugely beneficial service has declined in such a short time.

Secondly, childcare providers and families told the project that there is a need for more out-of-school care places in the area, especially in and around Parkhead. Perhaps an unintended consequence of the offer of extended nursery provision, coupled with the very well deserved increase in pay for child development officers in Scotland, is the concern that after or out-of-school care services may see an exodus of staff who see working in the nursery sector as a bit more attractive.

That brings me rather nicely to the final point that I wanted to touch on during the debate. It concerns general workforce and recruitment challenges for the expansion of early years provision. As a result of the ambitious plans to increase the offer of free childcare, we clearly need to recruit more child development officers.

Four or five months after I was elected, I attended a Scottish Government event at Tower View nursery in the Craigend area of my constituency. The event was a media launch of the campaign to recruit up to 11,000 additional staff to meet increased early years provision. One thing that struck me that day as I was going round carving pumpkins and meeting all the lovely children was the fact that we are still not getting it right in terms of seeing more men working in the sector; we perhaps need to do a little more to attract men to work in the nursery sector. Clearly, the debate around early years provision has moved more towards nurture, but I am not sure we are getting the balance right. I make that point as an observation and ask the people reflecting on these proceedings to consider that, because in Scotland only about 4% of the workforce in early years daycare provision is male. As we look to inspire children, we should look at role models, and perhaps we are not getting it right when 96% of the workforce is female.

I will finish where I started by talking about my own son’s experience. I want to say a massive thank you to all of the staff at his nursery who go the extra mile every single day and have a massive and hugely positive impact in shaping our little boy and how he perceives the world. We would all agree that that is a noble and rewarding profession, and I hope that many more people consider it as a career in the future.

10.36 am

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. May I begin by saying how apt it is to be discussing childcare and early education this week when many Members and, perhaps more unfairly, the staff who work in this place will have had to organise last-minute and probably premium-cost childcare because of the late-notice recess cancellation? I am pleased to see the Minister stepping in for the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi). Perhaps he is not here because he has a childcare problem, or perhaps, as the papers suggest, he is skiing. We wish him well and hope he comes back in one piece.

I want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), who secured the debate and is a young father himself. I congratulate him on the fantastic news that another baby is on the way. It has been great to hear submissions from parents in all parties who have talked about their own childcare arrangements and how valuable those are in enabling them and their partners to do their jobs and fulfil their potential.

I will summarise some of the excellent contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West had a passionate and humane approach to what childcare is all about: creating happy, fulfilled families so that children can grow up in brilliant homes where they can fulfil their potential while feeling safe and secure. The extra £1,000—£20 a week extra in pay cheques—would bring happiness and flexibility to families. That money is vital for some families, certainly families on the breadline. For them, if a washing machine breaks down, that £20 could mean going to a food bank or not. It is absolutely imperative that we also look at the wider economic situations for some of the poorest families.

The idea of families selling their cars to pay for childcare is distressing. My hon. Friend’s focus on equality and families having to decide who goes part time and who loses out in their career progression was incredibly powerful. I was also interested to hear about Flamingo Chicks and would like to know more if he will meet me. Also, the focus on gender and class is really powerful. We know that the gender pay gap starts at the beginning when a woman has her first child. Women often never recover from that. In the creative industries—my previous career—we see the awards season and more men than ever winning awards, but why is that? Because women have to make a choice about stepping out of their careers. Then it takes forever to try to catch up. Some never catch up and they just step out permanently.
Alex Cunningham: The disadvantage to women is not only in their earning power through the years, the loss of the opportunity to work and everything that means but in the effect on their pensions—they lose many years’ pension contributions and are more likely to be in poverty in retirement.

Tracy Brabin: I absolutely agree and I will probably pick up later on the idea that, despite the welcome alignment of men and women’s pension age, some women are coming to me and saying, “I can’t look after my daughter’s children, so she can’t go back to work, and I’m having to continue working.” Women Against State Pension Inequality has a case to make about the fact that the inability to find cost-effective childcare is impacting on their families.

We have heard some fantastic contributions. I value the work that the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) is doing with the Education Committee. Let me take a moment to thank him and his colleagues on that cross-party Committee for their report, “Tackling disadvantage in the early years”, which was published last week. I will flag up to the Minister, although I am sure that he will comment on it, the Committee’s observation that the Government’s own policy on 30 hours of funded childcare is “entrenching inequality rather than closing the gap”, and the Committee’s recommendation that the Government “resurrect their review of children’s centres and… explore promoting family hubs as a wider model for provision of integrated services.”

The Committee’s work is absolutely invaluable in trying to close that disadvantage gap.

I welcome the contribution from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), including his personal stories about his workforce; his member of staff who sends speeches at 1 am deserves a medal. He, too, mentioned older women who are unable to look after their children’s children.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) celebrated childcare staff, and talked about nursing bursaries and nursing trainees. It is absolutely vital that we enable those people, who are going into incredibly stressful jobs—jobs that we absolutely need—to get the support they need to study, rather than their having to worry about getting a part-time job. My daughter is working in a bar at the moment and she is working alongside a nurse who is working there to top up her salary, in order to work at night. That cannot be conducive for training, can it?

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) was, as always, a fantastic champion for the single parent, for gender equality, and for childcare. Childcare for those who are training, volunteering or going to job interviews, and for entrepreneurs who are starting up, is absolutely vital. For example, 95% of notonthehighstreet.com businesses are run by women and were often started at their kitchen table. They need support, to help them to get their businesses up and running. There is also the magic of Sure Start—we have all said that, have we not?—with that confidentiality, and that opportunity to go in and get support.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), who is no longer in his place, made an intervention. It has been very interesting to hear what Wales and Scotland have on offer; I also welcomed the contribution by the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden). The number of childminders is falling off a cliff and it is really important that we pull that back, and find really great strategic ways to support childminders, because they are the ones providing the wraparound care.

I thank everyone for their contributions today. It goes without saying that free or affordable childcare is fundamentally a good thing. It gives families autonomy over their own decisions; parents, especially mums, can go back to work and work the hours they wish to, within a timeframe that suits them. We know that so often the greatest barrier to accessing childcare is the cost, so we should always applaud efforts to bring the costs to parents down.

Free and high quality childcare has an incredibly positive impact on children. A child’s brain grows at an extraordinary rate in their first few years of life, and it is so important that children have access to stimulation and learning. Our collective aim should be that as many children as possible receive high quality early years education.

However, all is not well. The Government have introduced 30 hours of free childcare, a flagship policy in this area, but there are problems. The 30-hour policy excludes children whose parents are out of work. Those people’s children, many of whom would benefit the most from free childcare, are exactly the children who are being cruelly excluded from accessing it, through no fault of their own. I believe that is a fundamental flaw in the policy, and we may not understand the repercussions of that decision for a long time to come.

This term, more than 200,000 three and four-year-olds will receive that free childcare; that is 200,000 children who are entitled to double the support of their future classmates. They will arrive at school potentially having received hundreds more hours of learning than their more disadvantaged peers. We would not accept such exclusion in primary, secondary, or any other form of education, and I would like it to end for early years too.

Maintained nurseries are one part of the early years sector that works incredibly well, with children from disadvantaged areas. There has rightly been a huge amount of recent debate and discussion about those schools, because they are often the standard bearers for the sector. Wherever they are present, standards across the board are improved. I know the Minister realises how essential it is that those schools receive news about their funding as soon as possible. We have been told not to expect that news until the next financial review, but chatter suggests that an announcement could be made as soon as the spring statement. I do not expect the Minister to announce the funding today, but if he could shed some light on when the Department expects to make that announcement, I, Members, schools and concerned parents would be extremely grateful.

According to Members, charities, settings, think-tanks, Select Committees—just about anyone other than Ministers—the 30-hours policy needs more investment to work how we want it to. Local authorities are given an hourly rate that is set by central Government and passed on to providers for the hours that they look after eligible children. Regrettably, in too many circumstances the funding falls short of what is required to provide good quality childcare. Sector analysts Ceeda estimate that there is currently a £616.5 million shortfall in the private and voluntary early years sector. Providers are
caught between a rock and a hard place. They are struggling and sometimes unable to make ends meet, so they pass on extra costs to parents in other ways.

Since the policy was introduced I have consistently warned of the havoc facing providers, but it has never felt as if those concerns have been taken seriously by the Department. The weight of evidence is becoming undeniable. The Early Years Alliance—formerly the Pre-school Learning Alliance—published a survey of more than 1,600 early years practitioners in September 2018, in which four in 10 childcare providers said there is a chance that they will have to close their setting in the next academic year due to the funding—or under-funding—of 30 hours' free childcare. Eight in 10 providers said that there will be a somewhat or significantly negative impact on them if the funding rate stays the same next year. It has since been confirmed that only two councils will receive an increase in funding in April 2019. Thirteen will see a decrease, and the rest will have no change.

Will the Minister, when he responds to the debate, say whether any cross-Government discussions are taking place to increase funding for providers? What assessments are being carried out to ensure that parents are not paying for supposedly free hours of childcare through the back door? If those conversations are not happening, is he willing to facilitate a committee of providers—not just the big names, but childminders and small providers—to examine the day-to-day problems they face?

I am running out of time and I wish to give the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West an opportunity to respond to the debate. Briefly, however, let me mention a part of the sector that I am interested in—co-operatives. As Members will know, I sit as a Labour and Co-operative party MP. I have visited a number of co-operatives, and I am convinced we need to support them further. Co-ops allow time-rich but cash-poor families to contribute. They invite parents' skills into the setting, and in return, parents get a say in how that setting is run. Those settings have huge potential, and in the spirit of co-operation I will conclude by saying that I will happily work with the Minister and his colleagues if he would like to explore ways of supporting co-ops.

10.49 am

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) on securing this debate and his welcome news—and the interesting way he introduced it.

I am grateful for the opportunity to set out the Government’s position on childcare support. It is a pleasure to stand in for the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), who I understand is seeing family in Washington DC, which is appropriate, given the debate on families that we are having.

I think the truth is that Members here violently agree on the importance of high quality childcare. Evidence shows that high quality childcare supports young children’s development and helps to prepare them for school. Affordable and convenient childcare gives parents the ability to balance work and family life, allowing them to enjoy the benefits of a job, safe in the knowledge that their children are in good hands.

When the Labour party left office in 2010, only 15 hours of free childcare was available for three and four-year-olds. It was the Conservative-led coalition Government that introduced free childcare for two-year-olds from disadvantaged families. Early education from the age of two has long-lasting benefits for children, and we believe that it helps to promote a child’s emotional, cognitive and social development.

However, evidence shows that, on average, disadvantaged families are less likely to use formal childcare provision than more advantaged families, which is why the Government introduced 15 hours of funded early years education for disadvantaged two-year-olds in September 2013. Eligibility was expanded in September 2014 to include children with a disability or special educational needs from low-income working families, or who have left care. Our balanced approach to managing the public finances enabled us to do that. The extended learning programme for two-year-olds has been popular with parents. Local authorities reported in January last year that 72% of eligible parents nationally took up their entitlement to a place. That is a significant increase from 2015, when the figure was 58%.

A year and a half ago, we also doubled the childcare entitlement of working parents of three and four-year-olds to 30 hours a week. On the point made by the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), only working parents are eligible for those additional 15 hours; the first 15 hours are universally available for parents of all three and four-year-olds. In its first year, the 30 hours of free childcare, alongside the Childcare Choices website and the childcare calculator, helped more than 340,000 children to take advantage of more high-quality childcare, with savings for parents of up to £5,000 a year. Again, the Government’s balanced approach to the management of the public finances and the economy enabled us to do that and to provide that benefit to parents.

Independent evaluation of the first year of the 30-hours entitlement found more than a quarter of parents reporting that they had increased their working hours as a result, with 15% of parents saying that they would not be working at all without the extended hours. Those effects were stronger for families on lower incomes, helping to fulfil our commitment to help disadvantaged families and to boost social mobility. Furthermore, surveys of parents highlight the impact that the 30 hours can have on parents’ working patterns, with a majority of parents reporting that the 30 hours have given them more flexibility in the hours that they can work, and a small but significant proportion of mothers reporting that the 30 hours had led them to enter work or to increase their hours.

The evaluation report quoted one parent as saying: “By doing four days now instead of three...my company looks at my development and progression in a way that they wouldn’t if I was only doing three days.”

Some 86% of parents reported that they thought that their child was better prepared for school as a result, and 79% felt that their family’s quality of life had improved. The latest study of early education and development—SEED—report, published last year, also points to the
clear evidence of the benefits of high quality early education for the cognitive and emotion development of all children aged two to four.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) asked for a commitment to support the most disadvantaged children, but that has been the driving force behind all our education reforms since 2010. On early years education, more than a quarter of children finish their reception year without the early communication and literacy skills that they need to thrive. The Government have ambitious plans to halve that proportion over the next 10 years. The Department is working closely with the sector to deliver on our commitment to reform the early years foundation stage profile. The reforms are an important opportunity to improve outcomes for all children, but especially to close the word gap between disadvantaged children and their peers. We know that the gaps can emerge much earlier in a child’s life, well before they enter reception. That is why we recently launched a capital bidding round of £30 million to invite leading schools to come forward with projects to create new high quality nursery places for two, three and four-year-olds. Those are the reasons why the Government are investing more than any other in childcare. We will spend around £6 billion a year on childcare support in 2019-20—a record amount.

Jim Shannon: In my contribution, I referred to the take-up figure of 91,000. The number that could take up the scheme is 417,000. I asked what the Government are doing to bridge that gap and ensure that people take up the scheme.

Nick Gibb: I will come to that point in a moment. We believe that the take-up of all the different schemes has been very high, but we always want to do more to ensure that it continues to increase.

The introduction of 30 hours has been a large-scale transformational programme, and such change can be challenging, but tens of thousands of providers have none the less responded to make it a success, because of their ongoing commitment to helping families. The evaluation of the introduction of the 30-hour entitlement found that three quarters of providers delivering free entitlement places were willing and able to deliver the extended hours with no negative effects on other provision or the sufficiency of childcare places. Almost two thirds of providers offered full flexibility with free choice to parents on when they could take the extended hours. Overall, we are already starting to see how the 30-hour entitlement is making a difference to families across the country.

The childcare market in England consists of a diverse range of provider types, allowing parents real choice in their childcare provision. The supply of childcare in England is generally high quality, with more than nine in 10 providers rated good or outstanding by Ofsted. There are strong indications that supply can meet parent demand for Government-funded entitlements. Nearly 79,000 private childcare providers were registered with Ofsted in August 2018 and more than 7,500 school-based providers, including maintained nursery schools, were offering early years childcare.

While there are some examples of providers closing, as the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) pointed out, there is no evidence of widespread closures in the private and voluntary childcare market. The latest official Ofsted data, published in December 2018, showed that the numbers of childcare providers on non-domestic premises is fairly stable over time, showing a marginal 2% decrease compared with 2012. Providers joining and leaving the Ofsted register is normal in a private market and can be due to a variety of reasons. In fact, more non-domestic providers joined the register between 31 March 2018 and 31 August 2018 than left.

Tracy Brabin: Will the Minister accept that in order to keep the lights on, some smaller nurseries have had to ask parents for top-ups, such as baking birthday cakes and selling them, or even taking in ironing in order to keep their business going?

Nick Gibb: These issues are always raised. While there are some examples of providers closing, there is no evidence of widespread closures in the private or voluntary childcare sector. As important as the availability of places is, I am pleased that the quality of childcare providers remains high, with more than nine in 10 rated good or outstanding by Ofsted. In January 2018, more than 1.2 million children under five were receiving funded early education in settings rated good or outstanding. We continue to support growth in the childcare sector. As part of that, we have allocated £100 million in capital funding to create extra high quality childcare places.

Maintained nursery schools were mentioned in the debate. They provide high quality early education and support some of our disadvantaged children. I have seen that for myself in my constituency. In order to allow the hon. Member for Bristol North West to make some final remarks, I take the opportunity to again thank him for securing this debate. High quality childcare provides crucial support for children’s development and prepares children for school. The free childcare entitlements being provided by so many impressive providers are backed by record levels of Government spending.

10.59 am

Darren Jones: I thank all Members for their contributions today. Like all parents and providers across the country, I look forward to seeing the Government’s words turned into actions.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the costs and benefits of free childcare.
Heat Networks: Greenwich and Woolwich

11 am

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered heat networks in Greenwich and Woolwich.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I am grateful to the Minister for responding to the debate and for previously finding time in her busy diary to discuss the issue with me.

This is not the first time that I have expressed concerns about systemic problems in the UK heat network sector and I suspect it will not be the last. In the comparatively short time that I have been a Member of the House, I have raised the issue on numerous occasions and I have repeatedly made the case for statutory regulation of heat networks, particularly those that supply domestic customers.

For a long time, it felt as if those of us calling for greater protection for heat network customers were making no headway. When asked, former Energy Ministers would nod sympathetically and politely explain that statutory regulation was not appropriate and risked strangling an emerging industry in red tape. When I turned to the Competition and Markets Authority a few years back and made the simple request that it open an area of investigation into the industry, I was told that it had no plans to do so.

Thankfully, the situation has changed. The CMA was persuaded to carry out a detailed market study into heat networks and it published a final report in July that made several sensible recommendations. Ministers have now accepted the need to introduce a regulatory framework for the sector.

Of course, that is welcome, but it provides little comfort to heat network customers who are not getting a fair deal and for whom every month that passes without effective protections being put in place means continued poor service and expensive bills. That should concern us all deeply, and I know it concerns the Minister, not only because of the Government’s avowed aim to keep customer bills as low as possible, but also because systemic problems are not just a problem of the near term. The fact is that many of those networks and their operators are badly failing those who have no choice but to be served by them.

Since my election in 2015, not a month has gone by in which at least one constituent, served by one of the at least 13 communal heating schemes in my constituency, has not written to me with a complaint. Those served by privately operated schemes are at a much greater risk of failure and cost consumers more than they should.

Secondly, there is a very real problem with the choice of heat network operators. In my constituency, this issue relates almost exclusively to new build developments, more general planning requirements often lead to the installation of poor quality infrastructure or systems that are inherently expensive to operate. The situation is exacerbated by the lack of enforceable technical standards. The result is that communal heating systems are prone to failure and cost consumers more than they should.

For many customers, heat networks offer an efficient supply of heat and hot water at prices close to or lower than other sources of supply such as gas and electricity, with comparable service standards. It is not in dispute, however, that a significant minority of heat network customers are being badly let down. In London, as the Minister knows, the number of heat networks is growing rapidly, partly because developers are incentivised by London’s planning framework to install onsite systems, and partly because their use makes a huge amount of sense given the density of new build developments in the capital.

In my constituency, every large new build development, of which there are a great many each year, invariably includes a communal gas boiler, a combined heat and power engine, or a biomass boiler. That should be something to celebrate, and it would be, were it not for the fact that many of those networks and their operators are badly failing those who have no choice but to be served by them.

I will touch briefly on the three main drivers of the problem. First, while the London planning framework deliberately incentivises the installation of heat networks, more general planning requirements often lead to the installation of poor quality infrastructure or systems that are inherently expensive to operate. The situation is exacerbated by the lack of enforceable technical standards. The result is that communal heating systems are prone to failure and cost consumers more than they should.

Secondly, there is a very real problem with the choice of heat network operators. In my constituency, this issue relates almost exclusively to new build developments, so there is no existing body of residents to put pressure on the building owner to provide a customer-focused heat supply. In the absence of consumer pressure of that kind, the developers, which have no long-term interest in a site, have almost no stake in which operator they award a contract to. If the anecdotes I have heard from those involved in the local property market are to be believed, the selection of an operator is more often than not determined by which commits to giving the developer the largest up-front capital contribution to offset the capital costs incurred in having to install the network.

Even developers that have a long-term interest in the site complain to me that they have a limited choice of who could operate the network. The result is that developers invariably turn to one of the small number of large, established suppliers, or one of the growing number of much smaller, less established operators, both of which can be problematic.

Thirdly, heat networks are natural monopolies. They require a relatively large up-front capital expenditure. When a contract is awarded to an operator, it tends to last for decades. The operators of most of the communal heating systems in my constituency have contracts lasting for more than two decades. Some last for 30 or even
35 years. There are, of course, good suppliers out there, but if the group of customers has no freedom to switch to an alternative heating system until the mid-2030s or even 2040s, there is little or no competitive pressure to offer reasonable prices, a reliable supply and a high quality of service.

In my experience, the result is that the majority of heat network operators are totally unresponsive to their customers. The large operators seem not to care particularly about what amounts to a very small part of their business model, and many of the smaller operators are—to put it bluntly—a law unto themselves, because they do not even have to worry about the reputational impact of providing a poor service.

The combination of those three factors on a significant minority of heat network customers is well documented. A minority of privately owned heat network schemes offer extremely poor value for money. Even allowing for the fact that heat charges cannot be directly compared with standard gas and electricity prices, the tariffs levied on some of those customers cannot be justified. Moreover, unit prices and average bills vary significantly between schemes. I have seen evidence of discrepancies in charging between customers on the same scheme and in the same development, and significant month-by-month variation for individual customers when it comes to standing charges, which are supposed to be set annually.

There is a lack of transparency in billing for many heat network customers. Over the years, I have been sent many examples, and the vast majority of the bills are barely penetrable. Is it any wonder that most customers do not feel able to challenge their supplier on cost, prices and services? I suspect that a number of heat network operators prefer it that way, because it reduces the pressure on them to provide reliable, value-for-money heat.

Those problems are exacerbated by the fact that heat network customers do not have the same regulated consumer protections as domestic gas and electricity customers. It is true that some communal heating schemes are registered with the Heat Trust, but there is no requirement for individual heat network operators to register themselves with the trust or to register all their schemes. As a result, the Heat Trust provides only limited protection to consumers, and operators can pick and choose which of their heat network schemes they wish to be held accountable for and which they do not.

To illustrate what that perfect storm means for individual customers served by privately operated schemes in London, let me take a concrete example from my constituency. There are many that I could choose from, from the E.ON-run scheme at New Capital quay in Greenwich to the Evinox-run scheme at Wick tower in Woolwich. I will focus on the most recent case that has been brought to my attention: a scheme operated by a company called Vital Energi in a development called the Movement in central Greenwich.

The 530-unit development was constructed in 2015, and after—one hopes—an open, competitive tendering process, the operator was awarded a decades-long contract to operate the onsite communal heating system. Residents of Bellville house, the main block on the development, recently wrote to me en masse with a series of complaints relating to heat and hot water outages, a lack of transparency in billing, misinformation from their supplier and dire customer service. All those areas of concern are echoed in the findings of the CMA’s final report. However, their main grievance was the price hike that Vital Energi landed them with on 1 October last year. Not only did the operator increase the standing charge and what is itemised in the bills as “Separate capital replacement 1” and “capital replacement 2” charges—whatever that might mean—but the unit charge was increased by a staggering 96%.

As the Member of Parliament, I have no way of ascertaining whether the operator had valid grounds for that price hike, or whether Vital Energi simply priced in an exorbitant profit. The problem, however, is that residents of Bellville house and the rest of the development cannot submit a complaint to the ombudsman for it to adjudicate on the matter because Vital Energi has chosen not to register the scheme with the Heat Trust. Vital Energi has registered a scheme in Bristol, but for some reason has chosen not to cover the scheme on the Movement development, so residents have no protection other than the limited protection afforded to them by the Heat Network (Metering and Billing) Regulations 2014 and general consumer protection and competition law.

The hundreds of residents on that one Greenwich development are not alone; thousands of heat network customers in my constituency face similar problems and are not getting a fair deal, undoubtedly with tens of thousands more across the country. Their ranks swell with every high-density new build development constructed in my constituency, across London and in other parts of the country in urban areas.

I would be grateful if the Minister addressed two specific questions in her response. First, how long will it be before heat networks are regulated? The Department welcomed the recommendations in the CMA’s final report and made it clear that it intends to consult on more detailed policy proposals later this year, and any subsequent legislation to follow as parliamentary time allows. I appreciate that policy needs careful preparation and that any legislation required cannot be rushed, but any heat network customers watching our proceedings today will be forgiven for worrying that they will still be without effective protection for years to come. I know that the Minister will do everything she can within Government to address their concerns, but will she provide more detail with regard to the outlines of the regulatory framework that the Department believes is necessary and, more importantly, the estimated timeline for implementation?

Secondly, what, if anything, can be done in the short term, before a new regulatory framework is established, to give heat network customers greater protection? For example, will the Department do more to persuade and, if need be, cajole suppliers and operators to ensure that all of their heat networks are registered with the Heat Trust? Will Ministers write to operators such as Vital Energi to make it clear that they are expected to register each of their schemes with the trust? Such a step would not be a panacea, but it would at least ensure that all customers received minimum service standards and had access, if they felt it necessary, to the energy ombudsman. Will the Minister touch on that and on what steps might be taken to protect customers in the here and now, before the introduction of a regulatory framework?
The Minister knows what the problem is, she knows what needs to change and I know that she is doing her best to push the process along, but I urge her to redouble her efforts. Heat network customers are not getting a fair deal now, and are being ripped off in many cases. They are not being well served and cannot wait another year, or possibly two years, for those protections to be introduced.

11.13 am

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, in particular as you have a long-standing interest in the whole area of decarbonisation.

I sincerely congratulate the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) on securing the debate. He, as usual, gave us a thoughtful, informed and passionate exposition of the problem. In his current position, and as a councillor for half a decade, he has campaigned hard on such matters. He has also been assiduous in his correspondence with me. We have discussed the matter face to face and via correspondence on multiple occasions. I will address some of his concerns and come back to him on his action points—as we all know, I am a woman who likes to get things done.

To set the scene for why this is an important debate for the hon. Gentleman’s constituents and more generally, we believe that heat networks have an important part to play in the decarbonisation of the heat system in future. About half a million customers are part of a heat network, with about 14,000 individual schemes throughout the UK. As he has pointed out, however, there have been ongoing concerns about treatment of consumers and effective regulation of a small monopoly provider. That is why the CMA produced a report, to which we responded.

Last December we published a commitment to developing a market framework that will protect customers, including through regulation where needed. I believe that five of the seven networks in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency are members of the Heat Trust, to which he referred. Their feedback and that of others in the market has demonstrated widespread support for that commitment.

An immediate priority is to tackle the lower-performing networks. The hon. Gentleman makes a very strong case as to why some of those are in his constituency. Before addressing the broader question of how we regulate the market, it is hugely important to address the problems of people who are already on lower-performing networks.

Of course, the market is already regulated, and that includes consumers on networks, who are covered by general consumer protection regulation. In addition, there are the Heat Network (Metering and Billing) Regulations 2014, and customers on a Heat Trust registered scheme have free access to the energy ombudsman’s services. I was very pleased to meet energy ombudsman representatives only a few days ago and welcome their commitment to improving customer service for all customers, including those on heat network schemes.

Our large-scale survey in 2017 found that, on average, heat network customers are as satisfied with their heating systems as non-heat-network consumers, and that, on average, they pay about £100 less for their heating and hot water. Clearly, however, there are also examples of consumers on heat network schemes who are more likely to experience a loss of heating and less likely to receive a bill statement or account summary. As the hon. Gentleman eloquently pointed out, that reduces people’s understanding of what they are being billed for and possibly their ability to campaign to change suppliers.

Heat networks are perceived reasonably well, but clearly there is much more to be done. There is evidence that some customers are getting poor deals in terms of value for money—the prices that they are paying.

Therefore, as we said in December, we agree that the sector needs to be improved. We have set out our priorities for addressing the CMA’s recommendations. We strongly believe that a long-term market framework needs to be underpinned by regulation, with Ofgem best placed to take on the role—essentially, taking on whichever legislative powers we agree to give it. As the hon. Gentleman said, we will consult further on those powers later this year.

As I said at the beginning of my speech, that is not just because we want to ensure that consumers have adequate redress, particularly if they are on low-performing networks, but because there are huge potential benefits, both for customers and for decarbonisation. Heat accounts for about one third of the UK’s carbon emissions. We have to cut emissions from heat. We have had various other schemes, such as the renewable heat incentive and the energy company obligation. In February, I opened the heat networks investment project, which will see up to £320 million of capital funding invested in heat network projects through grants and loans across England and Wales.

The hon. Gentleman, who is standing up for his constituents in Greenwich and Woolwich, will know that many of the early heat networks came about in London. There are real planning incentives to bring forward networks in London, and there have been some excellent examples of that being done. I was happy to convene an investor roundtable a few months ago, to understand how we could reduce barriers outside London to ensure that networks could be deployed more fully. As we roll them out, though, we have to be mindful of the consumer experience, so we not only intend to bring forward legislation, but want to ensure that the Heat Trust or equivalent standards are widely adopted, are in place, and are actually delivering the consumer support required.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Heat Trust is a UK-wide independent consumer protection scheme, which draws on the terms of service offered to gas and electricity consumers. Heat Trust membership continues to grow, but, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out, right now it is a voluntary scheme. He makes an excellent suggestion: I will indeed, while we are in this period of refining and consulting on the regulatory requirements, commit to writing to all heat network members that are not part of the Heat Trust scheme, essentially to suggest that it is a very high-quality voluntary scheme and that we would like to ensure that all members sign up to it. That was a very good suggestion.

We are absolutely committed to heat networks. It has been good to learn from some of the experiences, both good and bad, in London. It is no comfort to the hon. Gentleman’s constituents, however, that his area still
has networks that he and others believe are providing a poor-quality service. I will therefore leave this debate with redoubled vigour to ensure that we consult on and bring forward the necessary framework as quickly as possible. I have to say, however, that the way to unclog the current parliamentary timetable, which is snowed up with Brexit, is of course to vote for the deal, so that we can get on with our lives and get on with dealing with the very many other issues that affect the day-to-day lives of all our constituents.

Question put and agreed to.

11.20 am
Sitting suspended.
asked to fund increases well above inflation, yet there is no extra money for putting frontline officers back on the beat to improve the visibility of the police presence? They are being asked to pay more, yet the service they receive seems to carry on disintegrating.

Stephen Twigg: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am sure her constituents say to her as mine do to me that there is that sense of having to make an increased contribution, yet not seeing an improvement in service.

With the increase in precept this year, there will be some new officers, which is very welcome, but it comes after almost a decade of considerable cutbacks. During the consultation on this year’s council tax increase, about three quarters of respondents indicated that they were willing to pay the additional money to protect police officer numbers and to put some extra officers on the beat, so our commissioner took the reluctant—I think—decision to propose an increase in the precept to generate an additional £10 million.

That increase, for most households—most Merseyside households are in band A for council tax—is £16 a year; for a band D property, it is £24 a year. Families across Merseyside, in our constituencies, face tight finances, so that kind of decision taken by local politicians is not one that is taken lightly. In an environment of increasing crime, however, with increasing calls for help from the public, politicians were left with no alternative. We simply cannot afford to lose any more officers, police community support officers or police staff in Merseyside.

Frank Field ( Birkenhead) (Ind): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. On the Wirral side, we have begun to have shootings. I hope that it is only a temporary blip; it is very important that it does not become a way of settling disputes. We will therefore need extra resources. I will see the chief constable on Thursday afternoon, and I will take the results of this debate with me and make the very point that my hon. Friend is making.

Stephen Twigg: I thank my right hon. Friend for that important intervention. We have seen an increase in shootings on the Liverpool side as well, and he is right to emphasise the real risk to our communities. I represent Croxteth and Norris Green which, a decade or so ago, suffered very serious issues to do with so-called gang violence, including the use of firearms. The strong sense in those communities is that they do not want to go back to those days. One of the ways to ensure that they do not is to resource our police service properly.

Gillian Keegan ( Chichester) (Con): I am not a Merseyside MP, but I grew up there. I pay tribute to Merseyside police, who thankfully I did not cause too much trouble to, but they were always there if required—

Ms Angela Eagle: That’s what you say!

Gillian Keegan: I think they would probably still say that.

For the record, my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Damien Moore) would like to be present to take part in this debate, but he is on a parliamentary trip to the Falklands with our armed forces. Like me, he voted to increase the funding for all police—as we know, across the country there is a mixed funding model for the police—and for Merseyside police by up to £18 million, we hope.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that many changes are going on in the police force, in particular the access to lots of technology? From going out with my police force, I know that there are a lot of changes, so straight-on comparisons of the amount of resource are difficult, because the whole nature of policing is changing across the country.

Stephen Twigg: There is no doubt that the nature of policing is changing and that technological innovation is providing opportunities, but I think that bobbies on the beat are still a fundamental part of what our constituents expect of policing. I will come on to that in a moment when I talk about the impact that almost a decade of austerity has had on neighbourhood policing across Merseyside, including in my constituency.

The increase in the precept enabled the chief constable to avoid a planned further cut of 100 police posts and provided the opportunity for an increase of 40 police officers across the whole of Merseyside. That is a modest increase, but welcome, and it is the first time that officer numbers have increased in nine years. In a sense, this relates to the point made by the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan). If we contrast the position in a place such as Liverpool with that in her constituency, the Merseyside police force is heavily reliant on central Government for funding—77% comes from central Government. As that funding has been reduced, the only way in which the impact can be ameliorated is for local people to step in through the council tax. As a result, Merseyside police is more dependent on hard-working local taxpayers, whose contribution to its funding has risen from 15% in 2010-11 to 23% in the coming year. Even with that increase in council tax, the force’s overall funding has reduced, as I said.

Let me contrast that with Surrey, one of four police forces that raises more funds locally than it gets from central Government, simply because it has a much more affluent council tax base. Surrey raises 57% of its funds through council tax, compared with 23% on Merseyside. As a result, although its budget has fallen, it has fallen by a lot less than Merseyside’s. The same story could be told about other areas with high levels of social and economic deprivation. Surely, that is inherently unfair. Does the Minister recognise the unfairness of passing the burden on to the local taxpayer where the ability to raise more locally is demonstrably regressive, meaning that the system itself compounds existing inequalities?

Merseyside has consistently been recognised as one of the best performing metropolitan police forces in the country, but the combination of cuts and rising crime inevitably has serious implications. That brings me to the latest crime statistics. Office for National Statistics stats show that crime across Merseyside increased by 12% in the year to last September. That does not paint the full picture. Robbery was up 18%, violent crime was up 16% and knife crime was at its highest level in 10 years, with more than 900 serious incidents reported last year. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) talked about the threat of shootings and firearms offences. I pay tribute to our police force for
the priority it has given such offences in recent years, which meant firearms offences on Merseyside fell from 258 in 2012 to 199 in 2016. Very sadly, that trend has reversed; in 2017, the last full year for which we have figures, firearms offences increased sharply to 353.

People in Merseyside are bearing the brunt of police funding cuts, of which the most visible example for many is the loss of neighbourhood policing. Neighbourhood police are the eyes and ears in our communities. Although crime trends have changed, the importance of a visible policing presence on our streets surely has not, so one of the many areas of concern is that we have lost 46%—almost half—of our police community support officers since 2010. Neighbourhood policing is at the heart of tackling the scourge of antisocial behaviour, the low-level crime that so often makes people’s lives a misery. The loss of PCSOs, combined with the rise in more serious violent crime, has had the inevitable effect that, despite the best efforts of officers on the ground, they so often do not have the resources to respond to that blight on our communities.

One example of that is the impact of so-called scrambler bikes. I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) is on the Front Bench, because she has led on that issue in the House. Those nuisance bikes are noisy, intimidating and frightening. They affect the quality of life of our constituents and pose a real threat to safety on roads, on footpaths and in parks. They endanger the safety of both pedestrians and other road users, and increasingly are used to carry out serious crime. I have worked with our commissioner and the local force to try to tackle the issue. Merseyside police is doing good things to identify and prosecuted people for the illegal use of off-road bikes, but it tells me it needs the resources and powers to do more to tackle that appalling scourge.

I welcome the Home Office’s proposals to help tackle motorcycle-related crime by providing police officers with better legal protection when they pursue suspects. Those long-overdue proposals went out to consultation last May, but as I understand it, we have not yet had a Government response to that consultation. I hope the Minister can provide an update on the Government’s plans to tackle the scourge of scrambler bikes and motorcycle-related crime.

Another area of great concern in my constituency and across Merseyside is road safety, and the impact on road safety of the loss of funding. Across the country, the number of dedicated traffic police officers has fallen by nearly a third in the past decade. In that time, the decline in the number of deaths on our roads has stagnated; indeed, the number of deaths on our roads last year was at its highest since 2011.

In Merseyside, there has been a concerted effort to keep those numbers down, with the ultimate aim of nobody losing their life on our roads. More than 500 people were killed or seriously injured there in 2017, which was a significant drop from 599 the previous year. I pay tribute to Jane Kennedy for the personal lead she has provided in seeking seriously to reduce those numbers. Every single death or injury is one too many, and I fear that spending cuts could compromise the vision of zero deaths and serious injuries on our roads.

I briefly pay tribute to the fantastic work of the Bobby Collaran Trust, which campaigns for road safety around schools. It was set up by the family and friends of Bobby Collaran, a little boy who died on his way home from Blackmoor Park Infant School in West Derby in my constituency. They have dedicated themselves to working with schools, the local authority and others to limit the number of injuries and deaths, and to make our roads—especially those near schools—safer.

Rising crime and police cuts affect our communities, but they also directly affect those who work in the police service. Last week, a national Police Federation survey of 18,000 officers of all ranks found that nearly 90% of officers say that the police are understaffed. Responses from Merseyside reveal that 84% of officers say that not enough officers are available for the job to be done properly; that 72% are often or always single-crewed; and that 76% experienced stress and anxiety in the previous year. The survey paints an all-too-familiar picture to those of us who talk to police officers working in our constituencies. They are over-burdened, stressed out and often exhausted. They work under immense pressure with fewer resources at a time of rising crime.

Tragically, we have seen in Merseyside several shocking incidents of officers being targeted while carrying out their duties, including the tragic example of PC Dave Phillips, who was killed in a hit and run in Wallasey, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle). Other incidents include a petrol bombing at a scene in Anfield and an officer being stabbed in Huyton, in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth).

There remains a lot of uncertainty over future funding levels for Merseyside police. I am told that the force’s own forecast is that, over the medium term, it may need to make further savings of around £22 million to balance the books. I hope that the Minister can give us some assurance that the Government recognise the scale of the challenge facing Merseyside police, and that there is the potential for new money to bridge this funding gap and provide the force with the resources it so desperately needs to tackle rising levels of crime.

It surely cannot be right that the largest cuts in police funding hit the communities with the greatest social and economic need. I urge the Home Office to engage with Merseyside police to address this serious funding crisis as a matter of urgency.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), whom I congratulate on securing this timely debate. I agree with much of what he had to say, particularly on the consequences of year-on-year real-terms cuts. There is no doubt that the Lib Dem-Tory coalition Government from 2010 and the Tory Governments that succeeded them from 2015 slashed the capacity of Merseyside police to do the job that it does so well and that we all need it to do. My hon. Friend is correct that there has been, in effect, a 32% reduction in central Government funding in that time.

Even if we take into account the extra income raised by the allowed increase in the precept—he set out some of the issues relating to that, which I will come back to—there has still been a 21% reduction in real terms. My hon. Friend made it clear that it is not easy to raise
the precept, partly because there is a low council tax base across Merseyside, and partly because the people who have to pay it face other cost pressures—they not only have to pay other precepts, but they are already hard-pressed to pay their ordinary bills. We therefore cannot simply keep saying that the precept can be raised.

It is a particularly deplorable trait—I do not blame the Minister personally for this—that the Government have tried to claim in the figures they put out that the increase in the precept is an increase in the money from them. The Department and Ministers—perhaps the Minister could address this—should stop including the money raised from the precept, if it is all collected, in the grant money, which gives the idea that the Government have handed over the money, when they have not. The difference it makes to Merseyside this year is between £8 million—the additional money that the Government have given—and £18 million. The Government cannot claim that they have given Merseyside police an increase of £18 million, as they repeatedly do.

There has been a switch from central Government funding to a reliance on hard-pressed council tax payers to pay for basic policing needs and to try to ameliorate the declining ability of the police. The force is down a quarter of its officers—1,120 police officers have gone on Merseyside. Although the increase of 40 that the police and crime commissioner is hoping to introduce this year is incredibly welcome, that does not make much of an impression, given that 1,120 officers and half of our PCSOs have gone.

Neighbourhood policing is particularly hard hit when hard choices have to be made about what the police can afford to do, because something has to give. That stores up problems for the future in a way that cannot be calculated at this stage. PCSOs and neighbourhood policing are the eyes and ears of the police. Neighbourhood policing prevents future crime and diverts young people and those who are going off the rails from the path they are choosing. It can lead to less crime in the future. To get rid of neighbourhood policing and make it impossible is a false economy. It is stupid in policy terms. It is damaging to the police’s future capacity to do their job.

Investigations have also been hard hit. If the police cannot investigate crime, crime does not get solved. People get away with crime, and lives of crime can continue with some reward. That is not a good way of dealing with possible future difficulties.

There has been an overall increase in all crimes on Merseyside of 29% in the past five years, and 12% in the past year. We are seeing an accelerating increase in crime on Merseyside. After 10 years of year-on-year, real-terms cuts in resource, that is not surprising. It is accelerating and will accelerate more if the Government do not realise that they cannot have policing in an area like Merseyside on the cheap. They must resource policing better, otherwise this will get worse.

That is without taking into consideration the new types of crime that we are beginning to see: there is masses of cyber-crime and online fraud, and people in our society have other vulnerabilities and need to be protected. New crime is coming along to challenge traditional policing, but old types of crimes are also coming back and increasing on Merseyside. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby referred to knife crime, as did the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), and it has increased by 31% in the past year—a huge increase that includes fatal stabbings.

A number of us, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) and other Merseyside colleagues, have met Ministers from this Government and the previous one for three or four years. We have raised issues of gun crime and gangs, but we have received not one iota of help or one extra penny to deal with those issues. It is about time the Government ensured that Merseyside police, which is excellent at dealing with criminal gangs, gets the resources to turn back the tide which, at present, is rising.

Last week, the Liverpool Echo reported that there have been nine incidents of firearm discharge on Merseyside streets so far this year. The year is not very old. Those incidents include one fatal shooting. Another chap was shot while holding his child in his arms, and it would not have taken much for that incident to have been even worse than it ended up being. There has been a 29% increase in demand for police services on Merseyside in the past five years, but at the same time the overall police establishment has reduced by 22% and we have had year-on-year cuts. It is not rocket science, and it does not take a genius to see that that situation will lead to more, and worse, problems in future.

Merseyside police is consistently recognised by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services as one of the best performing metropolitan forces, but it is becoming increasingly difficult for it to do the job. Is it any wonder that those Merseyside police who took part in the Police Federation capacity and welfare survey, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby referred, reported a job satisfaction rating of four out of 10? Some 84% of police said that there were not enough officers to do the job properly, 67% said that their workload was “too high” or “much too high”, and 72% stated that they were often or always single-crewed. More than three quarters of those surveyed indicated that stress, low mood, anxiety or other health and wellbeing difficulties were assailing them and had done so in the previous year.

The Government claim that they have increased funds to Merseyside police—that is what we heard in the debate on the police grant report on the Floor of the House last week. Merseyside police has received a 5.8% cash increase for 2019-20, which is the joint lowest in the country together with Cleveland police. Therefore, the £8 million extra—that is £8 million, not £18 million—simply funds the police pension gap that has opened up because of the change in Government policy. What the Government are giving with one hand has already been taken away with the other before it is given. That £8 million will not lead to one extra police officer on our streets, and no Government money has been given to the police on Merseyside to help with policing on the streets next year. There has been no new money to provide policing services on Merseyside since 2010-11, only cuts. That is the reality, and it is simply not good enough.

Despite the horrendous and ongoing challenges, I commend Merseyside police and our police and crime commissioner, Jane Kennedy, for making good things happen when they can. They are using the extra precept
money—the £10 million they hope to raise—to balance the budget and recruit an extra 40 police officers. That will make a dent in the 1,120 who have gone, but not much of one.

Through the careful use of inadequate resources, they can still do some good. Last year, a concerted focus on reducing burglary in dwelling houses, known as Operation Castle, resulted in a 22% fall, which equates to 1,616 fewer crimes of that distressing kind. In the last year, perpetrators of burglaries on dwelling houses have been sentenced to 130 years for those offences, which has taken dangerous and often repeat offenders off our streets. There is always more to be done, but that is a real achievement.

I commend the police and crime commissioner and the chief constable for recognising that police stations in communities that need them are a valuable resource. In that respect, they have recognised the campaigning efforts of Labour councillors and campaigners in Halewood and have undertaken to refurbish Halewood police station and open a new community police station in that building later this year. I welcome the extensive refurbishment of an asset once earmarked for closure. I commend the efforts of local Labour councillors on Halewood Town Council and Knowsley Council for their excellent and focused campaign, which has resulted in that good news.

In closing, however, if the Minister cannot offer Merseyside police far more resources, the crime issues that are building and worsening on Merseyside will only worsen further.

3.1 pm

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): May I, too, say how good it is to serve under you in the Chair, Sir Edward? I add my thanks to Jane Kennedy, the police and crime commissioner for Merseyside and to Merseyside police. My hon. Friend the Members for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) and for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) have given us a comprehensive survey of the current situation, particularly the financial problems that Merseyside police faces, which I will say a bit about in a moment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby made the point that a police officer was stabbed in my constituency, which brings home, sharply and regrettably, the risks that police officers face when going about their everyday business of trying to keep us safe. I will return to knife crime in a minute.

As has already been said, Merseyside police has had to make more than £110 million of savings since 2010 and as a consequence, the police officer establishment has been reduced by 1,120, which is a fall of 24.4%. That must have consequences; it cannot simply be brushed aside as, “Well, we don’t need them.” I want to talk about how some of those consequences affect my constituents.

I will make three points. On gun crime, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby has already stated the statistics, but I will repeat them for emphasis. In Merseyside, there were 79 firearm discharges in 2018 and 94 firearm discharges in 2017. Of the discharges in 2018, 13—16%—were in Knowsley, and in 2017, 22% were in Knowsley. That means that guns are now considered something relatively normal in some sections of the community, which was unthinkable when I was growing up in the area and cannot be right. There must be some connection between that and the level of policing that Merseyside police can provide.

Knife crime has become commonplace, and 88 knife incidents in Knowsley in one year is really frightening. It is frightening, first, that the knives seem to be readily available, and secondly, that the—mainly young—people who use them seem to think that doing so is perfectly normal. Again, that must be linked to the level of policing provided. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby rightly referred to the policing model. Neighbourhood policing has now been abandoned, so the intelligence needed to deal with this problem, such as who has the knives, where they are getting them from and all that important information, is not being gathered to the same extent. That is not the police’s fault; they simply do not have the resources.

I will make one further point on knife and gun crime before I move on. This is not unique to Knowsley or to the Merseyside police force area; to a different scale in different places, it exists everywhere. There are a group of young people in this country who will probably not get any GCSEs. Most will get an apprenticeship, find work and make their way in the world. However, there is a subgroup within that who, maybe because of family influence or other influences in the neighbourhood, see a life of crime as being a perfectly normal progression. We need to do much more with those young people, to make them appreciate that, first, that is not normal; secondly, that they have the potential to do other things—really good things in some cases—with their lives; and, thirdly, that they need to be in a position where they can provide for a family in later life, and not by the haphazard means of the proceeds of crime.

My second point is on antisocial behaviour. Merseyside police says, and the statistics show, that there has been a recent 32% reduction in the number of reported incidents of antisocial behaviour—[Interruption.] I have to say that is not my experience as a local MP, and I can see from the reaction of my hon. Friends that they feel the same. I simply say that I held two advice surgeries on Friday evening—one in Huyton and one in Kirkby—and most of the cases brought to me were in some way related to antisocial behaviour.

I also think that the term “antisocial behaviour” often does not properly describe the sort of problems we are talking about. For example, with the local social housing provider, Knowsley Housing Trust, I have been dealing with a case of a woman in north Huyton who cannot step out of the door without a volley of abuse being thrown at her by neighbours. The police might classify that as a neighbourhood dispute, but when someone is literally afraid to step out of the door because of the abuse they will get from neighbours, that is serious.

People have a right to a reasonably quiet life in which they should not expect daily abuse to be normal, yet in some cases it is. There are people in housing need who might be in a perfectly nice, well-maintained house that they pay the rent on, but they want to move out to get away from the trouble. That cannot be right. There cannot be places in this country where those subjected to antisocial behaviour feel that the only way they can escape it is to move house. Again, it comes back to
whether the policing resources are there to deal with the problem. The police are honest about that and say there are not.

There is some light at the end of that particular tunnel, certainly in Knowsley. Knowsley Council, as my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood is aware, is looking within its resources to see what more support it can provide to the police to get on top of antisocial behaviour. However, should that be the responsibility of the local authority?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): Yes!

Mr Howarth: The Minister nods her head and says yes from a sedentary position. Perhaps up to a point she is right, but at the end of the day Knowsley Council does not have the powers to intervene in such cases without the support of the police. All it can do is to help to point the police in the right direction, perhaps building up a case with some evidence, but in the end it has to be a policing matter.

Finally, I agree with my hon. Friends for Liverpool, West Derby and for Garston and Halewood in that I welcome the increase in the precept and that it is not how policing should be paid for. The increase will not have the impact that we need, but nevertheless I welcome it. Late last week, Merseyside police announced that they were going to downgrade Kirkby police station in my constituency, so that it will be open to the public on only two days a week. I recognise that we do not want police to sit in police stations; we want them out on the streets doing things. To be honest, however, if people want to report a crime, to get into a dialogue with the police about antisocial behaviour that they are experiencing or to give information on gun and knife crime when PCSOs are not out and about on the streets, the only place they can do so is at the police station.

I also question the way that the announcement was made on social media. The local councillors and I were alerted to the announcement on social media, but was that any consultation whatever? Is that any way in which to do it? I know why the police had to do it—because they have problems with resources—but I question the method.

A group of local councillors has been invited to meet Merseyside police tomorrow. Those councillors will put the case against the downgrade strongly. The leader of the council, Councillor Graham Morgan, has written to Jane Kennedy, and I will quote from what he said, because I agree with him. This relates back to the decision about the increase in the precept:

“The Chief Constable, and yourself for that matter, had the opportunity to let Cllr Aston know that you were planning the same thing for Kirkby ahead of her formally considering your Precept proposal on Knowsley’s behalf. Nothing at all was mentioned!”

As you know, Cllr Aston moved the proposal and Knowsley for the leader of Knowsley Council, the sort of person who tries to be reasonable with everyone, to write in such strong terms is an indication of how annoyed the community are about that. I share that annoyance. When the police meet the local councillors tomorrow, I hope that they will reach a solution that does not involve virtually closing down Kirkby police station for most of the week.

Unless Ministers appreciate the terrible circumstances in which the police have to operate throughout the Merseyside police force area, and do so quickly, I am afraid that we will have this debate repeatedly, with some of the problems that we are concerned about just going up and up. That cannot be right.

3.15 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Edward. I will not repeat the stark figures that my hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) and for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) put on the record, which show the terrible difficulties the Government’s decisions about police funding have left both the chief constable, Andy Cooke, and our PCC, Jane Kennedy, in over the years. Suffice it to say that we have seen an increase in demand, a rapid acceleration in crime, a significant reduction in the resources to deal with that demand, and a huge reduction in numbers, which has led to the loss of those eyes and ears that all our communities were so used to seeing when the Merseyside force pioneered the introduction of neighbourhood policing.

I do not think anyone in the room—I certainly hope that includes the Minister—would have anything other than praise for the Merseyside force and the individuals who make up the service. Merseyside police regularly outperforms other police forces. It has made huge efficiency savings over the years and was ahead of the curve in that respect, but it appears to have been punished for that by the scale of the cuts it has had to make. Merseyside police feels very much that it has been made to suffer for entering into the spirit of making efficiency savings and transforming the service. The Minister needs to recognise that my hon. Friends and I—some of us more than others—all represent areas of very complex and difficult policing challenges, particularly with organised crime and gangs, the like of which it is rare to see outside the Met.

The Minister will probably make all the usual arguments about how, really, the Government have massively increased resources and everyone should be able to manage with a bit of snipping and efficiency here, there and everywhere. However, the false economies of the cuts to prevention that decisions by the Minister and her Government are forcing on the Merseyside force will come back to haunt us in the not-too-distant future. Because many of the officers who remain are forced to do so much more with far fewer resources, they are becoming overstretched, and that is affecting their ability and capacity to do their job, their enthusiasm for the job and their mental health. Some of them are approaching burn-out, as demonstrated by the review my hon. Friends mentioned.
Aside from storing up trouble for the future, what do the cuts and pressures that the Minister and her Government colleagues are presiding over mean for our communities? What kind of society are we building if the cuts to the Merseyside force have stretched it to that extent? Given the emergence of county lines problems, no one should think for a minute that the issues that people have to live with in inner-city areas will not spread. They will, and we are now beginning to see them spread down train lines to areas that were previously untouched. We are seeing the increasing exploitation of people by organised gangs for profit and the spread of real-life and online behaviour, which wreaks havoc in formerly quiet and law-abiding communities. That creates even more difficult problems and provides the wrong incentives.

I urge the Minister to give us some comfort that the Government will not continue unfairly expecting people on council tax band A and in poorer, more deprived areas to pay for the increasing cost of policing in areas that were difficult to start with, but that the Government will take their share of responsibility, step up to the plate and fund the forces of law and order that keep our society safe and secure. That would give people the confidence to plan, to be out on the street, to talk to each other and to have a proper community, rather than cower behind their doors, worried about antisocial behaviour and thuggery, which is spreading. The Minister must assure us that she has heard what we are saying and that her Government will respond in a way that will make a difference. They must reassure us and our constituents that they will fund our police services properly and will not resort to the unfair practice of putting the biggest burden of policing on those who are least able to cope with it.

3.23 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I completely endorse everything my right hon. and hon. Friends have said, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) on securing this debate.

Sam Cook, my constituent, was murdered in Liverpool city centre just over a year ago on the night of his 21st birthday celebration. He was in a bar, somebody shoved his girlfriend, he stepped in to intervene and was stabbed. He died, despite desperate attempts to save his life. Sam’s dad, Alan, spoke to me recently about his son. He said that he received that knock on the door that no one ever wants to receive. I left a message for him before the debate and said that I would be thinking of him throughout it. He wants to pay tribute to his son in the best way he feels able to—by succeeding in his campaign to reduce the number of knives on our streets. Let me set out what he said about Sam:

“He would come in and make everyone laugh. He was a joker and he always had a smile on his face. He was a decent kid too. All his friends went to Sam if ever there was an issue. He was sensible in the head.”

That was the glowing tribute paid to this young man by his dad, but however decent he was, he was still a victim of appalling knife crime.

We have heard already from my right hon. and hon. Friends the figures for the increase in violent crime that we face across Merseyside. I have the figures for knife crime over the past year. There was a total of 914 crimes involving knives on Merseyside between April 2018 and January 2019. That is an increase of 217 such crimes—an increase of 31%—compared with in the same period in the previous year. There have been two fatal stabbings, within the figures, in the past two years. One of the victims was Sam Cook, whom I have mentioned.

What Alan Cook is calling for is no more knives. What he is calling for is the action that the Government could take to increase the opportunity, through legislation, to reduce the number of knives on our streets and to reduce the potential for what has happened to his family happening to anybody else. That is uppermost in the mind of Alan and his family. He says:

“I don’t want any other family to go through what we have had to go through”,
because it is the worst thing in the world. I am sure that we would all agree wholeheartedly with that.

The problem is that the increase in knife crime has corresponded with a reduction in the number of officers on our streets. As my right hon. and hon. Friends have reminded us, central Government funding has seen a real-terms reduction of 32%, and there has been an overall reduction of 21% in real terms, after account has been taken of precept increases. Since the 2010-11 financial year, the precept element of funding for Merseyside police has risen significantly, going up from 15% of the force’s funding to 23% by next year. This is all because of the low council tax base that we have across most of the boroughs of Merseyside.

The force has made more than £110 million of savings. My hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) made the point that it feels as though it is being penalised for doing so. Over the period to which I have referred, the consequence of the cuts in funding has been a
that unless additional resources are forthcoming, such psychologically to its victims. We have also been told significant impact in reducing the level of burglary and heard reference to Operation Castle, which has had a hard at keeping our communities as safe as possible. We good job. Andy Cooke and Jane Kennedy work extremely tribute to Merseyside police, whose officers do a very in ensuring that he was kept safe. The increases in the resources to prevent reoffending and to keep tabs on individuals such as the one who carried out that appalling crime.

The problem is that the public sector does not have the lowest tax base. We have the biggest cuts in grant and the smallest potential to raise funds from council tax, as we have heard from my colleagues. But we still face one of the lowest increases in central Government funding, despite having the greatest need for resources because of the scale of the problems that we face. All this is not in isolation, the cuts are much longer cut elsewhere in the public sector. The cuts to the youth service have been especially severe—hundreds of millions of pounds across the country—and probation service funding is down 30% in the past three years.

I mention probation because the man who has now been convicted of murdering Sam Cook was on licence, having been convicted previously of being in possession of an offensive weapon. He was wandering round the streets of Blackpool waving a machete. He was given 16 months but was released after serving half that period and was then able to go and murder Sam Cook. The problem is that the public sector does not have the resources to prevent reoffending and to keep tabs on individuals such as the one who carried out that appalling crime.

We have a problem not only in direct services, but in council services more generally. The police service has to backfill for the National Health Service, especially in supporting people suffering from poor mental health, and there are other examples where officers carry out duties that are not part of mainstream policing. All these things add up to huge pressure on police time and contribute to making it much harder for the police to respond. In the case of Sam Cook, the issue was about prevention and making sure that they played their part in ensuring that he was kept safe. The increases in the number of knife crimes are all linked to the wider picture.

Like my hon. and right hon. Friends, I want to pay tribute to Merseyside police, whose officers do a very good job. Andy Cooke and Jane Kennedy work extremely hard at keeping our communities as safe as possible. We heard reference to Operation Castle, which has had a significant impact in reducing the level of burglary and recognises the damage that it does both physically and psychologically to its victims. We have also been told that unless additional resources are forthcoming, such an approach will become increasingly difficult to sustain, just as it will become harder to reverse the increase in violent crime that we have heard about in the examples given by me and my right hon. and hon. Friends.

I looked at the Hansard from 4 February and the Minister’s response to the urgent question from my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) on the proposed introduction of knife crime prevention orders. I said earlier that Alan Cook wants tougher laws introduced to help reduce knife crime, and I suppose knife crime prevention orders might be part of the answer. The Minister might remind us, as she did on 4 February, that the police want such orders introduced. I do not doubt that for one moment. However, if we see a continued decline in the number of police officers who can respond, and a reduction in the numbers of officers and their partners across the public sector because of continued pressure on public sector finances, who will carry out the knife crime prevention orders? Who will implement the new policy? Who will be there to police our streets and prevent knife crime and other violent crime from continuing to escalate?

I notice from the urgent question and the responses from the Minister that what is happening in Merseyside is repeated again and again right across the country. The same pattern is evident: a clear increase in the number of knives on our streets and in the number of attacks, as well as a fall in the amount of resources available. I want to be able to go away today and say to Alan Cook and his family and to Sam’s friends that the Minister agreed that Alan’s campaign for no more knives was the right campaign to support. Not only that, I want to say that she also said she would look seriously at giving an increase to Merseyside and other parts of the country where these things are a problem and where the resources that are needed are not there. We have those additional pressures, and my right hon. and hon. Friends have shown that the increase does not leave us at anything more than a standstill. I want the Minister to look very seriously at how our police are funded so that we can keep our communities safe and prevent any more Sam Cooks from happening.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. This has been a fantastic debate with some wonderful advocates from the Merseyside force area. We have had a true overview of the issues facing Merseyside police and its funding. I do not know whether we can call it a debate when everyone has agreed so wholeheartedly with each other, and it will not surprise the Minister that I am about to agree wholeheartedly with the points my right hon. and hon. Friends have made.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) on securing this vital debate. He passionately laid out the case that Merseyside has suffered significantly from being one of the forces worst hit by funding cuts, resulting in the loss of almost half of Merseyside’s PCSOs and more than 1,100 officers. As a result of its low council tax base and the increased cuts to the Home Office central grant caused by the political failure to review the police funding formula, it is continuing to receive a deeply unfair funding settlement.

The cuts have consequences, as we have heard. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby mentioned the increase in firearms offences, as well as
off-road bikes and related offences. He also mentioned the number of people dying through cuts to the number of road safety officers and the consequential impact on the welfare of our police officers and staff.

My hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) spoke about the 21% real-terms reduction, even including the allowed precept rise. She was absolutely right to say that an absolutely deplorable trait of this Government is to pretend that somehow they are being generous in allowing our hard-pressed ratepayers to pay more in council tax. The chair of the UK Statistics Authority agreed with her when he wrote to the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary last year to insist that they stop making such claims, because the claims were “misleading the public”.

My hon. Friend spoke about the consequences for neighbourhood policing and investigations, the huge demand caused by new crimes, such as cyber-crime, and the increase in traditional demand caused by things such as knife crime, which is plugging so many of our communities. She mentioned the consequential impacts on faith in the police, and the Home Affairs Committee has found that, too. The very legitimacy of our police is at stake. The situation is undeniably leading to a lack of confidence in reporting to the police, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) mentioned, and confidence that they will be able to act at all on those reports.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) spoke about the consequences that sadly resulted in a police officer being stabbed in his constituency. The safety of our officers and staff is increasingly being put at risk. More people are single-crewed when responding to crime. Guns are increasingly available and knife crime is increasingly normalised, particularly for young people on our streets. My hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) spoke about the tragic murder of Sam Cook on his 21st birthday. It is hard to escape the conclusion that that was not at least in part down to cuts to policing and prevention and the massive failure in the privatisation of our probation service.

As we have heard, nine years of brutal cuts to our police service have led to stark consequences on the streets of Merseyside. The precept increase will raise just £8.4 million, in comparison with Surrey, which has a smaller population and substantially less violent crime, where the police force will be able to raise £3.5 million more. As has been said, almost all additional funding from central Government will be spent on covering the cost of pension increases that have been passed to Merseyside police by a changed Government policy. That is completely and utterly unacceptable.

From 594 incidents of knife crime in 2010 to more than 11,000 today, Merseyside police have suffered one of the highest rises in violent crime of any force in the country. It has one of the highest rates of gun crime per head, and it is little wonder that its chief constable, Andy Cooke, stated:

“So have I got sufficient resources to fight gun crime? No, I haven’t. I will put all of the resources I have available to it and we will continue to see some excellent convictions...but if I had more staff would I put them to deal with gun crime? Yes I would.”

At the heart of the inequity in the Government’s approach to funding our police, particularly in Merseyside, is the fact that it is based on the ability of an area to pay—it is based on the number of large houses that that police force happens to have in its area. When we consider the picture for police forces nationwide, that is not only unfair but reckless. The greatest challenges facing our police forces are the surge in violent crime, child sexual exploitation, risks from terrorism, county lines and cyber-crime. Those challenges do not present an even picture across the country because crime rates are higher in metropolitan areas such as Merseyside. It is therefore completely perverse that forces such as Merseyside police, which have suffered the greatest cuts, should receive least from the funding settlement.

Last month the Government should have presented a funding settlement that meets need and demand, but instead of using any of the investment provided by the Home Office to help meet the operational demands caused by missing persons, child sexual exploitation and serious crime, every penny of central Government funding will be sunk into pension costs that the Government have imposed on forces. That is perverse and will create a postcode lottery in policing, meaning that those communities that cannot afford to pay will see policing get worse and worse.

As has been said, Merseyside is an excellent police force with exceptional officers from the chief constable, Andy Cooke, to the frontline and the hardworking police community support officers and staff. The force has fantastic advocates in its parliamentary representatives and its police and crime commissioner, Jane Kennedy, who consistently make the case for a fairer funding settlement. It seems, however, that with this Government in office Merseyside police will never get the funding that it needs or deserves.

3.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) on securing this important debate, and I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for contributing.

Before we get to the rough and tumble of political debate, I wish to reflect on the cases that colleagues have raised of deaths in their constituencies. The hon. Gentleman spoke about Bobby, which is a terribly sad case, and our thoughts are with his parents and his family. The right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) spoke about Police Constable Dave Phillips, and again our thoughts are with his family. Any murder is a terrible event, but to my mind, the killing of a police officer goes to the heart of our society and values, and we are reminded that police officers are on the frontline every day.

We heard movingly from the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) about Sam Cook—about the terrible loss of that young man’s life on his birthday, and his father’s extraordinary strength in setting up a charity to help other families and ensure that they do not suffer as his has. If it would meet with his approval, I would be delighted to meet Mr Cook and learn more about the work that he does in his local area.

I am extremely grateful to colleagues for the way they have conducted this debate. One point on which we can all agree is our wish to thank officers and police staff who work to protect people and communities in Merseyside. I pay tribute to them and thank them for their work,
just as I thank colleagues across the country for the work they do day in, day out to keep us safe and fight crime.

I am struck that many colleagues raised the welfare of officers. The Policing Minister cares deeply about that, as do I, not least because particular types of crime, such as child sexual exploitation, can be incredibly trying for any human being to work on. I am always keen to ensure, as are the Policing Minister and the Home Secretary, that our officers are looked after in the course of doing their jobs, which are often very stressful. Hon. Members may be interested to know that the national police welfare service run by the College of Policing will commence in April, which I hope will bolster and consolidate all the efforts that happen at the local level.

We want to spread good practice nationally as well.

I must mention my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Damien Moore), who is on an armed forces visit at the moment but who spoke to me last week, ahead of the debate, to emphasise his thanks and to pay tribute to his local police officers and staff. I am sure that he would want that to be reflected.

The first role of Government is of course to protect citizens. The Government are determined to ensure that the police have the powers and resources they need to keep our citizens and communities safe. We absolutely recognise that there are major pressures on the police, including in Merseyside. There has been a major increase in the reporting of high-harm crimes such as child sexual exploitation and modern slavery, many of which were previously hidden behind closed doors. We absolutely acknowledge that violent crime in Merseyside has sadly risen recently. I hope in a moment to go into a little more detail on the national strategies to fight serious organised crime and serious violence, what we are trying to achieve at the national level, and the impact that I hope that will have at the local level.

The title of the debate requires me to talk about funding. I know that there is not agreement across the House on the approach to funding. I feel obliged to remind people, as I do on such occasions, that these tough decisions were taken in 2010 and thereafter because of the financial situation that the country found itself in. They have been very tough decisions, but as of 2015, of the financial situation that the country found itself in. They have been very tough decisions, but as of 2015, at the insistence of the then Home Secretary, who is now the Prime Minister, we have been in a position to protect police funding.

**Maria Eagle:** Will the Minister explain why this settlement gives Merseyside police the lowest increase apart from Cleveland? If she is aware of Merseyside’s difficulties, why do we have the lowest increase of any force?

**Victoria Atkins:** There is a great debate in my home constabulary of Lincolnshire at the moment, which, although very rural, has its crime demands and faces similar pressures. The problem, as we have discussed before and as the Policing Minister has gone through in detail, is that the funding formula needs reform.

**Louise Haigh:** Do it then.

**Victoria Atkins:** The hon. Lady says, “Do it then.” We tried to do it in 2017 and sadly were not able to achieve that. We have tried since the general election to consolidate the formula as it is at the moment. The Policing Minister has spoken to every single chief constable and police and crime commissioner about the needs in their local area, to try to make the existing formula work and to reflect the rising demand. We are conscious that the demands on the police are changing, which is why the Home Secretary has made dealing with police funding a priority in the next comprehensive spending review.

**Stephen Twigg:** Progress on the formula would be very welcome, particularly to meet the point that several hon. Members raised about areas with high deprivation. Can the Minister respond to my specific point about the fact that the additional funds this year essentially cover the pension shortfall? What prospects are there that that money, at least, will be available again in future years?

**Victoria Atkins:** We have been conscious of the impact that the rule changes would have on constabularies. That was discussed in 2016, I think, and there was an expectation that forces would be able to go some way to ameliorating the increase. Following the conversations that the Policing Minister had with chief constables, we have secured more money from the Treasury to try to cover the majority of that pension increase. I accept that a proportion still falls on local forces, but we have managed to secure some assistance towards the overall cost.

I will ask the Policing Minister to write to the hon. Gentleman about next year. We are working towards the comprehensive spending review and I imagine that the message from this debate and others will be heard loud and clear by the Policing Minister and, importantly, by the Treasury.

I return to the fact that we have tried to increase police funding; last year, we increased it by up to £460 million. Contrary to allegations from Opposition Members, I have always been clear that it has been with the help of police and crime commissioners that we have helped, as a society, to inject that further money into policing.

Similarly, this year, we are injecting up to £970 million more, again with the help of police and crime commissioners. That is why I am pleased that the police and crime commissioner for Merseyside has conducted her consultation, won the support of more than 74% of respondents for her proposals, and can raise council tax by £2 per month on band D households.

**Ms Angela Eagle:** Will the Minister recognise, on the record, that by doing things in that way and by bringing local taxpayers into the formula, she is saying to my constituents and the constituents of all hon. Members on this side of the Chamber that people in the poorest areas, who are least able to cope with tax increases, have to pay them because they happen to live in an area with greater demands on policing? Why is that not the national Government’s duty? Why should our constituents have that unfair burden put on them?

**Victoria Atkins:** That is where the hon. Lady and I part in our political philosophy. There is no such thing as Government money; it is taxpayers’ money, collected centrally, that is paid to police constabularies. None the less, we have been careful to protect and increase Government grants where we can.
Ms Angela Eagle: I am sure we could have many a philosophical discussion about what taxpayers’ money is, but that would be for another time. Even with that difference of view, will the Minister not admit that using the council tax system puts a greater burden on the people who are least able to pay, because of the regressive way that council tax is worked out? We have many constituents in band E properties who are, by definition, asset poorer and generally poorer than those in higher council tax bands, but she is suggesting that there should be a redistribution from people in better-off areas to those in poorer areas, who will be forced to pay more. How is that fair?

Victoria Atkins: There is still funding from central Government. We are concentrating on the direct funding formula for the force, but there are other ways in which police forces receive money to target particular needs in their communities. For example, with the issue of serious organised crime, which has been raised today, I am delighted that Andy Cooke, the chief constable, is in fact the National Police Chiefs’ Council lead on serious organised crime. He brings his expertise to that role.

Through the funding settlement, there is a national grant of £90 million to tackle serious and organised crime. Regarding the local area, I think the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) said that there was not a penny being put towards serious organised crime—I hope she will forgive me if I have misquoted her, but it was something along those lines. We are funding a serious organised crime community co-ordinator in Merseyside and Cheshire, as one of five pilot areas with a specific focus, and through this pilot programme we are looking to increase significantly our focus on diverting people away from serious organised crime and on building resilience.

In addition, the North West regional organised crime unit is providing specialist serious organised crime policing capabilities and advice to its six host forces, which include Merseyside. We want very much to help local PCC funding across those forces by supplementing their funding through core grant funding, as we did last year. The hon. Member for Garston and Halewood specifically raised the point about cyber-crime. The North West ROCU has been allocated £434,000 of specific funding for cyber protect and prevent officers, and an international standards officer, so there is funding from sources other than the grant.

Maria Eagle: I did actually say that as a consequence of the meetings—the repeated meetings—that we have had with Ministers, and despite having been given many promises, not a penny-piece extra has been forthcoming. Merseyside police is an acknowledged expert at dealing with guns and gangs. It does not need “advice”; it needs money in order to do things. It is good that the chief constable is the lead, but that does not give him an extra penny-piece to deal with the issues.

Victoria Atkins: I am conscious, Sir Edward, that the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby will want to respond, so forgive me if I race through.

On serious violence, a great deal is being done at a national level. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), who specifically mentioned the rise of county lines. She will know—having, I am sure, read our serious violence strategy—that we are very conscious of the impact of drugs as a driver of serious violence, which is why we are doing so much on early intervention, including providing a £200 million youth endowment fund for the next 10 years.

The right hon. Member for Knowsley mentioned antisocial behaviour. Powers are available to councils as well as to the police, because we are conscious that the police are not always the right people to deal with antisocial behaviour. I encourage him to look at the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014; I am obviously happy to discuss it with him.

I will now sit down to give the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby two minutes to respond. I thank everyone for their contributions.

3.58 pm

Stephen Twigg: I thank the Minister for her response, and I thank my hon. Friend the shadow Minister and hon. Friends from across Merseyside for their contributions to what has been a comprehensive debate on this important matter.

This morning, I was on BBC Radio Merseyside, ahead of this debate. The presenter said, “There have been loads of these debates and all the issues get aired, but nothing ever changes.” One of the frustrations of being in Opposition is that, sadly, that is often how it feels.

I appeal to the Minister and to the Policing Minister, who cannot be with us today: I think that my hon. Friends and I have made the case that there needs to be an increase in spending on the police nationally and that the distributional impact of the system fails areas such as Merseyside. The very small amounts of money that the Minister just referred to for co-ordinators and particular programmes are a drop in the ocean compared with the scale of the reduction that we have seen.

We need a fair funding formula in the future that recognises that in areas with a low council tax base, it is simply unjust and wrong to shift the burden on to hard-pressed local taxpayers in the way the Government have done. Nationally, we need policing to be given a higher priority in the spending review. I think that a powerful message from today’s debate is that in a context of rising crime, especially given what we have heard regarding the horrors of the impact of gun and knife crime on our communities, Merseyside needs a fair funding formula, but we also need a spending review that gives due priority to fighting crime and policing our communities.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the funding of Merseyside Police.
Foreign National Offenders: Prison Transfers

4 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered prison transfers of foreign national offenders.

It is a joy to see you in the Chair, Sir Edward. I thank Mr Speaker for granting me this debate, and I welcome the Minister and his team to the Chamber.

Believe it or not, we have something like 160 nations of the world represented in our prisons. About one third of those individuals have been convicted of violent and/or sexual offences, about one fifth have been convicted on drug charges, and others have been responsible for burglary, fraud, robbery and other serious crimes.

Some years ago, the National Audit Office did an estimate of the cost to the British taxpayer of incarcerating those people in our jails, and came out with a cost per year per prisoner of something like £33,000. When we add to that the cost of the police, the Crown Prosecution Service, legal aid and other things, the total bill could be something between £750 million and £1 billion a year.

The National Audit Office came down somewhere in the middle of that range, and estimated the annual cost to the taxpayer to be about £850 million a year. That assumes that there are about 10,000 foreign national offenders in our jails.

I first ask the Minister, given that he is attended by a galaxy of civil service talent, who no doubt have the numbers at their fingertips, what is the present prison population today? Of the total number of prisoners, how many foreign national offenders do we have in our prisons today? I reckon the present prison population is somewhere between 160 nations of the world represented in our prisons. About one fifth have been convicted on drug charges, and others have been responsible for burglary, fraud, robbery and other serious crimes.

Mr Hollobone: That is about 13% of our foreign national offender population at any one time, so we need at least nine more Huntercombes if we are to deport these people back to the countries from which they came.

No doubt the Minister will tell the House today that since 2010 some 45,000 foreign national offenders have been removed from the UK, including 6,000 in the past year. My first reaction to those numbers is, “My gosh! Given the extent to which foreign nationals commit crimes in this country, thank goodness they are being caught, the number who commit offences but are not caught must be even larger.” We have a real problem on our hands, with such a large number of foreign nationals committing crimes in this country.

No doubt the Minister will tell the House that prisoners are transferred in four main ways. The Government maintain that the main method to remove foreign national offenders from prison is what is called the early removal scheme. Will the Minister give us more detail on what that scheme entails? I hope that it does not mean that prisoners’ sentences are cut short and they are just deported to be at liberty back in their countries of origin, because that is not the point that I am making. These people should be sent back to their own countries and kept in prison there, until their sentences have been completed. Last year, I understand that some 2,000 were removed under that scheme.

No doubt the Minister will then tell us that prisoner transfer agreements are in place, falling into three main categories, the first of which is the EU prisoner transfer framework; decision, which EU member states signed up to between December 2011 and December 2015. There are 27 EU member states to which we can send prisoners and which can send UK prisoners back to us. Amazingly, since the scheme first went live in December 2011, two EU nations have still not ratified their membership of that framework decision: Bulgaria and Ireland. I suggest that Ireland spends less time trying to cause problems for this country with the Irish backstop and more time on ratifying the prisoner transfer directive, which is now eight years old.

Can the Minister confirm these estimates of what I call the list of shame—the top 10 countries that are represented in our prisons? I reckon that No. 1 is Poland with about 950. No. 2 is Ireland with 750. No. 3 is Romania with 630. No. 4 is Jamaica with 550. In joint fifth, sixth and seventh place are Albania, Lithuania and Pakistan with about 475 each. No. 8 is India and, as the Minister and his team to the Chamber.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for that interesting. I will give way to him again if he knows—I do not expect him to, but if he does—the number of prisoners at HMP Huntercombe. The nation needs to know. Perhaps the Minister will advise us in his response how many prisoners are held there pending deportation. I am pleased for my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) that he has such a facility in his constituency, and that it is popular with his constituents, but my contention is that the prison is not large enough. We need to send a lot more of these people back, and quickly.

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Under the EU prisoner transfer framework decision, since it has been inaugurated, we have only sent back 357 EU national offenders, out of an EU prison population that is of the order of some 1 million—so the Minister will tell us. The top three are the Netherlands, to which we sent back 141, or 39% of the total; Romania, 56, or 16%; and Poland, 35. I point out to the Minister that we have sent back 56 Romanian nationals back to prison in Romania, but at any one time we have about 630 Romanians in our prisons; and we have only sent back 35 Polish nationals, but at any one time we have about 950 in our prisons. Furthermore, of the 27 signatories, to 10 we have sent no prisoners back at all.

Of course, this is a two-way process, and we are entitled to receive UK nationals who committed offences abroad back into this country. We have taken back a total of 100. The largest number—40—came from Spain, nine have been returned from Germany, and nine from Italy. It seems to me that the scheme, despite having been in operation for eight years, is not working very well.

However, it is working better than the additional protocol to the prisoner transfer framework decision, to which 13 other countries are signed up: Georgia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Norway, Russia, Serbia, San Marino, Switzerland, Turkey and Ukraine. It was confirmed to me yesterday in a written parliamentary answer that we have transferred to the countries adhering to the additional protocol the grand total of zero foreign national offenders. We have sent no foreign national offenders at all back under the additional protocol. It is absolutely and completely useless.

The third category we have is bilateral prisoner transfer agreements. The same parliamentary answer listed six countries, out of the 160 nations represented in our jails, with which we have compulsory prisoner transfer agreements. In other words, we can send foreign national offenders back to those countries without their permission—it is compulsory for them to go back. Those six countries are Albania, Ghana, Libya, Nigeria, Rwanda and Somaliland. The Ministry of Justice helpfully listed the dates on which those six prisoner transfer agreements came into force. The oldest goes back to 2009, and the latest came into force in 2017. For one country—Somaliland—the Department has no information about when the agreement came into force. The answer states, “Not Available”. Can the Minister confirm whether we have a compulsory prisoner transfer agreement with Somaliland?

We have sent back a grand total of 25 foreign national offenders to those six countries, one of which is Nigeria. We have something like 400 Nigerians in our prisons at any one time. We have sent back one Nigerian under the compulsory prisoner transfer agreement. That simply is not good enough. I suggest that the Minister takes the lead on negotiating effective compulsory prisoner transfer agreements with countries for which we hold a large number of foreign national offenders in our jails.

Let me give two examples. Pakistan is seventh on my original list—in fact, it is joint fifth, sixth and seventh with Albania and Lithuania. There are something like 475 Pakistanis in our jails at any one time. Nigeria is tenth, with 400. We should use our foreign aid budget to build prisons in those countries so we have a place to send those people back to. Pakistan and Nigeria are among the five biggest recipients of UK aid in the world. We give something like £400 million a year to Pakistan and £330 million a year to Nigeria in international aid. It seems to me that if we have, by law, to spend that money on international aid—I do not agree with that, but it is the law of the land—we should use it sensibly, by trying to reduce the £1 billion annual cost of incarcerating foreign national offenders in our prisons.

I understand that the Government are seeking to build an additional wing on a Nigerian prison, at the cost of some £700,000. Is that correct? Has that wing been completed and is it operational? Given that we have sent back only one Nigerian, presumably he is living in luxury in that 112-bed facility somewhere in Nigeria. Do we have plans for any more?

Do we have any plans to build prisons in Pakistan? There are almost 500 Pakistanis in our jails, and they should be held in prison in Pakistan at the cost of taxpayers there, rather than taxpayers here. Will the Minister negotiate more compulsory prisoner transfer agreements? Will he make sure that they are effective and that we send back more than the 25 prisoners who we have sent back under the agreements so far? Will he speak to the Department for International Development to use aid money to build modern prisons in those countries so we can return more foreign nationals?

I will allow the Minister some time to reply, so finally, once we have sent those people back, will the Minister liaise with the Home Office to make sure that they cannot return to this country? It is one thing to send them back to prison in their own country, but we should ban them from ever returning and darkening our shores again. Surely that would be fairly straightforward for the Government to do and my constituents would certainly welcome it.

**John Howell:** On a point of order, Mr Austin. May I correct the record? I said that the capacity of Huntercombe was 1,300; it is actually 480. I read the wrong figure.

**Ian Austin (in the Chair):** Thank you.

4.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) for securing the debate. He has raised the issue tenaciously on previous occasions, most recently at Justice questions earlier this month. He and his constituents attach great importance to it and, as always, he acts as a powerful and strong voice in Parliament for the people of Kettering.

As always, the debate raises a matter of huge importance and is an opportunity to update the House more fully than would be possible in a single parliamentary answer. Rightly, increasing the removal of foreign national offenders is one of the Government’s top priorities. All foreign national offenders sentenced to custody are referred by the Prison Service to immigration enforcement as quickly as possible to be considered for deportation action.

As all hon. Members present are aware, the Government are absolutely committed to increasing the number of foreign national offenders removed from our prisons. Any foreign national who comes to our country and
abuses its hospitality by breaking our laws should be in no doubt about our determination to punish and remove them.

My hon. Friend raised several statistical questions. He rightly alluded to the fact that since 2010 we have removed more than 45,000 foreign offenders from prisons, immigration removal centres and the community. In 2017-18, as he stated, we removed almost 6,000 foreign national offenders, of whom 2,000 came directly from our prisons. That represents good progress, but the Government are determined to do more.

My hon. Friend asked some specific questions. The current overall prison population is 82,236, which is a little shy of what he thought but in the same ballpark. The latest statistics that I have are that foreign national offenders make up 9,090 of that—roughly 10% or 11%—and EU foreign national offenders make up 3,943 of those.

My hon. Friend touched on his top 10. His fabled statistical brilliance has slightly changed, because our order and numbers are different, but if it is helpful, I will briefly run through them. The latest list puts Poland in first place, with the highest number, then Albania, Romania, Ireland, Jamaica, Lithuania, Pakistan, Somalia, India and Portugal. In terms of the stats that sit behind each of those, if I do not manage to answer every question he has raised today, I am happy to write to him.

As he is aware, the primary responsibility for the removal of foreign national offenders rests with the Home Office immigration enforcement team, with my Department supporting its work by setting the policy for, and administering, early removal schemes from our prisons. Prisoner transfers are a matter for my Department and fall within the portfolio of the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart). I will certainly pass on to him the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering about negotiating further such agreements and the form of those agreements.

Before I turn to the specific issue of prison transfer agreements, I want to highlight the substantial cross-Government work under way to increase foreign national offender removal. A lead Minister’s group that meets quarterly is in place. It focuses on the removal of foreign national offenders and brings together key Departments to ensure a co-ordinated approach. We continue to work hard to improve and speed up every part of the removals process, right from the point at which a foreign national offender first comes into contact with criminal justice agencies up to their removal back to their home country.

For example, as my hon. Friend will be aware, the Government introduced new requirements through the Policing and Crime Act 2017 so that anyone appearing in court now has to state their nationality. It is designed to speed up early identification of foreign national offenders and therefore assist with speedier removal. In other initiatives, my Department is working with the Home Office on ways to speed up the immigration appeal process for foreign offenders held in prison, and to ensure that appeals are determined as quickly and as efficiently as possible so that foreign offenders with no right to remain here may be removed quickly.

We are also working to concentrate foreign national offenders within fewer prisons in our estate. As has been mentioned, we have already created two foreign national offender-only prisons, one of the first countries in the world to have done so, with the benefit of concentrating foreign national offenders and allowing the Prison Service better to address the specific needs of that cohort of offenders. Importantly, it also allows the Home Office better to deploy its immigration enforcement teams, which need access to the prisoners to undertake the deportation process.

As my hon. Friend highlighted in his speech, there are different routes by which foreign national offenders can be removed from this country. The first that he touched on is the early removals scheme, which is our principal mechanism for removing foreign national offenders from prison. Under the scheme, offenders are returned to their home countries and are barred from returning to the UK, potentially for life. In 2017-18 we removed more than 2,000 prisoners through the scheme; that is about 95% of early removals from prison. I am keen that we should not lose sight of our success in removing such a large number of foreign offenders.

Mr Hollobone: I am listening closely to the Minister. Can he clarify whether the 2,000 a year who are returned under the early removals scheme are then at liberty in their country of origin, or are they behind bars?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is clearly clairvoyant, because my next note addresses exactly that point. Under the transfer agreements, the mechanism allows us to transfer a sentenced prisoner during their prison sentence so that they will continue to serve that sentence in a prison back in their home country. Importantly, the agreements are reciprocal and allow the return home of British nationals from overseas prisons. We have more than 100 transfer agreements—he mentioned 160, which is roughly in the right space overall—with countries and territories around the world. Depending on the type of agreement that is in place, prisoners can be transferred either on a voluntary basis, meaning the consent of the prisoner is required, or on a compulsory basis, meaning their consent is not required. To address a point that my hon. Friend specifically raised, under either type of agreement, including the compulsory one, the receiving country still has the right to accept or refuse the prisoner; the country receiving them still has to agree to accept them even if the prisoner does not have a say in that process.

To focus briefly on the EU prisoner transfer agreement, that is the most effective transfer agreement to which the UK is a signatory, largely because, going back to my previous point, there are limited grounds on which a receiving member state can refuse to accept a prisoner transfer request. Our departure from the EU will therefore have an impact. As the prisons Minister said earlier this month, if we leave the EU without a deal there is the risk of a decline in the number of transfers to and from the UK, because we might be forced to fall back on older transfer mechanisms that could prove less effective.

Mr Hollobone: The Minister says that under the EU prisoner transfer agreement there are limited grounds for a country to refuse to take their prisoner back. There are 950 Polish nationals in our jails, and Poland has taken back only 35. Is the Minister telling us that...
Poland regularly has 915 good reasons not to take prisoners back? It seems that this agreement is not as effective as the Minister makes out.

Edward Argar: I will make two points. The first is a statistical point because latest figures show that there are 787 Polish prisoners, although my hon. Friend’s point about the number and scale still stands. I was about to come to the other legal and procedural reasons for why transfers can take a long time in this country. In that context, I wish to touch on the suggestion made previously that the prisoner transfer agreements are in some sense not working, and that our prisons are full of prisoners who could be transferred. As my hon. Friend is aware, many of our transfer agreements are necessarily voluntary, not just for the country receiving them but for the prisoners themselves. That is due to the poor standard of prison conditions and the treatment of prisoners in some parts of the world, and our obligations under those agreements as well as our human rights obligations.

For our compulsory agreements, we target transfer at those offenders who are serving lengthy prison sentences. Transfer can take place only if all appeal routes have been exhausted, a deportation order is in place, and there are no legal concerns about the prison system to which the prisoner will be moved. Consequently, when all those factors and process points have been taken into consideration, the number of prisoners who are eligible for a swift transfer might not be as high as my hon. Friend might wish, and in some cases the process could take longer than the prison sentence being served.

We are, however, working to increase the number of transfers wherever possible, and our current agreement with the EU has enabled the transfer of 357 prisoners to EU prisons, with each transfer freeing up several years of cell space. Transfer numbers continue steadily to rise now that most member states have implemented that agreement and operational processes are bedding in. Such transfers therefore play a role in managing our prison population and ensuring that capacity is available for offenders who have been sentenced to custody.

I will also highlight a number of successes for our transfer agreements with countries outside the EU. In late December we signed an agreement with the Government of Pakistan to restart the voluntary prisoner transfer process between our countries. Given that Pakistani prisoners are one of the top 10 nationalities held in our prisons, that progress is welcome and I thank all Departments who worked on that issue for their support. We also have a prisoner transfer agreement with Albania, which is another of the 10 most common nationalities in our prisons. A transfer agreement has seen 24 Albanian prisoners transferred, and there is ongoing engagement with Albanian authorities to improve that mechanism and speed up and increase transfer rates. The prisons Minister met the Albanian Justice Minister earlier this month to discuss co-operation on that issue, and an agreement was reached to continue with close co-operation.

I am conscious that only a short amount of time is left, so I shall conclude by saying that whether removal is through the early removal scheme, prisoner transfer, or deportation after an offender has completed their sentence, the key point is that we continue to work to remove those who have broken our laws and have no right to be here. I suspect my hon. Friend will continue to champion and push hard on this issue—indeed, I suspect we may well debate it again in the coming weeks and months—but he should be in no doubt that the Government are committed to that agenda, and to increasing the number of foreign national offenders who are removed from this country.

Question put and agreed to.
Transport for Towns

4.30 pm

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered transport for towns.

I appreciate the opportunity to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. The presence here of so many of my hon. Friends and other parliamentary colleagues shows the strength of feeling on the towns that we represent and on the importance of transport to our communities and their survival. There is no successful town that cannot move people around it efficiently, moving workers from homes to places of work at all hours, visitors to hospitals, patients to GPs, students to schools and colleges and even people on trips to the pub, cinema or leisure centre.

I represent a constituency of just over 100,000 people living in more than 30 towns and villages. Apart from one suburb, all those communities are detached from Doncaster town centre, many with open countryside in between. Undertaking my monthly surgeries across seven wards involves a 62-mile round trip. Reliance on cars is essential for many in those outlying communities, as public transport has failed them. Effective transport is central to revitalising our post-industrial towns and giving new life to our smaller town communities.

We often hear about connectivity, but that is all too often about links—massive infrastructure projects costing many billions of pounds—to major cities such as Leeds, Sheffield and Manchester in the north. No matter how right those projects are for our regions and for the country, they jar with people frustrated by the everyday transport problems that they face.

This is not new. When Tony Benn was MP for Bristol South East, he received a letter from a constituent that read:

“Dear Tony, I see the Russians have put a space vehicle on the moon. Is there any chance of a better bus service in Bristol?”

I want those voices to be heard. Like many of my colleagues here, I have fought against post office and bank closures. I have been exasperated by the last-call attitude to providing mobile phone and broadband coverage to our homes and businesses in towns. I struggle to understand why new housing developments are built without broadband.

The reality of transport for Britain’s smaller towns is very different from our cities. Our communities are often the places travelled past, not to; communities that no longer have rail services, or a bus service on certain days of the week or in the evenings. Last year, Joseph Rowntree Foundation research found that unaffordable and unreliable public transport cuts off the poorest families in the north of England from crucial job opportunities, making it harder for them to attend job interviews or to hold on to paid employment. Poor transport entrenches poverty.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making an important speech. A lot of people in rural villages around Hartlepool, such as Elwick, are getting older. Does she agree that improvements to bus services, which can be vital links, are important not only to keeping those communities going but, from a social and welfare perspective, to keeping those older people connected to the towns that serve them?

Caroline Flint: I absolutely agree. I actually speak from personal experience, second hand though it may be, because my husband, Phil, lived in Stockton and travelled to Hartlepool every day to go to secondary school. In many respects, the service was probably better then than today for many of our schoolkids.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making an important speech. In accessing further education, schools, and also employment to help to pay for that education, young people in villages such as Barford and Bishop’s Tachbrook in my constituency are being alienated.

Caroline Flint: That is an important point about young people. I will talk later about the fatalities in my constituency of young drivers, who are often forced into getting a car as it is the only means of getting around. These young people are not drinking or anything else but are just inexperienced drivers on our country and rural roads. That is a big problem.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend and I have been good friends for many years, and I think we share the desire for a really good rail link across the northern regions and the northern midlands. That is absolutely essential. We now know that HS2 will cost £100 billion. Does she agree that it would be better if we invested that money in good local transport across the north of England?

Caroline Flint: My hon. Friend is right to point out the rising cost of those major infrastructure projects. Many people around the country find it hard to believe how much money is spent on HS2 and other projects—in some cases misspent if the projects are not kept on budget—when they find it hard to find a few thousand pounds for something that could make a big difference locally.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend for securing this debate. I was talking to an old man in Spenymoor in my constituency who told me that when he was young he had taken a train from Spenymoor to Spain. Now there is not even a railway station, and it costs £10 to take a bus from Spenymoor to Barnard Castle. Does she agree that high bus fares make it impossible for most people to use public transport?

Caroline Flint: That is absolutely right. Although parts of our community get access to cheaper fares, for many people it is still a problem. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation study makes the point that, for many of our constituents who are sadly at the lowest end of the pay scale, once they factor in transport costs and the hassle of getting to work—particularly if they are on shift patterns—it is hardly worth while. I have always been a strong believer that work should pay.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for securing this debate. Ashfield falls under the north-east of England traffic commissioner. The latest annual figures show that 712 bus services were cancelled in that area, compared with 178 in the south-east and metropolitan area. That pattern has been repeated every year for the last six years. Is it not true that we are paying twice as much for half as good a service in our towns? That has to change.
Caroline Flint: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: it has to change. At its heart, this is about understanding the price of everything but the value of nothing. Too often, it is the economical routes—if that is the right word to use—that the operator is attracted to. Meanwhile, the areas of the country that cannot compete with our cities—certainly not London and the south-east—do not get a look in because it does not pay. That has to change for the common good.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate. She is making an important argument. In Greater Manchester, 8 million miles of bus services were lost between 2014 and 2017. All too often, bus companies cherry-pick the profitable routes and ignore others, which means that many people on the outskirts, such as in Affetside in my constituency, are left behind. Does she agree that social prescribing should include access to transport to avoid isolation and the knock-on impact that that has on the wider social health of our population?

Caroline Flint: I absolutely agree. As a former Public Health Minister, I have always thought that we should not be confined to the clinical aspect of public health. It is also about housing and transport. So much of this debate is about air pollution, and given that our buses could run on green fuel, I would have thought that that is a no-brainer as a way to get people on to more sustainable, greener and affordable transport systems, which benefit not only individual travellers but the wider community by reducing air pollution.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate about transport in our towns. Normanton in my constituency used to be at the heart of the national rail network. Now, we have only one train an hour into Leeds, even though it is only about a 20-minute drive away. We see that pattern across the country. Towns are losing their connections, and there is real resentment about the fact that such a high proportion of the investment in infrastructure is going into cities, while towns are getting an unfair deal. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government must change their pattern of investment across the country if towns are to get a fair deal in the future?

Caroline Flint: My right hon. Friend is right: it is unfair to blame people for not taking up some of the massive job opportunities that our cities offer when it does not make sense for them to do so. We must change not only the investment but the attitude to transport. It is not just about cities but our towns. My right hon. Friend is right that our communities are being not only left behind but bypassed. They are isolated and excluded by planners, operators and, I am afraid, policy makers, who see them as uneconomic.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): I was brought up in the Tyneside conurbation, and the passenger transport executive supplied an integrated bus system in the 1970s. My parents never had a car and travelled everywhere by bus and metro. We need a change of structure, so that our towns are brought into transport systems and we do not have a separate, privatised structure, which is at the heart of the problem that we now face.

Caroline Flint: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. Sometimes we have to look again at the old ideas that worked and see where they fit in the world we live in today. I am a great believer in not reinventing the wheel. What we do not need is just another set of initiatives that get rebranded as one Transport Minister passes the job to another and that mean we do not make any progress. What matters is what works. But first, to get to what works, we have to understand what people and communities actually need and how that can be inclusive.

Last week, the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), said that the north of England’s transport system had suffered “long-term under-investment stretching back decades”.

He is right, but still today London receives £4,155 of transport spend per person. That is two and a half times the figure for the north and five times more than Yorkshire and the Humber and the north-east.

As co-chair of the northern powerhouse all-party parliamentary group, I recognise the importance of our cities to the regions and smaller communities of the north. We need to accelerate the delivery of Northern Powerhouse Rail to provide a fast Hull-Manchester-Liverpool service. I do not want this debate to be about towns versus cities or the north versus London. However, big cities are magnets for investment in transport, technology, culture and jobs on a level that few UK towns could ever aspire to achieve. My constituents want to be able to travel to our cities for both work and pleasure. We want bright young professionals for whom city living is the pull—I get that; I was young once—

Ian C. Lucas: You still are.

Caroline Flint: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind comment. We want those young professionals to be able to travel easily and at an affordable price to work in our local schools and health services. As my right hon. Friend, the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) pointed out, we have to have a twin-track transport strategy whereby we can deliver for both our towns and our cities. When announcements are made about the mega transport projects, the smaller schemes, which speak to our communities, should get equal billing.

I have a message of hope for this Minister. All is not lost; small changes can make a big difference. My own experience as the MP for Don Valley speaks to this. Under the last Labour Government, by 2002 Doncaster town centre had a new road bridge over the River Don. By 2005, two old, dirty bus stations were united in one airport-style clean and safe bus interchange attached to Doncaster railway station. Those two vital schemes are in the constitution of my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton), but they benefit everyone across Doncaster.

In 2002, a road bridge replaced a level crossing, connecting my communities of Denaby and Conisbrough to the economic developments in the Dearne valley. Doncaster’s 100-year aviation history was brought to an end when our last airbase, RAF Finningley, was closed in 1995. It was destined at that point to become my area’s third prison. Backed by a people-led campaign, FLY—Finningley Locals say Yes—I lobbied the newly
elected Labour Government to cancel the prison and secure a commercial airport. My 1997 election address pledged to secure a link road from the M18 to Rossington village. Today, Doncaster Sheffield airport, which opened in 2005, supports more than 1,000 jobs and the planes fly to more than 50 destinations.

The road scheme took somewhat longer—21 years, with the final mile of the Great Yorkshire Way completed last year. It is not often that constituents tell us what a difference something has made to their lives, but that four miles of road network has done just that. It has cut 15 minutes off journey times to Sheffield and other work centres. It has ended the Cantley crawl along Bawtry Road to reach a route to the M18. The Great Yorkshire Way connects the Humber ports to the iPort strategic rail freight interchange—a development that created more than 2,000 jobs, including at a large Amazon distribution centre.

However, the relatively small results count just as much. I have had to fight with Government and planners over the years to ensure that the Rossington part of the road scheme was not dropped. Rossington was known as the village with one road in and one road out. People could be left waiting for 20 minutes because of the level crossing servicing inter-city trains. Now, they are connected to the Great Yorkshire Way; Rossington has a road that it feels it owns and can be proud of. That is how all infrastructure projects should be managed—by not losing sight of how important the small picture is to the bigger picture.

Not every town can have an airport to help to lever in transport investment, but every town can have its own small or large success story. Many towns and villages in Don Valley would benefit from better public transport services, as well as investment in road maintenance, including traffic calming. Many of my smaller communities, where national speed limits apply on rural roads, suffer from speeding traffic. We have an above-average rate of fatalities caused by young drivers. I believe speed is part of the cause, but the funding pot for repairs to roads and effective traffic management has suffered unsustainable cuts.

Housing built around a coalmining industry where people walked to work cannot cope with modern car ownership. There is a lack of parking spaces, so cars and commercial vehicles are parked on grass verges. That is unsightly and sometimes leads to antisocial behaviour, so we end up with a policing problem. Where funds have been found to tackle that practically, but not at the expense of green space, residents and the wider community have benefited. Small changes make a big difference, but there is not enough money, which stops a strategic programme being put together that gets the job done over time.

Last summer, I discovered that the 57 bus had been changed. Despite bus operators, the passenger transport executive and local authorities forming a bus partnership, they left Blaxton, one of my villages, with no convenient service to the nearest secondary school and sixth-form college, and some residents with no service to their GP practice in Finningley. On investigating, I found that neither the GP practice nor Doncaster clinical commissioning group had been consulted, and nor had the dial-a-ride service, which the bus operator assumed could provide transport for patients. Assumptions had been made about the school opening hours, too, which turned out to be wrong. I think that is typical of what happens in many small towns and villages. I do not think my transport stories are an exception.

I am sure the Minister will dazzle us with examples of funding pots and schemes to address concerns about transport in towns. I am not in denial about those initiatives, but too many of them just do not hit the mark. I support devolution, but it cannot be a journey just from Whitehall to the town hall. Our smaller communities still get left behind. I therefore have three asks of the Minister.

First, I want the Government to launch a national conversation about transport in towns. I do not want it to be dominated by the professionals, big businesses, the committee people and the usual suspects who respond to Government consultations. Instead, let us find new ways to hear from people in our towns and villages—people like the lady who wrote to Tony Benn all those years ago—about what bugs them and what makes them infuriated when they hear about the mounting billions spent on HS2 and other big Government projects that overspend and under-deliver. What do we have to fear? A massive transport tab? Give the people credit. My constituents inspire me every day with their no-nonsense approach and understanding of priorities. Give them the chance to express their choices.

Secondly, we need a bus consultation review so that when bus operators and planners consult on new routes and timetables, the obvious destinations, such as shops, markets, schools and health centres, are all taken into account before changes are made.

Thirdly, we need to establish a rebuilding Britain fund that supports smaller but just as important infrastructure projects for our towns and villages. This is not just about transport, but transport without a doubt should be a significant part of it. If that fund is to work, our small towns cannot be expected to provide the kind of match funding that our cities and large towns can muster. Too often, they miss out on central funding because the match funding required is undeliverable locally. The fund should not require match funding. Alternatively—here is an idea—the Government should seek national or regional sponsors to support our towns, alongside Government resources, through the rebuilding Britain fund.

I do not expect the Minister to say, “Yes, yes, yes,” to those three asks, but I would welcome the opportunity—[HON. MEMBERS: “Go on!”] I can always be surprised. I would welcome the opportunity to meet other colleagues to explore my asks at a later date. This debate follows an earlier Westminster Hall debate secured by my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on Government support for a town of culture award, in which I and many other Members present participated. There will be more to come. We will not stop standing up for our towns and villages. We will not stop trying to convince the Government and all our political parties to remember that the voices of people in our towns count as much as those of people living in our cities and wealthy university towns, and to say to our towns that their best days are not behind them, that decline is not inevitable and that their communities do matter.

Several hon. Members rose—
Ian Austin (in the Chair): Order. I will have to call the first of the Front-Bench spokespeople at eight minutes past 5. Seven people want to speak, so I will have to restrict speeches to two and a half minutes. I am sorry about that, but we have limited time. I ask people to bear that in mind.

4.49 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. I thank the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) for securing this important debate.

Transport connectivity is essential for many members of our communities in achieving daily activities such as going to work, places of education and medical appointments, and participating in leisure and other activities. For some, that involves travelling to and from neighbouring towns and villages, and we need to ensure that adequate and affordable public transport connectivity is in place.

Connectivity is only as good as the timetabling allows. Some of my constituents in Cumnock recently raised the issue of the revised bus timetable, which results in them arriving unsociably early or unfashionably late for work. Greater care must be taken in the notification of proposals and there must be improved consultation on any public transport changes, with active participation from those who are likely to be affected.

Even worse than timetable changes, an inordinate number of buses and bus routes have been withdrawn, which has had a negative effect, particularly on people in rural communities seeking to go to and from work. Lifestyle choices will have a bearing on the transport that commuters utilise, although some people have little or no choice, particularly in rural areas. Life events outwith their control, such as an illness that requires regular treatment, may influence people’s preferred mode of transport between, for example, Ayrshire towns and the excellent Beatson oncology centre in the city of Glasgow. Any transport infrastructure also needs to be mindful of those with limited mobility.

In my constituency, with the publicised threat of some specialist NHS services being relocated to larger towns and cities, it is important that we consider the needs of different travellers at different times in their life journey. Many communities and charities run community transport buses, which—believe me—are a lifeline in rural Scotland. It is vital that we support them where possible and that we do not overlook the varied needs of rural and urban communities.

I am conscious of the time. It is important that we invest in affordable, functional and durable transport infrastructure that enhances the ability of our constituents to journey safely within and between our towns and cities. The UK Government’s industrial strategy recognises the need for investment in greener, cleaner transport and for support for electric vehicles, including public service vehicles. We need towns with safe cycling and electric vehicles that lead to clear air to breathe, where trees and greenery intertwine with modern connected living. I hope that the Minister will continue to support such investment throughout the United Kingdom, including the much-needed improvements to public transport.

4.52 pm

Liz McLennan (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. Many passengers across Greater Manchester had a torrid time last year. With daily disruption on the rail network and congestion on the motorway network due to smart motorway construction, getting around has been hard. Transport issues form a constant, if not large, part of my constituency casework, and my office regularly receives complaints, particularly about late or cancelled bus services.

My colleague, Councillor Phil Burke, who is a member of the Transport for Greater Manchester committee, describes the buses serving my constituency as dire. He points out that it takes up to an hour to make the average 10-mile journey to Manchester from the area, which is unacceptable for anyone trying to get to work in the morning. He also points out that we are in a vicious circle, with people not using the buses because they are unreliable, which leads to prices being hiked up because of low patronage or to services being cut altogether.

With rail services available to only part of my constituency, my constituents are more reliant than most on good bus services. Until the damage done by deregulation is put right, bus services in my constituency will continue to be the poor relation of public transport.

The Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, is working to create an integrated bus system that will be more affordable, more reliable and more accessible for disabled people. For the last 30 years, however, bus companies in Greater Manchester have been run in the private, rather than the public, interest. That needs to change. We are still waiting for the Department for Transport to put all the necessary regulations in place to enable franchising to begin under the Bus Services Act 2017 and for the much-needed reform of our bus services to commence.

If we do not have good transport in our local communities, no one benefits. Transport has to be affordable and reliable. It is a vital link for young people to access education and gain skills and for people to get to places of work, and it boosts the local economy. For the elderly, transport plays a vital part in helping them to access local services, such as hospitals and GPs, as well as in tackling social isolation. I am conscious of the time, so I will call it a day there.

4.54 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) on securing this debate, which gives me another opportunity to raise important local transport priorities with the Government.

The economic opportunities for an area such as Mansfield, the largest town in Nottinghamshire, are greatly improved by good transport links. The ability to attract new employers to create jobs so often comes from quick and easy access to major motorway and railway networks. Such major infrastructure needs to be supported by the Government, however, because often the projects are on such a scale that they are not viable for local authorities to consider alone.

The town of Mansfield has experienced challenges similar to those of all growing towns. The housing is built, but the infrastructure cannot cope, in particular
our roads, which were built for a time when fewer if any cars were on the road. The A60, the main road through my constituency, is a prime example: to the south, it is congested because of a poorly planned retail park, with 1,700 new homes to be built shortly as well, while to the north it is narrow and surrounded by housing, which makes expansion incredibly difficult. I very much appreciate the Secretary of State’s multiple visits, which have built great momentum behind the plans to improve the junction and traffic flow at the retail park. I hope to secure Government support for the project this year.

The roads were just not built for a town of this size, but there are economic opportunities from road investment, including in the A617, which is known as the Mansfield Ashfield regeneration route, or the MAR. It has grown steadily to accommodate new housing, and it could expand further to support new jobs and to provide an increasingly necessary route for heavy traffic to get around Mansfield, rather than to plough through the middle of it.

Rail infrastructure, too, can have a big impact. Increasingly, people see Mansfield as a commuter town, from which to travel to Nottingham or Sheffield, but we do not have a national rail link, only the Robin Hood line to Nottingham. I want to improve on that. We have one of the best value-for-money rail expansion projects in the country. We are opening an existing line, extending the Robin Hood from Shirebrook through to Warsop, Edwinstowe and Ollerton, linking historically deprived communities to jobs at the former collieries at Welbeck and Thoresby pits, and tying in our tourism offer in Sherwood forest with access from our towns to make the most of the social and economic opportunities of such tourism. In the future, only a short hop will be needed to link Mansfield directly to the HS2 hub at Chesterfield. HS2 could be a game-changer for towns such as ours, but it will only work if communities can access it effectively and efficiently, and local lines will be pivotal.

There are major opportunities to utilise transport improvements to support ever-growing towns, whether in boosting infrastructure or improving the scope to attract new jobs and businesses. I hope that the Government’s priorities in the industrial strategy will genuinely seek to boost towns, which are often more deprived, more isolated and more in need of support. The east midlands in particular sits at the bottom of the list of the Government’s regional investment. Transport could play a big role in changing that. I will continue to raise with the Department for Transport those relatively cheap projects that can make all the difference to our community.

4.57 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Austin.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) on securing this debate. I represent Comber and Newtownards, which are small former mill towns with textile factories and a linen industry, so I well understand to what she is referring.

We see the loss of industry to foreign fields. The vast majority of people who once walked to work now travel to work, if they can, and there is little or no infrastructure to deal with that. If someone misses a bus in my constituency, they will not get another in five minutes; it will be 45 minutes or 60 minutes. If they miss their bus, they miss their work and then they will not have a job. It is little wonder that so many use their car or taxis, as there simply is not the infrastructure in place to allow people to use public transport. Access to cars has gone up six percentage points in 10 years in Northern Ireland.

The fact of the matter is that areas with unaffordable and unreliable public transport cut off the poorest families. The right hon. Lady referred to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which did a survey interviewing people in neighbourhoods across the north of England and Scotland. It found:

“Transport was consistently highlighted as a significant barrier to work once the trade-off between the cost, reliability and speed of local public transport; and the prospect of low-wage, insecure work was considered.”
We did a similar survey in Northern Ireland. The travel survey for Northern Ireland found that 17% of people travelled on a bus once a week, 3% travelled by bus at least once a month, 44% said they never travelled by bus, 3% travelled on a train once a week, and 6% travelled by train at least once a month. When asked what would encourage them to use local public transport, 28% said cheaper fares and 19% said more frequent weekend services. Just under a fifth said that nothing would persuade them to use local public transport. Those are the issues.

The numbers paint a clear picture: we need much better public transport links to enable people to look further for work and to enable people to travel affordably and without having to work out if the job pays enough, given the bus fare. There is no quick fix and no short-term answer; there is only a need for funding a visionary plan. For me, any city deal should have enhanced links to towns and villages as a key component. To fail on that is to fail to unlock the potential of cities and the surrounding towns. Worse than that, we are failing to bring industrial towns and villages outside of the area up to modern-day life. That is grossly unfair and changes must be made.

5.2 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a genuine pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) on securing this debate, which has demonstrated the strength of feeling across the House on the issues that face our local transport networks, particularly in towns.

Stoke-on-Trent is one city, but in fact six towns linked together by an artery of roads that all too often neither get people to the place they want to be, nor get them there on time. We struggle in Stoke-on-Trent because of the non-traditional geographical nature of our city. Towns that are no more than 2 miles apart do not have a direct bus route. In one instance, people can stand in one town and almost see the other, yet they have to travel through a third town to get there by bus. It is telling that since 1991, bus usership is up by 8% across the country, but network coverage is down by 30%. That is disproportionately affecting the small towns we all represent.

In places like Stoke-on-Trent, bus companies make operating changes, and that has consequences. In my community, a morning bus service at school time was changed, meaning that young people could either get to school an hour early or 10 minutes late. I am not convinced that the consequential impact of such changes on the day-to-day lives of those we represent is being taken seriously by bus companies or the Government. The Government have given additional powers to the combined authority areas to do proper regulating and franchising of buses, but they have also extended that power to local authorities outside of those combined authority areas, if they can prove they meet the criteria and standards set by the Department for Transport. When the Minister sums up, will she tell me how many times the Department has granted to local authorities that cover small towns those powers to get directly involved and bring their bus routes back into public ownership?

Municipal bus companies have not been mentioned. There are multiple examples around the country of small towns running their own bus services for public benefit at a profit to the taxpayer, meaning that services can be subsidised from a commercial interest. That is not being talked about and the Government appear to be opposed to the idea. When the Minister sums up, will she explain why she does not think small towns should be in control of their own bus services?

5.4 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) on securing this important debate. I have to confess that I love buses. Being on one gives people a chance to daydream, to chat to strangers, and now, on wi-fi-enabled buses, to do their emails. Communities like mine—clusters of small communities—really rely on their bus routes.

The economic gap between towns and cities is demonstrated by the differing opportunities to use buses to get out and about. The Urban Transport Group has shown that one in 10 people would be out of a job without their bus service. Two thirds of bus passengers earn less than £24,000 a year. These are working people on low wages or benefits, the unemployed, students and retirees—people who are already under pressure because of austerity.

With only one railway station in Batley and Spen, for a service that has really struggled with timetable changes, our roads are becoming increasingly congested, with parking on pavements and speeding cars being common complaints. We need a green alternative, and buses are that alternative. With air pollution rising beyond official limits and deaths connected to poor air quality on the rise, we need more people to use buses and trains.

I have been inundated with correspondence on Arriva’s bus timetable changes in Batley and Spen. One woman might be forced to give up her cleaning job at a local school, which she has had for 18 years, because the bus will no longer go down her road. A 92-year-old will now have to use a taxi to get to the doctors, rendering her bus pass useless. Numerous residents have told me that the changes will result in them becoming further isolated from jobs and opportunities, robbing them of time with family, friends and loved ones. The changes have been made for cost reasons, but buses are not unprofitable. Bus companies have raked in a combined £3.3 billion in profit since 2009-10. We can make money out of these bus services.

We need to readjust our priorities for towns. Our constituents should not be abandoned by bus companies due to their emphasis on lucrative routes only. I echo my right hon. Friend’s request for a national transport and towns conversation, a bus consultation review and a rebuilding Britain fund.

5.7 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) on securing the debate. There is clearly a lot of interest in it, which I assume is why there are so many Members on these Benches, rather than it being part of any further breakaways from the Labour party.
On a serious point—this is a serious subject—the right hon. Lady correctly set out the problems of connectivity in rural areas, and how towns and villages, and the people in them, can be left behind. I was particularly struck by her saying that that can entrench poverty. My constituency covers many rural villages and towns. I actually stay in a village 5 miles from the main town of Kilmarnock, so I know all about the problems with bus services, the cost of bus fares and bus companies changing timetables without proper consultation with or consideration of the paying public.

On a more positive note, today saw the opening of the final stretch of the Aberdeen peripheral bypass, which was first planned 65 years ago and has finally been delivered by the Scottish National Party Government. That is typical of the Union dividend that Scotland has had to deal with over the years and that it now has to rectify, post-devolution. We also had the last single-track trunk road—the vital trunk road to Mallaig—in the UK, which was only upgraded to allow traffic each way in 2009.

There has also been the Pulpit Rock upgrade on the A82, with a viaduct replacing what were supposed to be temporary lights but which were left in place for 30 years. The Crianlarich bypass on the A82 opened in 2014. There are ongoing upgrades to the A9, A96 and A75, and the M8 has been completed, as have the M74 and M80 extensions. The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) will welcome the Maybole bypass, which is now receiving funding. That was first mooted in Westminster in 1989 and is now being delivered by the SNP Government.

The SNP Government also delivered the borders railway, which has been transformational. The rest of the UK could look at that when thinking about reconnecting the towns and villages left behind by the Beeching cuts. Since its reopening, we have seen new businesses on the borders, the creation of travel hubs and a massive increase in tourism and the associated increase in tourism jobs. Such developments create jobs and people do not necessarily need to travel once the connectivity is in place for visitors.

The Urban Transport Group published a particularly relevant document, “About towns: How transport can help towns thrive”, which states:

“Now, in a post industrial age, transport has a key role to play in putting these towns back on the map. After all, it is transport that can plug towns into larger city regions and national economies, and in doing so widen labour markets; meet housing demand; draw in investment; and open up access to opportunity.”

We would all welcome that. It continues:

“Transport can also shape the way towns look, and the way they feel about themselves, through creating better and healthier streets; though the sector’s employment, procurement and community involvement practices; and through the quality of new or transformed transport infrastructure.”

We cannot argue with those key findings. Others are using transport to open up new housing and commercial development opportunities in long-term master planning.

I was particularly struck by the document’s case study of Kilmarnock train station, under the subheading, “more than just a station”. It rightly covers the transformation of previously unused, partially derelict rooms in basement areas into vibrant community hubs in Kilmarnock train station. That was undertaken with Kilmarnock Station Railway Heritage Trust. That group is spearheaded by another Allan Brown—it feels like he is a more dynamic Allan Brown than me, given his achievements.

Ian Austin (in the Chair): Not possible.

Alan Brown: I will take that compliment, Mr Austin.

The trust managed to secure £500,000 of funding from a number of sources and brought seven station rooms back into use. They now host a gift shop, a coffee shop called Storm in a Teacup, and a bookshop called the Killie Browser, which has a huge range of second-hand books—rest assured, nobody can go in there and come out empty-handed. It is used to create skills and opportunities for people and to help people back into the workplace.

A number of community groups use the rooms. The Breaking Bread group involves local people coming together to cook together and socialise for one evening a week. A local peer support group has been set up, focusing on family-related issues. The group receives community reinforcement and family training in order to improve relationships and family communication.

“Living life to the full” training is offered via eight sessions over eight weeks, to help with low mood, confidence and self-esteem, and with breaking cycles of negative thinking. The transformation of the station is also transforming people’s lives, helping them in a social environment and moving them on from social exclusion.

It really is more than a station.

Next to Kilmarnock station, we have the fantastic Kilmarnock campus of Ayrshire College, which is helping to regenerate the former Johnnie Walker site. That is another example of master planning. It is reconfiguring college housing and locating it near to important transport hubs. That is how we can change towns for the better.

5.13 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) on securing this important debate, and I thank her for raising the important issue of transport in towns. It is clear that the issues that towns face are distinct from those affecting major cities and the countryside. There are several thousand towns across the UK, ranging in size from a few thousand people to a couple of hundred thousand residents. Many have a long history. They are linked to their local area, have particular industries and are situated in particular parts of the country. Their identity and the local economy often differ considerably from those of cities. Some have less effective transport links, and many can feel different and distinct.

I am proud to represent Reading, which is one of England’s largest towns. It is a borough with a long history. It is the site of an important medieval abbey, the burial place of Henry I, and was later an important industrial town. We are very lucky that our town sits on the main road and rail link between London and Bristol and south Wales. However, not all towns are as lucky, and many suffer from poor transport links. I will mention that later, as Labour has a range of policies to support our towns.
Many towns also suffer severe problems with congestion. It is important to address that serious issue, which wastes valuable time and money for businesses and harms the quality of life of many residents. A number of towns suffer from serious air pollution as a result. Given those serious problems, my right hon. Friend is absolutely correct to call for a new focus on transport in towns. However, I am afraid to say that the current Government seem quite simply incapable of identifying that as an issue, even though transport problems in towns affect a huge number of people across the United Kingdom. I should say, however, that that is hardly surprising, given the woeful track record of Ministers and in particular the Secretary of State.

The evidence of that inept handling of transport policy is clear for all to see. Ministers have failed to see the scale of the need for investment across our country, as they have continued to put London and the south-east first. Encouraging long-distance commuting through their new roads fund has diverted resources that could have been spent on improving transport in towns. New A roads have been built to get from one city to another—or perhaps I should say to get from one traffic jam to another.

Ministers have cut funding for buses and failed to promote bus use, which has now declined for several successive years; indeed, bus funding has fallen by 45% since 2010. They have also failed to acknowledge that investment in buses is a simple, cost-effective and environmentally friendly way to cut congestion and give more people access to high-quality public transport. That ill-thought-through approach has hit pensioners, commuters and young people, all of whom rely on buses.

To make matters worse, the Government have also missed their targets for cycling and walking. Quite simply, they have failed to invest in the modes of transport that reduce congestion, improve health and the quality of life in towns, and protect the environment.

Labour’s strategic approach would provide a complete contrast to the years of failure under the current Government. Labour would introduce a young person’s bus pass and we would offer local control and improved services to allow all councils to franchise bus services and set up new municipal companies. We would bring rail back into public ownership, which would improve services and lead to much more effective spending of money. We just have to look at the simple comparison between the profitable publicly owned east coast service, which paid a surplus back into the Treasury, and the recent bail-out of Virgin on the same line.

Labour would also invest in walking and cycling, and we would support imaginative schemes to join up parks and tow-paths, and encourage more cycling and walking in towns.

The UK is also one of Europe’s most unequal countries by region. Many of our towns and cities have suffered severe under-investment in transport, and we would be committed to ensuring that each region of the country receives its fair share of transport spending.

I will turn briefly to the excellent points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley. First, she is absolutely right to highlight the Government’s failure to tackle transport problems affecting towns. She made a very important point about the need to make transport respond to the needs of local people in towns. The Government should review the way in which private bus providers consult on changes to routes, so that obvious destinations such as shops, markets, schools and healthcare centres are not excluded. Her third point was also telling: as I have said, for far too long infrastructure investment has been biased towards London and the south-east. It is high time that Ministers embraced a new deal for towns.

To conclude, this has been an important debate. Transport and the rejuvenation of our towns go hand in hand. I hope that this debate encourages the Government to realise that our towns’ best days are not behind them but in the future, and that communities matter.

5.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) on securing the debate. There has been a wide-ranging discussion this afternoon. I am pleased to note that this debate was not just about a particular journey from A to B but about how transport can regenerate our communities and bind them together.

This afternoon, we have all discussed the fact that transport is essential for opportunity, growth and the wellbeing of the whole nation, including the towns that represent the living souls of the UK.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport has set local transport as a key priority for the Department for Transport, recognising its vital role in achieving a prosperous and well balanced society. However, as has been noted this afternoon, most people say, if they are asked, that they just want their transport system to be local, convenient, clean, reliable and safe. They want to have less congested roads and better air quality. My Department is delivering on those expectations, but of course there is always more to do, and transport is a key driver for social and economic change.

I was pleased to note that the right hon. Lady spoke about technology. The 21st century is seeing rapid shifts in mobility, with the adoption of broader and more sustainable approaches. Social and economic trends are also changing people’s behaviour and attitudes. The digital revolution, the growing awareness about smart places, and the greater emphasis on sustainability and environmentally friendly ways to travel create new transport challenges and opportunities.

I would be pleased to respond to the right hon. Lady on the transport in towns conversation and the rebuilding Britain fund, but most hon. Members raised the issue of buses, so I will discuss them first. As I come fresh from the Select Committee on Transport session last week on buses, I hope that hon. Members will note that I am a particular advocate for them.

The right hon. Lady mentioned a quote from Bristol, is that correct?

Caroline Flint: It was from Tony Benn.

Ms Ghani: I was just trying to find out the statistics for Bristol. The Member, or the resident, was obviously disturbed about how or when they could catch a bus, but if that Member was still around, the right hon.
Lady could point out to them that 50% more people are using buses in Bristol compared with in 2009-10, as I saw on a visit last weekend.

No matter what happens with technology or how people change the way they want to travel, buses will still play a key part. More than 4 billion journeys take place on our buses and those who use buses have the highest satisfaction compared with all other modes of transport. Buses will continue to play a huge role in our transport system. They connect our communities to the workplace and to vital public services such as healthcare and education. They are the quickest and most effective way to deal with people’s desire to get to work and school.

Most importantly, the Bus Services Act 2017 gave local authorities the option to manage those relationships even better, including new and improved options to allow transport authorities to enter into partnerships with their local bus operators. As was noted by many hon. Members, Mayors have additional franchising powers, too.

I was interested to note which hon. Members’ constituencies were in mayoral authorities. The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) mentioned that her local authority was waiting for an update in the regulations, but those regulations are already in place under the 2017 Act. Her local authority just needs to contact the Department and it will have the opportunity to enter into a voluntary or statutory relationship.

Liz McInnes indicated dissent.

Ms Ghani: The hon. Lady shakes her head. If she wishes to get in touch with the Department, we can lay out how the plans can work for her local authority so it can take the relationship forward.

I believe the constituency of the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) sits under the mayoral authority of the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis). Through the powers in the 2017 Act, the Mayor has the opportunity to franchise bus services. I had that conversation with him in person when he met me about HS2.

The hon. Lady was also keen to make sure that the right investment was made in the rail network in her region. About £48 billion of rail investment is projected between 2019 and 2024. There has also been a substantial amount of infrastructure funding—about £300 million—to help with HS2.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) was keen to understand how the 2017 Act could help his local authority. Local authorities can have a voluntary or statutory partnership with their bus companies. They just need to get in touch with the Department. We would welcome any interaction, because we are always delighted to enable local authorities to take that forward.

Gareth Snell: Having read the 2017 Act, I am acutely aware of what possibilities exist in it, but my specific question to the Minister is how many local authorities have taken up those powers outside mayoral combined authority areas. Simply having something on paper does not mean that local authorities are doing it. Can she give me a figure today of how many local authorities have taken up the powers that she references?

Ms Ghani: The hon. Gentleman raises a valuable point. Previously, the argument was that the powers were not available. The Department made those powers available in 2017—they have been in place for only a few years—and we are in conversation with a number of local authorities and Mayors. We need local authorities to put business cases together, come forward and be bold and responsible for the bus services that they should be making available to their local communities. The hon. Gentleman might also have noted his area has been shortlisted for a slice of the £1.28 billion transforming cities fund. I know that is a city and we are talking about towns, but we can ensure that buses are central to how that fund is allocated.

Tracy Brabin: Does the Minister accept that communities such as Kirklees, where we have had a 60% cut to our council funding since 2010 and where, since One Yorkshire has been kicked back, we cannot currently get a Mayor, are in a perfect storm where bus services are stagnating?

Ms Ghani: I share the hon. Lady’s frustration and concern for her constituents who rely on bus services, but we have to remember that these are the choices that local authorities are making.

Tracy Brabin: But they don’t have the money to do it.

Ms Ghani: These are the choices that local authorities are making. They need to be aware that if they make changes to buses, they do more than just remove a mobility service; they affect people’s opportunities to access health, education and jobs. We all talk about devolution, but if we are going to talk about devolving these powers so that local authorities are responsible and in charge, they need to think about the impact of the choices they make on the communities they represent. The hon. Lady will be pleased to know that there should be more funding available for buses in her area, because West Yorkshire has also been shortlisted for a share of the £1.28 billion transforming cities fund. I am sure that she—

Tracy Brabin: That’s transforming cities!

Ms Ghani: I agree, but buses and towns will also play a part in that fund. Most of us have spoken about buses. We all have a role in ensuring that buses are part of that project and that, when local communities put in plans to transform transport, buses are not seen as something to add on at the very end.

One of the issues raised was how people can access buses and get information about what tickets are available and when services are running. The 2017 Act puts in place bus open data. That will require bus services to make public information about timetables, fares and tickets, which at the moment are not that easy to understand, in real time so passengers can make decisions about how and when to get the bus. That information will be available from 2020. Those improvements aim to remove uncertainty about bus journeys, improve journey planning and help passengers secure the best value for money for their tickets.
The hon. Member for Batley and Spen was absolutely right to say that buses are the greenest option. That is why we recently announced a further £48 million for low emission buses, which means that catching a bus is also environmentally friendly. I believe there is also a discussion to be had about how buses are a way for people to communicate with each other. A huge amount of work was done on tackling loneliness on the back of the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness. Once again, buses were seen as a service that some people take up just to have a conversation. I therefore urge all Members present to work with me to ensure that their local authorities understand how important bus services are.

I will touch on taxis for just a moment, because they are a key service in our towns. We recently responded to the taxi and private hire vehicle task and finish group, which put together proposals for ensuring that taxi and private hire vehicle passengers continue to be secure, on the back of the cases in Rotherham and Oxford. Only a few weeks ago, we announced that we will raise the basic threshold for drivers to secure a licence and will have a national database and national enforcement policies.

I was going to talk about walking and cycling, but I seem to have run out of time. I wanted to end with what the right hon. Member for Don Valley said about having a towns conversation and ensuring that we have a transport fund and strategy by touching on the future high streets fund and the transforming cities fund, but I believe she wants to respond, so I have run out of time—forgive me.

5.29 pm

Caroline Flint: I am afraid the Minister did not really address the sum of all the parts of today’s contributions. Twelve Labour Members contributed to the debate, including my hon. Friends the Members for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero), for Hartlepool (Mike Hill), for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), for Bury North (James Frith), for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) and for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas), my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and my hon. Friends the Members for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

Clearly, the sum of all the parts of those contributions adds up to a huge amount. The Minister did not address what our towns and villages are crying out for—a holistic strategy that understands that local areas need to be given not only powers but resources. I will take up the opportunity of a meeting with the Minister. By the way, Tony Benn has been dead for four years and the Russians landed a vehicle on the moon in 1959, when the letter I quoted was written.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 20 February 2019

[Stewart Hosie in the Chair]

Police, Fire and Rescue Services: Funding Reductions

9.30 am

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the effect of reductions in funding of police, fire and rescue services.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Hosie. I declare an interest as a member of a number of trade union groups, including the Fire Brigades Union parliamentary group. I start by placing on the record my appreciation for and gratitude to our police officers, firefighters and, indeed, NHS staff. I am sure that those sentiments will be shared by all Members.

The focus of the debate relates to the funding of the police and fire services, as pressures affecting those services in my constituency have been more acute in recent months. However, I in no way seek to downplay the funding challenges facing our health service and, in particular, the ambulance service. In many respects, they face similar pressures.

The last Labour Government had a well-known policy; it was a kind of catchphrase: “Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime”. And they had a proud record. Indeed, finance, resources and police numbers were all increased. Being tough on crime was not just a slogan. It meant more visible policing, a priority being placed on community policing, intelligence gathering and the detection of crime. I well recall attending PACT—Police and Communities Together—meetings at which there were consultations with community safety partnerships and local priorities were determined. There was a real sense of partnership.

In 2010, when Labour left office, there was a record number of police officers; it was in excess of 143,000. However, in the last decade, we have seen a systematic reduction in funding and what amounts to a downgrading of services in my constituency have been more acute in recent months. However, I in no way seek to downplay the funding challenges facing our health service and, in particular, the ambulance service. In many respects, they face similar pressures.

The last Labour Government had a well-known policy; it was a kind of catchphrase: “Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime”. And they had a proud record. Indeed, finance, resources and police numbers were all increased. Being tough on crime was not just a slogan. It meant more visible policing, a priority being placed on community policing, intelligence gathering and the detection of crime. I well recall attending PACT—Police and Communities Together—meetings at which there were consultations with community safety partnerships and local priorities were determined. There was a real sense of partnership.

In 2010, when Labour left office, there was a record number of police officers; it was in excess of 143,000. However, in the last decade, we have seen a systematic reduction in funding and what amounts to a downgrading of the police service. In every community, we can see the effects of the missing police officers who once patrolled our streets.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. He is absolutely right. Greater Manchester police have lost nearly 2,000 police officers since 2010, and across south Manchester the problem is that the police are so stretched that they struggle to fulfil their duties, including proper investigation of the crimes that are happening. Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the biggest effects of the reduction is a loss of confidence among the local community that crimes will be properly investigated, and that that is not the fault of the police?

Grahame Morris: Trust and relationships are built over many years. Sadly, the impact of sustained funding cuts over nine or 10 years has been that much of the good work from the partnership arrangements, and often valuable intelligence, have been lost. It will take a colossal effort to regain that.

There are many implications from having fewer police officers. I am thinking of the reassurance that comes from seeing a police officer talking to residents in Peterlee town centre in my constituency, seeing officers walking down Church Street—a rare occurrence in the current climate—or community police officers gathering intelligence to combat drug dealing or engaging young people to tackle antisocial behaviour.

It is the view of many that the Conservative Government have abandoned their support for law and order by cutting more than 20,000 police officers, taking us back to numbers that we have not seen since the 1980s. Crime is now rising as a result. In my own policing area, Durham, the number of police officers is down by 25% since 2010; we have lost 360 police officers. The National Audit Office report on the financial sustainability of police forces identifies Durham as having lost more resources than any other provincial force between 2010 and 2018-19, with its funding from central Government cut by one third.

I hope that the Minister will join me in acknowledging that, despite every funding challenge being placed before Durham constabulary, credit must go to Chief Constable Mike Barton, Police and Crime Commissioner Ron Hogg and all the officers, staff and support staff of Durham constabulary. It has been rated as the only outstanding force in the country for the past three years, and has the highest crime detection rate in England and Wales. It has endeavoured to overcome its difficulties. Nevertheless, the fact that we have fewer police officers is manifest, and the consequences are there for everyone to see.

I want to say something about Grenfell. The County Durham and Darlington fire and rescue service is experiencing the same financial pressures as the police in my constituency. Before I move on to the circumstances that apply in my constituency, I want to comment on the Channel 4 “Dispatches” episode that aired on Monday night. It was called “Grenfell: Did the Fire Brigade Fail?” Unfortunately, the episode had the same flaw as some of the questioning in the Grenfell inquiry, and was blinkered from the wider context of the incident that led to the dreadful loss of 73 lives because it focused solely on the night of the tragedy.

On 14 June 2017, the London fire brigade was confronted with a fire spreading at an unprecedented rate. The crews’ experience and training would have taught them that, in a high-rise building, a fire would be contained within a flat in an individual concrete unit built to contain the fire. In such cases, it is clear why a policy of “stay put” would work. On that night, as the fire developed, the crews on the ground had to make decisions in that moment of pressure, panic and uncertainty. I ask everyone to consider what they would do in that moment, with a fire spreading rapidly in an unexpected manner, with lives being lost in front of them, watching colleagues and friends entering a building in the belief that they might not return. Are we to expect a fire chief on the ground instinctively to change established policy and procedures that had been ingrained into the service through training, and to develop new strategies on the spot?

To scapegoat the firefighters—the men and women who bravely risk their lives in a service whose purpose is to preserve life—is nothing short of a scandal. It will not get us any nearer finding those responsible for the
tragedy. In the opinion of many people, including me, the fire service and the firefighters did not fail. The building and the policy failed. Policy fails when faulty and unsafe electrical appliances are not tested, when building regulations fail and when substandard windows do not contain the fire. A local authority fails when the cheap cladding that was used to wrap the high-rise building is actually made of flammable materials. Business fails when the companies that installed the cladding and produced it do not act when their product fails to meet safety standards.

It is easy to attack the fire service for decisions made in a moment of extreme pressure, but at some point those who made the decisions with time and forethought that placed residents in a dangerous building will have to be held to account. Perhaps that is not for this debate, but that programme raised such questions that I felt that I had to put something on the record.

I am offended when the fire service and firefighters are unfairly attacked. I have seen that in my constituency. County Durham and Darlington fire and rescue service is currently consulting on changes, as it is trying to manage excessive Government cuts. It has set out a number of options and is asking the public for their views. I have never met a fire chief or a firefighter who does not want to recruit more firefighters. The barrier to recruiting more firefighters is finance, which is determined by central Government, combined with the local authority precept. Our problem is that we are being systematically underfunded, and as a result, the fire service in our area is being downgraded. The Minister may disagree, but how can the loss of 11,000 firefighter posts nationally—one in five posts—be described as anything other than a downgrade of the service?

The scale of cuts to the fire service is nothing less than a national scandal. County Durham and Darlington fire and rescue service has lost 58% of its Government funding since 2012. In the current four-year settlement, its Government funding will reduce from £10.9 million to £8.9 million, and Government support for new fire appliances and other vital equipment has been almost totally axed. Hon. Members may recall that, some years ago, we were actually encouraged to develop resilience and to acquire equipment, particularly pumping equipment and boats, which might not be used so much in our area but could support neighbouring brigades during flooding incidents.

Our own chief fire officer in Durham, Stuart Errington, described a £1.3 million stealth cut, stressing:

“I’m not worried about PFI, I’m worried about capital spending.”

I place on the record my thanks to Stuart and to our firefighters for the work they do under the most difficult circumstances. I know from my conversations with the chief fire officer that he has raised concerns with the Minister about cuts and their implications for public safety. He said to me:

“I think everyone thought the cuts would stop after four years.”

He added:

“I’m still lobbying with the Home Office really hard to stop the cuts, because we’re getting to the point where we’re going to see some really big cuts, which will increase the risk to the public.”

I ask Ministers to look at the cuts to the police and to the fire and rescue service and to recognise that they have gone too far and are now endangering the public. The idea that fire services covering Seaham and Peterlee in my constituency could be reduced, at a time when they are actually dealing with more incidents, defies all logic and common sense. It makes the likelihood of death and injury greater, which cannot be acceptable.

I ask the Minister to address funding cuts. One issue in Durham is that the precept is not an effective means of raising finance. As a relatively deprived area, we have a low council tax base. Some 55% of households in County Durham and Darlington—it is more in my constituency—are classed as band A, whereas nationally a typical property is classed as band D. That limits the capacity to increase funding for the fire and rescue authority via the precept, compared with more affluent areas.

An example used by my own police and crime commissioner is that, if Thames Valley police increased its precept by the same amount as Durham, it would raise £17 million a year more. At some point we will have to question the sustainability of the precept as a means of financing both the police service and the fire and rescue service, particularly in the current climate, where the principle of resource equalisation—that more affluent areas should provide support to less affluent areas—which has stood since the second world war, seems to have been abandoned. We increasingly see a postcode lottery in resources and funding.

I point out to the Minister that the demands on policing and fire and rescue services—particularly in areas of high deprivation, such as mine—are complex and need to be funded appropriately. That will require the Government to recognise the needs of communities like mine and the limited ability of local areas to raise the necessary funding via the precept.

9.45 am

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing this important debate. We are discussing some of the most important services in our constituencies—people who are there to keep us safe and who come to our rescue when we are in peril. I am pleased to put on the record my thanks to the police and fire services in West Yorkshire. Regrettably, the lives of the people who work in those services are being made harder by the Government’s decisions. Ultimately, resources are the burning issue.

Our police have to do more work than ever before. Most hon. Members will be familiar with complaints in their inboxes about illegal moped use and related antisocial behaviour, but I am now receiving a growing number of complaints about fighting, threatening behaviour, drug dealing and armed robberies. Violent crime is increasing in West Yorkshire and it feels as though robberies and burglaries are becoming more common. Regrettably, there is also an ongoing investigation into historical child sexual exploitation in north Kirklees.

In such circumstances, one would rightfully expect an increase in our police numbers and resources, so words cannot fully explain my frustration that West Yorkshire police is about to enter its ninth consecutive year of
real-terms cuts. West Yorkshire has lost 1,100 police officers and 152 police community support officers, and its overall budget has been reduced by £113 million since 2010. Between 2013 and 2018, there was a mind-boggling 227% rise in violent crime—the largest rise in the country.

It goes without saying that the visibility of officers has reduced, and local anger and blame is increasingly put on the shoulders of the police. We will all have experience of constituents who have been victims of crime and complained about response times or, worse, given up calling the police altogether.

That gets worse when there is a spate of crimes. In Birstall in my constituency, a number of small local businesses have been the victim of repeated burglaries, which put livelihoods at stake and drive local people to distraction. My mum used to have a café in that community, and if it had been burgled, that would have been the end of her business. These people’s businesses are hanging by a thread because of the criminality of thugs. However, I am left in little doubt that if the police were able, they would have a greater presence in communities such as Birstall, Gomersal and Cleckheaton. That is why the Labour party’s pledge to employ a new police officer for every community is important and resonates with victims of crime.

We cannot wait for that, however. People deserve to have faith in their police, and businesses need to know that their premises are secure for the good of our local high streets. The Government missed another opportunity in the most recent funding announcement, but they cannot continually leave communities such as mine out in the cold.

The debate about the resources of emergency services often focuses on the police, for good reason, as I have mentioned, but our fire services do inspiring work too. They have not been exempt from the harsh reality of austerity and continue to suffer. Hon. Members may have recently read in the news about a large domestic explosion in Batley in my constituency. It was an exceptional circumstance that received an exceptional response from the fire service. No fewer than 10 fire engines from across West Yorkshire were quickly on the scene and they dealt with the fire swiftly and professionally. I remain impressed that even when resources and numbers are tight, the fire service manages to be there when we need it most.

Having viewed the figures provided by the Fire Brigades Union, I am concerned that we will reach a tipping point where the cuts become too much to handle. Between 2010 and 2018, West Yorkshire fire service has faced massive cuts, which has led to 572—33%—fewer firefighters. By 2020 the overall national budget for fire services will have been nearly halved.

Our police and fire services are an absolute credit to our country. They constantly work hard for us and run towards danger when we run away, but we cannot take them for granted. For too long, all they have known are budget cuts and ever-tightening resources. I encourage everyone in this House to spend time, if they can, out on the frontline with both police and firefighters, as I have, to see the pressures that our brave men and women have to cope with. If austerity is over, it is vital that we start supporting the services immediately and guarantee that the fire and rescue services will suffer no further cuts to their funding.

I have several asks for the Minister. Will he please look again at the precept that unfairly hits communities such as Batley and Spen in the north? Will the Government guarantee future funding beyond 2019-20 for the increased employers’ cost for the firefighters pension scheme? With the firefighters not having any real pay rise in the past eight years, will the Government make funding available so that firefighters’ pay can at least keep pace with inflation? Will the Government now acknowledge that West Yorkshire in particular needs extra support for its police to deal with the exceptional rise in crime in order to ensure that people and my constituents feel safe as they go about their daily business?

9.51 am

Alison Thewlis (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hosie. It will come as no surprise to anybody in this place that emergency services feel stretched; it is extremely challenging for them to operate within the constraints of nearly a decade of austerity, and that is the context of the debate today. The link between austerity and different types of crime has been well established. There is the global context of an increased risk of terrorist attacks, and forces across the UK are now also preparing for a no-deal Brexit. It is a perfect storm, and it can be remedied only with sustained investment from the UK Government.

The Scottish Government have been instrumental in ensuring that Scotland is protected from the austerity cuts that emergency services have faced in the rest of the UK. The Scottish Parliament does not have all the powers we require to increase our revenues in the way my colleagues and I would like, but we can make spending decisions that lead to much better outcomes for the people of Scotland.

Police numbers in Scotland are up by more than 5% since the Scottish National party took power at Holyrood in 2007. That is despite the wider context of nearly a decade of austerity cuts from the UK Government. In the same period, police numbers in England and Wales are down by nearly 14%. The headcount in Scotland is 17,175 officers, which is still 941 full-time equivalent police officers, or 5.8%, more than the figure we inherited when we came into office, which is significant. In September 2018, there were 32 officers per 10,000 people in Scotland, compared with 21 officers per 10,000 in England and Wales. That reflects not only our geography, but investment in our service, which needs to be protected, given the issues that have emerged in England around knife crime and so on.

The Scottish Government do not have the powers to mitigate absolutely everything, and emergency services are increasingly concerned about the impact of leaving the European Union. Police Scotland has said that a no-deal Brexit could have numerous consequences, such as officers being deployed elsewhere and a considerable risk of harm to the public if there were incidents of civil unrest. Nobody wants to see that, particularly not in Scotland, where we did not vote for Brexit, but we are at the end of the supply chain for many things, and if supplies start to run out, it could have a significant impact in terms of civil unrest.

I am absolutely appalled that our emergency services are having to squander public resources on preparing for civil unrest and other eventualities associated with
crashing out of the EU without a deal. It is entirely within the Government’s gift to take no deal off the table and offer reassurances to those on the frontline that such a catastrophe can be avoided. The Government have allowed internal politics within the Tory party to escape into the lives of ordinary citizens, and Scottish taxpayers and citizens are picking up the tab.

Scotland has its own distinct challenges that must be met by our emergency services. In a diverse geographical landscape, they respond to incidents and various challenges within our cities and towns. We have our own cultural challenges and a separate legal system, but our police force has, in good faith, acknowledged that there may be a need to provide mutual assistance to other forces in the UK should that be required. The only circumstances in which that would be necessary as a result of Brexit would be if the Prime Minister continues her reckless course towards a no-deal cliff edge.

There are also challenges in the funding of fire and rescue services, and I say that as a former councillor who sat on the Strathclyde fire board before it was merged into the single service. There were good and legitimate reasons for doing that; many like to see the pooling of shared resources, and it made sense for the service. It meant a change in nature, and there were challenges in coming together as one, but nobody would change back, and there was broad cross-party agreement for the merger.

One benefit of the change for fire and rescue services has been their ability to adapt to the changing nature of the fire service. Recent FBU figures stated that non-fire rescues now considerably outnumber fire rescues. In 2017-18, more than 3,000 rescues were at non-fire incidents, compared with around 500 rescues from fires. Before the Strathclyde board was dissolved, it invested considerably in a state-of-the-art training centre at Cambusbang just outside Glasgow, and I recommend anyone who can to go and see that fantastic service. Firefighters can access a range of training opportunities, and all services in Scotland can come and use the centre, which is of huge benefit.

Scottish fire and rescue services have tried wherever possible to make savings to reduce the burden on their services, and the West Dunbartonshire service recently worked hard to reduce by 23% the number of unwanted fire alarm signals, which can cause call-outs that do not need to happen. That is 23% fewer times that the service had to turn out when it did not need to, which is important.

I would be remiss not to mention funding, and the UK Government must do the fair thing and adequately compensate Scottish police, fire and rescue services for the expenditure involved in contingency planning for a no-deal Brexit. We should not be out of pocket because of the decisions of this Government. That additional expenditure is likely to amount to £17 million in policing costs alone—around the same amount that the UK Government have provided to Northern Ireland to cover its Brexit-related policing. Why should Scotland be treated any differently?

The UK Government have shown political discretion in funding the devolved nations in the past, and it is deeply unfair that the people of Scotland and those struggling on the frontline of the emergency services should miss out. Last year, we were successful in finally persuading the Chancellor to stop charging VAT to emergency services in Scotland, which was a result of moving to the single service. That came about because of the intransigence of the UK Government as regards fixing that situation. Some have said that we chose to go forward with that merger, which we did, and the cost savings made it worthwhile. However, it was a political decision by the UK Government not to treat our services in the same way as they treat Highways England, or other services in England, and that should not have happened in the first place.

As things stand, compensation is overdue. Our emergency services paid £175 million to the UK Government before the decision to scrap the VAT obligation. That funding could have gone to the frontline, saving lives and improving the service. When will the UK Government give back the money that we are entitled to? If VAT is exempted now, it should have been exempted in the first place, and we are due our money back.

9.58 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I thank the hon. Member for East ingin (Grahame Morris) for securing it. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Members for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) and for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who made their contributions forcefully and gracefully on behalf of the fire and rescue services and the police.

An attempt to lower the deficit has clearly led to cuts and losses, but I believe that a few areas must be untouchable, including frontline healthcare, funding for schools to provide basic education, defence spending to secure our nation and its interests, and—lastly, but no less importantly—the police, fire and rescue services. The fat on all those things can be trimmed, but I believe the emergency services are as lean as they can be. In fact, we are too skinny, and without the ability to do what the body is capable of doing if it is well fed. We have tremendous talent and ability, yet we cannot do what a well-funded body can do.

We also have a police service and a fire service that train the world, yet they are precluded from giving their best, due to a lack of funding. I pay tribute, as others have, to the fire and rescue services of Northern Ireland and the whole nation. I also pay tribute to the Police Service of Northern Ireland. I know the debate is not about the ambulance service, but I also put on record my thanks to those who work in it for what they do. In many places, they are hard-pressed financially and resources-wise.

A few years ago, I was in Afghanistan with the armed forces parliamentary scheme. We had a chance to visit Lashkar Gah in Helmand province. It was remarkable to be in a camp and all of a sudden to hear a Northern Ireland accent—former police officers being seconded to train the Afghanistan army and police. That incident told me a number of things. Those gentlemen had done their stint in the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the PSNI. They then had the opportunity to train people in other countries, and they did that. The husband of the lady who works in my office is a retired police officer, and he trains police officers in Serbia, Montenegro and other parts of the Balkans. The expertise, commitment
and ability we have through our police forces is being used to train police forces in other parts of the world. That is an indication of just how highly thought of they are.

In Northern Ireland in 2017, the fire and rescue service of Northern Ireland warned that any more cuts would almost certainly result in preventable deaths. We are not playing with figures; we are playing with people’s lives—the lives of families and children. That is backed up by findings from the Local Government Association. Many of us know the LGA from our days on councils. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central spoke about her time on the council. My hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) and I have been councillors, too, and I suspect others have the same expertise and knowledge. It is a massive body with a lot of knowledge and expertise. It highlighted the latest fire statistics, which show that although the overall number of fires has fallen steadily, the rate of decline has slowed. Deliberate primary fires are on the rise, which is incredibly concerning.

The LGA further outlined a 22% increase in fire-related deaths involving those over 65 in the past two years. There is a need to raise awareness about elderly people on their own in their homes. In Northern Ireland, we have regular advertising on TV about smoke alarms, saying: “Check your smoke alarm on a Monday. Press the button. If it goes off, you know the batteries are not done.” It is important that people do that, because some elderly people probably do not have that ability. It is about how we raise awareness.

The LGA also said that, in deciding fire service funding, Ministers should consider the rising over-85 population and the increasing numbers of people renting houses. When it comes to raising awareness, landlords should be reminded of the responsibility they have, and elderly people should be helped. It is not hard to look out for our elderly neighbours and to call in and see how they are. In two minutes, we can check their smoke alarm and make sure everything is all right.

Alison Thewliss: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent point about the importance of people using their smoke alarms and ensuring that they work. Is there a system in Ireland, as there is in Scotland, of home fire safety visits, where the fire brigade will come out and check someone’s house for fire safety and install smoke alarms if they are needed?

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend may have read my script and known that I was going to mention that. I have become very alarmed by attacks on the fire and rescue service, the PSNI and the ambulance service—and, indeed, on A&E staff, which he referred to—across Northern Ireland. There is something grossly morally wrong and evil about people feeling they can attack our rescue services when they are out doing their job of responding to a fire or to someone who is hurt. There is also the issue of the theft of property from ambulances and fire engines. Defibrillators, for instance, are stolen from the back of ambulances, as is other equipment. That all has to be paid for. Whenever people lay their lives on the line to save others, they should be shown an element of respect.

My hon. Friend referred to accident and emergency. Again, there is something grossly offensive about people feeling it is okay to go into A&E and verbally abuse nurses, doctors or other people who are there to help. There is something criminally wrong with those who would attack people in A&E. My hon. Friend underlines how we as a nation feel. It is time to respect our fire and rescue service; it is time to respect our police; it is time to respect our ambulance service; and it is time to respect the nurses and doctors in A&E. We must send that message from the Chamber today.

I agree with the chair of the Local Government Association fire services management committee, who said:

“Projected rises in both the elderly population, including those living alone, and the number of people living in privately rented homes will only increase the risk of more fires putting people’s lives in danger.”

We have a duty to focus on elderly people who need help, and I look to the Minister for a response to that. The FBU says the number of firefighters has fallen by 22% in the past 10 years. The fire service is not sufficiently funded, and that needs to be changed.

The hon. Member for Easington mentioned electrical wiring, which he, I and others in the Chamber have spoken about before. That is about not only upgrading and checking the wiring in houses, but identifying faulty electrical equipment. We have had many Westminster Hall debates about that issue, and he is absolutely right to underline it. I back up what he said, which was important.

Grahame Morris: I want to make a small point about that. It is a very relevant issue, and it reminds me of the public health argument. The hon. Gentleman mentioned firefighters being involved in identifying areas of high risk and installing or checking smoke detectors. There is a payback for that, but resources are so tight that the fire service and the police service are now just completely reactive. Good work was being done, and we perhaps were seeing the benefit of that in reduced incidents. Since we are no longer investing in education, installing smoke detectors and so on, we will see a higher incidence of crime and fires that could otherwise have been avoided.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It is not sufficient to be reactive; we should proactively address these issues. That should be one of the key messages.
from the debate. Many Opposition colleagues have participated in Westminster Hall debates about electrical safety. It continues to be a massive issue, and we need to be proactive about it.

The same can be said for policing. We have some phenomenal officers, who work hand in hand with community workers to address problems on estates, yet the funding is not there to ensure that there are community workers on shifts at all times. I am a great believer in community policing—I always have been. I was probably reared in community policing, in my former life as a councillor. The relationship between the community officers, the estates and the people was phenomenal. Unfortunately, when those officers retired or moved on, that relationship fell by the way, which was a loss and a sadness.

The funding is not in place to ensure community workers are on shift at all times. Regular officers who are not up to speed with dynamics and who act as they are trained flare tensions, whereas a team who have built up a relationship would have been able to settle those tensions. How much of a talent it is to be able to solve, or salve, problems, rather than inadvertently inflaming emotions. That is down to a lack of funding. The losers are entire areas.

As I said, there are things that we cannot scrimp on, and the police and the fire services are one of them. I add my voice to those of Members who have called and will call for appropriate ring-fenced funding.

10.11 am

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is my pleasure and privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on bringing the debate to the Floor of the Westminster Hall Chamber. I share his tribute to the police, the fire services and the emergency services of all the nations of these islands. I also take the opportunity to commend him for his comments on the dangers of making the fire service a scapegoat for the Grenfell fire. The thrust of what he was saying was that if we want to know who was responsible for the Grenfell fire, we should follow the money—see who benefited from the cheap cladding and the poor upkeep of the building—rather than blaming the men and women who risked their lives to save lives that night.

We have heard a number of interesting and diverse contributions, from the hon. Members for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). My hon. Friend raised in particular the role that the fire services play in Scotland, with their proactive preventive measures, such as offering to go into people’s homes to assess their anti-fire readiness. That proactive strategy is reflected in the way the Scottish police force, the Crown Office and some Scottish social services have approached the problem of knife crime in Scotland, treating it as a public health emergency. My hon. Friend has spoken about that eloquently on a number of occasions.

This debate is really about funding. The hon. Member for Easington painted a concerning picture of the effect of the reductions in police and fire and rescue services across England and Wales. Those concerns are clearly widely held. As the Scottish National party spokesperson for justice and home affairs, I want to contribute constructively to the debate by offering an overview of the somewhat different position in Scotland. In an era of severe funding cuts to police and fire services across England and Wales, the UK Government would do well to look to the example of the Scottish Government, who have managed to protect such vital public services from the worst excesses of the UK Government’s failed austerity project.

Let us look at the stats on crime in Scotland, from the Scottish crime and justice survey. Since 2008-09, crime has fallen by 32%. The vast majority of people in Scotland—87%—say that they experience no crime. That is not to diminish the severe experiences of the 13% who do but, again, the Scottish Government have leading legislation for the victims of crime and for vulnerable witnesses. Since 2006-07, recorded crime in Scotland has fallen by 42%, and non-sexual violent crime is at one of its lowest levels since 1974, and represents a 49% fall since 2006-07. That is largely due to the public health approach to the problem of knife crime in Scotland, in which the police and emergency services collaborate with other healthcare and social services professionals to reduce violent crime at a time when it is sadly on the rise in England and Wales.

Alison Thewliss: My hon. and learned Friend makes a good point about the impact of that approach to tackling knife crime, particularly in relation to young people. Does she agree that that investment over an extended period of time has been valuable in dealing with knife crime and the impact of violence on young people?

Joanna Cherry: Absolutely, and I am pleased to say that the UK Government have recognised that, by coming up to Scotland to study the approach that we have taken. Cressida Dick from the Metropolitan police has been up to Glasgow to see the approach that has been taken there, and I know that UK Government Ministers have been to my constituency and to see Scottish Government Ministers in Edinburgh to discuss these issues. Witnesses have also given evidence to the Select Committees on Home Affairs and on Justice about the approach taken in Scotland.

However, key to the approach in Scotland is protecting the budget of the police and fire services from the consequences of austerity. As we all know, the Scottish Government’s budget has been squeezed over the past few years. Between 2010-11 and 2019-20, Scotland’s discretionary resource budget allocation will have been reduced by 6.5%, which is almost £2 billion in real terms. However, the Scottish Government’s decisions on tax and borrowing have reduced the real-terms reduction to the total Scottish fiscal budget from 5.5% to 3.4% between 2010 and the current year, and their decisions on income tax alone in this coming year mean that we will have an additional £68 million to invest in public services. Such measures have enabled the Scottish Government to mitigate the worst of austerity in very challenging circumstances.

For example, while spending on police forces in England and Wales has dropped by 17% since 2010, and the number of officers has dropped by 14%, in Scotland we have gone in the opposite direction. As my hon. Friend
the Member for Glasgow Central said, since the SNP Government came to power in 2007, there are now 5.8% more police officers. There has also been modernisation, with one police force for the whole of Scotland. It is important to remember that in London there is one police force for the whole metropolitan area, whose population is nearly twice that of Scotland, so having one force for Scotland was a no-brainer. I will come back to that point when I address my hon. Friend’s comments on VAT. In September last year there were around 32 police officers per 10,000 of population in Scotland, compared with around 21 officers per 10,000 of population in England and Wales.

The commitment to protect public services in Scotland from the effects of the UK Government’s austerity project extends to fire services. The recent Scottish Government Budget—for the year 2019-20—introduced increases in the money available for fire and rescue services, as well as for the police. There has been a real-terms uplift for Police Scotland. The overall Scottish Police Authority budget will increase by 3.7%, meaning an additional £42.3 million. The police revenue budget will increase by 2.8%, meaning an additional £30.3 million. The police capital budget will increase by £12 million, meaning a 52% increase. Also, the Scottish Government remain committed to protecting the police resource budget in real terms in every year of the current Scottish Parliament, which means a boost of £100 million by 2021. So it can be done when the right choices are made by Governments.

Likewise, this year will see the budget for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service increase by £5.5 million, and that is in addition to increasing the service’s spending capacity by £15.5 million in the previous financial year. The Scottish Government’s Budget also confirmed that the £21.7 million increase in capital funding for the service announced in the 2017-18 Budget will be maintained.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central said, the Scottish National party, after much campaigning during this Parliament and the last, was successful in persuading the UK Government to end the VAT obligation on Scotland’s police and fire rescue services. However, more than a year on, the UK Government have still not repaid the £175 million taken by way of VAT before scrapping the unfair charges. They need to reverse that decision and return the money to Scotland’s emergency services. Scotland’s police and fire rescue services were the only territorial forces in the UK asked to pay VAT—as my hon. Friend said, other national public organisations south of the border were not asked to pay VAT. Make no mistake about it: that was a political decision. It has now been reversed, and the money that was wrongfully taken should be paid back.

My hon. Friend also raised the funds required for policing in Scotland in relation to Brexit, which has been estimated at £17 million a year, including capital costs for uniforms, equipment and vehicles of around £800,000 a year. The UK Government need to recognise that when allocating spending. The majority of people living in Scotland did not vote for Brexit, and the Scottish Government’s sensible, compromise solutions for ameliorating the effects of Brexit have been ignored. If the British Government are intent on imposing Brexit on Scotland against our will, the least they can do is meet the costs of the extra policing, as I believe they intend to do for Northern Ireland. Although there are special considerations in Northern Ireland that must of course be respected, that does not mean that differing considerations in Scotland should not be taken into account.

I will end by putting three questions to the Minister. First, will she look carefully at the position in Scotland, to see what lessons can be learned for England and Wales, bearing in mind the crime figures I have quoted and the fact that the Scottish Government have managed, in a time of austerity, to find the money necessary to properly fund the police and fire and rescue services? Secondly, will she intervene with the Treasury to ensure that the £175 million wrongfully taken in VAT from Scotland’s police and fire rescue services is paid back? Thirdly, will she explain who will fund the extra policing needed in Scotland as a result of her Government’s Brexit plans, which the Scottish people did not vote for?

10.22 am

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. This has been an incredibly thorough, if somewhat depressing, debate on the state of funding of our police and fire services. It is testament to how strongly Members feel about the issue that we have heard such passionate speeches and that it is frequently raised, both here in Westminster Hall and when the Government are dragged to the Chamber to answer urgent questions and through Home Office questions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), in his usual mild-mannered and constructive way, gave a thorough overview of the issues facing our police and fire services. He is fortunate to be represented by an outstanding police service in Durham and, by the sounds of it, an excellent fire service as well. However, they are under exceptional and unprecedented pressure and demand. He made a powerful speech, particularly on Grenfell, and spoke about the regulatory failings of that local authority and of businesses. There was in no way a failure of those firefighters—those men and women who risked everything to go in and save others.

My hon. Friend spoke about the madness of funding our police service through the precept, which I will come on to. He is particularly affected by that, representing, as he does, Durham, which has an exceptionally low council tax base and is therefore less able, even than other metropolitan areas, to fund the police to the level needed. He also asked the Minister whether the Government have abandoned the principle of resource equalisation. It certainly feels that they have, given that we are faced with a funding settlement that bears no relation to demand, need or operational resource—instead, it relates only to the number of houses in an area that are over band D. How can any sane Government allocate resources to the police service in such a way?

My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) made an important intervention about the resilience and legitimacy of policing, which undeniably is being undermined by cuts. They have left communities feeling that there is no point in reporting crimes, because they do not believe that the report will be acted on or that the police will be able to respond.

My hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) is a constant fighter for our police. In her usual impassioned way, she spoke about response
times and said that people are giving up on reporting. Entire communities feel abandoned, which has led some areas of the country to turn to vigilante responses, because they feel that the only way to deal with crime is to deal with it themselves. She gave some shocking statistics, such as the fact that West Yorkshire has experienced a 227% increase in violent crime in the past six years, which is the highest increase in the country. That is truly shocking. Yet again, West Yorkshire receives one of the lowest funding settlements. How can that be right?

My hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen explicitly asked the Minister to guarantee the pension costs for police and fire services after 2019-20. The Home Office barely covered them for 2019-20 in this year’s funding settlement, and police and fire services across the country still have no guarantee beyond 2020. I would be grateful if she could respond to that point.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) made important points about the potential consequences of a no-deal Brexit and the demand being placed on our police services in preparing for them—not just the potential consequences of coming out of systems such as the Schengen Information System II or the European criminal records information system, or the potential impact of withdrawing from or playing a lesser role in Europol, but the potential for widespread civil unrest and for officers to be deployed to ports that they are not currently asked to police.

The lack of resilience in our police force to deal with unpredictable and large-scale disruption was highlighted when police were deployed all over the country to cover the visit of President Trump last year. If there had been a terrorist attack, a spike or even a murder during that time in any area covered by a police force that had deployed significant numbers of officers in mutual aid requests, it would have shown how stretched to breaking point our police services are.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made important points about the demand on the police and fire services. We had a debate about the important role the police and fire services play in prevention, and how the cuts have reduced our emergency services to nothing more than responsive or reactive services that turn up only when the absolute worst has happened. Again, that not only means that we are storing up problems for the future and failing to prevent crimes and fires from happening in the first place, but undermines the legitimacy of our emergency services and erodes the ability to police by consent, because that vital neighbourhood policing model has been eroded.

All hon. Members have rightly paid tribute to the police and firefighters in our emergency services, who we rely on in times of need. The Government’s twin failure to invest in the police and fire services must represent one of the most chilling consequences of a decade of Tory rule. When the Government unpick the safety net and undermine the last resort—when they take such risks with public safety, as they have done—they must be held to account for the consequences of those fateful decisions.

In the aftermath of the financial crisis, no other major economy in Europe cut their police by proportionally more than we did—we are one of Europe’s leading nations when it comes to police cuts. The zeal with which the Conservative Government slashed our emergency services is unmatched. Our once proud police service, which was one of the best in the world, has been critically undermined by the party that once called itself the party of law and order. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) is absolutely right that different political choices can be made. We have seen the effect in Scotland of a Government making different political choices.

Despite an increase in the number of incidents that firefighters attend, funding for fire services has been cut by 15%. As the fire brigade says, one of the most important aspects of its work is to minimise risk and prevent fires in the first place. It is therefore staggering that, 19 months on from the tragedy at Grenfell Tower, there are still buildings in this country wrapped in Grenfell-style cladding, whose residents do not know whether their home is safe. There were 437 tower blocks with the same or similar cladding, and 370 have yet to be replaced. The Government must get their act together on that, and fast.

It is a matter of deep regret that, as the inquiry into Grenfell continues, phase 2 continues to be delayed. That is the phase in which answers will be sought from the building owners, the local authority and politicians—the very people who, as my hon. Friend the Member for Easington and Matt Wrack, the general secretary of the FBU, said, allowed public safety to be undermined. The one thing we know about the Grenfell fire is that the firefighters, in impossible, unimaginable conditions, showed bravery beyond what any of us could imagine. They put their lives at risk and risked their children and families growing up without them in order to save other families. In my mind—I am the granddaughter of a firefighter—and the mind of my party, they are absolute heroes. Those who are casting aspersions, as the disgraceful documentary did on Monday, long before the inquiry has concluded, should take a long, hard look in the mirror. Our firefighters and police have not let us down; they have been badly let down by the Government.

The consequences of the Government’s actions are stark: more than 21,000 officers, nearly 7,000 PCSOs and 17,000 police staff are gone, recorded violent crime and knife crime are at record levels, arrests have halved in a decade, and there are almost 2 million unsolved crimes. With that as a backdrop, it was almost unbelievable that the Government chose to bring forward the funding settlement last month. The reaction to it from police leaders across the country has been stark. The chief constable of West Midlands police has calculated that it will mean another real-terms cut. In North Yorkshire, the police and crime panel has rejected the imposition of another council tax increase. In Lincolnshire, the chief constable has been forced to make £3.2 million in savings this year as a direct result of the funding settlement. Despite asking local rate payers to pay the full whack of £24 a year, it is still cutting officers this year. People are paying more for a lesser service.

At the heart of the inequity in the funding settlement, which hits policing hard, is the fact that it is basing increased funding on the ability of an area to pay. It is basing operational improvement on the number of private houses in an area. Why was each force asked to put together a management statement? Why did the Policing Minister go around every force to assess the level of
demand and then apparently completely ignore it? Serious crime is expected to increase substantially in many forces, as are areas of protection for vulnerable people. That means big increases in demand due to cases involving missing persons, stalking, harassment, cyber-crime and managing sexual offenders. The challenge is massive and is expected only to increase. People will be in utter disbelief that, once again, the Government are causing the police to suffer a ninth consecutive year of real-terms cuts, once the Government-imposed pensions black hole is taken into account.

The Policing Minister promised that he would help forces manage the pensions black hole. He said:

“Every police and crime commissioner will have their Government grant funding protected in real terms”.—[Official Report, 13 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 432.]

I am afraid that was disingenuous at best, and demonstrably false at worst. Nationwide, there will be a cut in central Government funding in cash terms, never mind real terms. That investment will not be used to help meet the operational demands from cases involving missing persons, child sexual exploitation and serious crime; rather, every penny of it will be sunk on pension costs. The Government are giving with one hand and taking with the other. It is perverse, and it is creating a postcode lottery.

These arguments are well rehearsed; hon. Members have made them in this Chamber time and again. It appears that there are fundamental differences between the two sides of the House on how our police and fire services should be funded. I ask the Minister to justify this if she can. How can West Yorkshire, which has experienced a 227% rise in violence crime, receive just 13% of the money that it has lost since 2010, in comparison with Surrey, which has seen half that rise in violent crime but is receiving 36% of the money that it has lost since 2010? How can Durham, which has seen one of the largest increases in police recorded crime, receive just 13% of the money that it has lost since 2010? How can Wiltshire, which has seen one of the lowest increases in police recorded crime, receive just 13% of the money that it has lost since 2010? Can she confirm that this Government have abandoned the principle of resource equalisation and that, instead, their philosophy is that only those areas that can pay deserve to be kept safe?

10.35 am

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): It is of course a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing the debate and giving me what I think is my first opportunity to listen to a debate on police funding. I am conscious that, as the spokesman for the Opposition, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), said, many hon. Members have been in this Chamber and the main Chamber discussing this issue on a number of occasions.

I start, as the hon. Member for Easington did, by paying tribute to our police officers and fire and rescue officers across the country for their tireless work in keeping our communities safe. He mentioned in particular Durham’s police and crime commissioner and chief constable. I was reminded the night before last, when an officer was threatened in Romsey in my constituency—an individual has now been charged with possession of a knife in a public place—that such incidents occur across the country and even in the most unexpected locations. Although I cannot comment further on the incident in my constituency, it reminds us that every day and every night police officers face significant threats and dangers. I am unable to add to the comments that hon. Members have made about the “Dispatches” programme on Grenfell. The inquiry is ongoing, and I am conscious that I am not the fire Minister. I am not going to say anything that might in any way affect that inquiry, but it is absolutely right to point out that on that night it was our brave public servants who yet again were rushing towards a dangerous situation, not away from it. They were, as the shadow Minister said, putting their lives on the line, and we owe them an enormous debt of gratitude.

I will seek to respond to the comments made by hon. Members in this debate; I think it important to reflect on some of the comments that I have heard and respond to them. Of course, the recent funding settlement represents the biggest rise in police funding since 2010. There is not just more for our local police forces, but more for counter-terrorism and dealing with serious and organised crime.

It is important that the public have trust in the police and that we work as a Government to ensure that the funding is in place to enable the police to carry out their important roles. The ability to raise council tax, which a number of hon. Members mentioned, is taken into account when calculating the amount of Government grant, and the same is true for business rates. Areas that raise low levels of council tax receive higher levels of settlement funding. Reductions in Government funding do not necessarily show the full picture. Council tax has been a significant part of fire funding—on average, 60% of funding for fire and rescue authorities.

We heard interesting comments from—he is now back in his place—the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who talked in particular about preventive work and the impact on loneliness. The hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) is here, and of course her predecessor in the House was Jo Cox. I mean no disrespect to the hon. Lady when I say that we still miss Jo every single day, and perhaps more at the current time than previously. She did an enormous amount of work on loneliness, and I am delighted that we now have a loneliness Minister, who has made much of the issue of loneliness among the elderly, the legacy of Jo Cox and the importance of our continuing to emphasise it.

I am struck by the fact that our fire and rescue services up and down the country often do important preventive work with elderly people who live alone in their own home. The importance of checking smoke alarms was mentioned, and Hampshire fire and rescue service has provided me with—I do not know the technical term for the device; I refer to it as “the prodder”. It is a long stick with a hand on the end of it, so people do not have to stand on a chair to test their smoke alarm, which is a crucial way of avoiding accidents. It might seem a simple, straightforward and slightly odd-looking device, but it serves two purposes—not only is it easier for people to check their smoke alarms, but they are not putting themselves at risk by climbing up to do so.

When my daughter was in year 2 at school, she went on a visit to a fire station in Salisbury—the shadow Minister mentioned Wiltshire fire and rescue service—and she was given a fridge magnet. That might seem a
simple thing for a year 2 child, but she is now 20 and that magnet is still on my fridge. Every month I have to write in the date with a specially provided pen that indicates when I last checked my smoke alarm. Such important preventive work continues across the country, and many fire and rescue services continue to do such work. Our fire station in Romsey has an annual “check the safety of your electric blanket day”. Perhaps we are particularly soft southerners who need electric blankets, but they can pose a significant fire risk and it is important that they have an annual health check.

Part of our fire reform programme is about establishing the independent fire inspectorate service, and although only the first 14 service reports are complete, questions have been raised about the extent of the focus on fire prevention, which is part of the inspection process. In a speech in January my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service raised with fire leaders the importance of preventive work.

The changing nature of rescues was rightly mentioned by the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). Although traditional fires are fortunately decreasing, rescues of different types are on the increase—for instance, the crucial work done by fire and rescue services on our motorway network, or in more recent years the work with flooding and assisting those who have been flooded out of their homes. As well as saving individuals, those services also do important pumping work.

The changing nature of crime has also had an impact on our police forces. I was struck by the comments of the hon. Member for Batley and Spen about child sexual exploitation, and sadly we have seen increasing reports of that horrific crime. There has been not only an increase in crime, but an increase in the confidence of victims to come forward. These are incredibly complex, difficult and sensitive crimes to investigate; we must ensure that our police can respond whenever such occurrences are reported and that they have the resource and ability to investigate. I am routinely struck by the increase in cyber-crime, which a few short years ago was not even heard of. Criminals are incredibly resourceful and adaptive and they will find opportunities wherever they exist. Our police forces must be equally adaptive and able to take important preventive action.

I am sure that hon. Members will comment on what I say about funding, but the House has approved total funding for policing of up to £14 billion for 2019-20, which is an increase of up to £970 million compared with 2018-19, including the precept pensions funding and national investment. We reviewed the changing and increasingly complex demands on police; the settlement will enable them to meet the financial pressures they face next year, while continuing to recruit and fill capability gaps, such as the shortage of detectives. If all police and crime commissioners use their precept flexibility in full next year, there will be a total increase in police funding of £2 billion between 2015-16 and 2019-20.

We are increasing Government grants to police and crime commissioners by £161 million, with every police and crime commissioner’s grant funding protected in real terms. They are being empowered to raise council tax contributions for local policing by up to £2 a month per household, which could raise up to £509 million. Elected PCCs have made the case for raising local tax from their electorate, and they are accountable for delivering a return on that public investment. That additional funding of up to £970 million will enable the police to manage their additional pension costs of approximately £330 million next year, while continuing to address capability issues. The police need to use that money well, which means every force saving money on procurement and back-office functions so that it can be invested in the frontline. The Home Secretary has been clear: he will prioritise police funding at the spending review.

Turning to the issue of fire funding, fire and rescue services have the resources they need to do their work and keep people safe. Fire and rescue authorities will receive about £2.3 billion in 2019-20. Single purpose fire and rescue authorities will receive an increase in core spending power of 2.3% in cash terms in 2019-20 and an overall increase of 0.3% from 2015-16 to 2019-20. We are also providing additional pension funding in 2019-20 to fire and rescue authorities to ensure that their additional pension cost is limited to £10 million. Financial reserves held by single purpose fire and rescue authorities increased by more than 80% to £545 million between 31 March 2011 and 31 March 2018, which is equivalent to 42% of their core spending power. The sector has made efficiencies, but as by the first tranche of inspections by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services indicated, it can do more to work smarter and to reduce costs. It is important that fire services continues to receive the right level of resources, which is why we work closely with the services to build the evidence to develop a clear proposition for the spending review.

Some issues were raised about neighbourhood policing. I want to put on the record how much we value neighbourhood policing and the vital role that officers play in keeping the public safe. That is why we are enabling police and crime commissioners to increase their cash funding next year, and many PCCs have set out their plans in that regard.

On top of protecting 2019-20 general grant funding in real terms for all police forces in England and Wales, the Government have increased funding for counter-terrorism policing and to combat serious and organised crime.

There was mention of the impact of Brexit, which is not only topical but of real concern. The Government have provided additional funding to Kent police for the particular pressures that they might face with Operations Stack and Brock in their area. Rightly, as part of Brexit planning, we look closely at police resourcing and the additional pressures that might be put on the police. In common with every other Minister, I am working hard to ensure that we get a deal—that is the best way forward for the country—but it is important to plan for all eventualities, and the Government are doing that carefully.

In conclusion, the Government support policing and fire and rescue services to do their vital work by providing the resources that they need. I pay extreme tribute to their very hard work.

Alison Thewliss: Before the Minister finishes, I was paying attention to what she was saying but she does not seem to have picked up the issue of VAT in Scotland. Will she give us our money back?
**Caroline Nokes**: That is a question that the hon. Lady might best put to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service when she next gets the chance. I am conscious that Home Office questions are on Monday, and I am sure that she will take that opportunity. With that, I will say no more.

10.48 am

**Grahame Morris**: I thank all Members who participated: my hon. Friends the Members for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) and for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), and the hon. Members for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell). I also thank the respective Front Benchers, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), and the SNP spokesperson, the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), who made extremely powerful and incontrovertible contributions.

Funding cuts are putting public safety at risk. Injuries, deaths, tragedies such as Grenfell, crime and community safety are all compromised when the emergency services are not properly funded. This Government have made political choices—there were alternatives—and they have made the wrong ones. I want to know when we will return to a level of funding that will restore the numbers of police and firefighters that our communities need. The consequences of cuts can be seen in communities in every constituency in the country. I urge the Minister to reverse the cuts and to provide the funding needed properly to support our emergency services.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved.**

That this House has considered the effect of reductions in funding of police, fire and rescue services.

10.50 am

**Sitting suspended.**

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**UK Deep Sea Mining Industry**

11 am

**Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the UK deep sea mining industry.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I am grateful to the Minister for coming to respond to the debate. Just a little political push from her over the next few weeks might be all that our fledgling deep sea mining industry needs to succeed and to catch up with our international competitors.

The debate is timely and important. This year, we reached a critical point in the development of the UK’s deep sea mining exploration and exploitation capabilities. A small push from the Minister’s Department could mean that the UK leads the world in the environmentally responsible exploitation of vital and valuable seabed minerals. We could secure supplies of the raw materials we need for a host of new technologies, including rechargeable batteries, as well as large tax revenues. On the other hand, neglect or bureaucratic inertia could mean that we squander a once-in-a-generation opportunity and lose out to more agile, forward-thinking countries, such as China and Belgium.

I will briefly outline why Parliament legislated for deep sea mining in 2014, what has changed since, the progress of other nations, the enormous benefit that the industry could bring to the UK and, finally, some things that the Government could do to help it to move forward. Deep sea mining has come a long way since I took the Deep Sea Mining Act 2014 through Parliament. Back then, we were concerned with making our law technically consistent with the United Nations convention on the law of the sea—UNCLOS. Actual exploration of the deep Pacific seabed, let alone exploitation, was uneconomic, yet Parliament recognised, even then, the enormous economic and strategic potential of deep sea minerals, as well as the environmental risks. We recognised that the UK must be at the forefront of setting global standards for operating in these untouched and sensitive marine environments.

In the last five years, technology has moved apace. Every year, seabed minerals, such as cobalt, grow in importance. Demand for seabed minerals, for example, for wind turbines, solar panels and rechargeable batteries, means that the economics of mining have totally changed. The commercial opportunity, and the environmental risks, are there right now. Other countries are well aware of that and have made good progress in building their industrial bases to seize this opportunity. The International Seabed Authority says it wants to complete its regulations on mineral exploitation by 2020, so that we are no longer concerned with the legal technicalities and theoretical licences.

This is happening right now, and the UK is falling behind. China, South Korea, Japan and the European Union all have well-developed deep seabed mining industries. China was just a side player five years ago but has since made great strides. It now sponsors four deep seabed mining contractors and has just applied for its fifth exploitation contract. That is more than any other country. During those same five years, the UK has sacrificed an enviable strong position.
That is crucial for industry, because it reduces the risk and allows it to plan long-term investments. Secondly, we have high environmental standards and diplomatic leadership on maritime issues. Thirdly, we have a leading and central position in the offshore oil, gas and mining industries. Fourthly, we have a world-leading financial services industry. Last but not least, we have an international reputation for innovation and engineering, and a track record of solving complex engineering challenges.

That really matters, because there are strong concerns about the security of our national supplies of cobalt and rare earth minerals. China currently has a stranglehold on the supply of those minerals. The UK is totally dependent on imports for its supply of cobalt. Cobalt is required for rechargeable batteries for electric cars, which we all know will become incredibly important very soon. Both cobalt and rare earth minerals are present in polymetallic nodules. The International Seabed Authority has granted two licences sponsored by the UK, which cover an area of 133,000 sq km—roughly the size of England. The current best estimate is that that area of seabed contains almost 1 billion tonnes of minerals. Nickel and manganese are vital for the so-called decarbonisation agenda—for electric vehicle batteries and wind farms. Unless we secure the supply of those minerals, we will have no hope of meeting the terms of the Paris agreement.

I believe that after just one deep sea mining operation, we would go from being a 100% net importer of cobalt, nickel, manganese and other rare earth minerals to being a net exporter. Deep sea mining would allow the UK to secure its own supply of those important minerals, yet through inaction we are letting China and other countries beat us to it. The frustrating thing is that the UK has incredible, world-class expertise in battery science. Two years ago, this Conservative Government launched the Faraday battery challenge, yet apparently we have not realised that if we want to be world leaders in rechargeable battery technology, we need raw materials readily available. It is an energy security issue and an environmental issue, and it requires large investment.

It is important that the UK becomes a leader in this new international industry so we can ensure that high environmental standards are followed. That is especially important since the USA has not ratified UNCLOS and therefore cannot participate. We can lead not just by example, but by the commitment to the environment as we have. There is a kind of gold rush under way and, just as with other gold rushes, proper environmental scrutiny could easily be neglected.

The International Seabed Authority has issued 26 permits for mineral prospecting, of which two are British sponsored. The total area covered by the ISA is now a massive 1.2 million sq km. The seabed is largely an unknown world, and new species are being discovered that exist nowhere else. It is one of the last untouched ecosystems in the world. It is vital that the UK leads the world in setting standards for exploration and exploitation without ruining yet another ecosystem.

The two UK-sponsored licences were granted to UK Seabed Resources Ltd, a wholly owned subsidiary of Lockheed Martin. Lockheed Martin drew up charts of the Pacific seabed nodules in the 1970s, when exploitation was completely impossible. Those charts, which we might think of as almost literal treasure maps, now form the basis for exploration and eventual exploitation. Needless to say, both those phases require significant investment.

Belgium benefited from EU funding. Unfortunately, the UK chose not to apply for that funding. Until now, Lockheed Martin has self-funded, but in view of the ongoing regulatory uncertainty, it has been obliged to slow its rate of investment.

It is worth noting that the other projects in the Clarion Clipperton belt have received financial investment from their respective Governments, which is a major reason why those projects are well advanced. Exploitation of those licences needs to reach the pre-feasibility stage by 2022. That will require fairly significant funding if we are not to fall behind further. Government funding would be highly desirable so that at least the UK is not disadvantaged compared with competitor nations.

It is also worth noting that the funding will not go to UK Seabed Resources, but to universities and other regional partners, which will conduct research once funded. The total investment for a seabed mining project is very significant, perhaps as much as £3 billion. That is about the same amount as for a similarly sized onshore mine, but the level of technical risk is higher, which is why some element of Government involvement is normally required.

The funding would not be required all at once, but in several smaller chunks. Furthermore, only about £400 million is required to reach the “bankable” feasibility phase. At that point, traditional debt finance becomes readily available. It is an energy security issue and an environmental issue, and it requires large investment.

Deep sea mining also presents a huge commercial and tax revenue opportunity. When David Cameron was Prime Minister, he called it a £40-billion opportunity, which was almost certainly an over-cautious estimate. If we invest in the industry and make it a commercial success, there will be benefits to the Exchequer in the form of tax and royalties. On current estimates, the Treasury will take £5.7 billion in tax plus £360 million in royalties over 25 years. That is about £2.8 billion at net present value, given the Treasury’s 3.5% discount rate. I have tried to show that the new deep sea mining industry in the UK would create huge commercial, environmental and tax revenue benefits for the country.

The Government could do some simple things that would have a huge impact on the prospects of the fledgling industry. I ask the Minister, in general, what steps the Government have taken, or plan to take, to pioneer the new and essential industry. Specifically, how does she plan for us to catch up with competitor nations and get to where we should be—in front and leading the way in engineering and environmental standards? What assessment have the Government made of the risks of the economic reliance of the UK and our
allies on imports of minerals such as cobalt, nickel and manganese? What is our strategy to reduce or mitigate those risks? Does deep sea mining form part of that strategy? It is now more than four years since the 2014 Act received Royal Assent, but we do not have a strategy or regulatory framework.

To turn to academia and business, how can the Government support a research programme? Can we put one together through the industrial strategy challenge fund to make UK academia and small and medium-sized enterprises world leaders in deep sea mining? If so, how? As I have tried to stress, the benefits would be rapid and large, in the form of mineral supply autonomy and environmental leadership.

Can we explore avenues for international co-operation, for example with the USA, which has not signed up to UNCLOS? Other nations look to us to show leadership in the field. As we look forwards, beyond Brexit, I sincerely hope that we will rise to the challenge.

I have tried to show how the world has changed since the Deep Sea Mining Act passed into law. I have explained what an enormous opportunity we have before us. We can ensure our mineral security and our environmental leadership in this new industry, and gain massive benefits for our industry and the Exchequer.

We are falling behind, and for want of a tiny push by the Government we are in danger of squandering a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I therefore urge my right hon. Friend the Minister to look for ways to drive this fledgling industry forward. This is a new, challenging task of the kind that the UK is uniquely capable of delivering. Our capable officials need political will, determination and leadership if they are to make progress. I therefore urge the Minister to work across Government to ensure the UK does not miss this generational opportunity to pioneer a new and essential industry, which potentially has huge benefits to the environment, our energy security and the Exchequer.

11.15 am

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, and to respond to the debate secured by my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), who set out her extremely interesting and detailed knowledge of the current situation and the opportunities presented by new technology. She is known to many of us as one who has an almost unique perspective on these matters. Matters maritime and mining run in the blood of Cornish men and women, and she has certainly demonstrated that she is capable of talking with great knowledge about both.

My hon. Friend was responsible for delivering the Deep Sea Mining Act 2014. A private Member’s Bill, it did some incredible work by amending the Deep Sea Mining (Temporary Provisions) Act 1981, which provided only powers to license applications in relation to polymetallic nodules—a rather niche area. Through her work, the 2014 Act extended that to apply to all minerals found in the deep sea, opening the way, as she rightly said, for the UK to sponsor applications to the ISA for all minerals in the future. It was striking that that Bill received cross-party support in Parliament. During its passage, my hon. Friend expressed the need to carry out economic exploitation in a sensitive environment with the utmost environmental concern and caution.

My hon. Friend also managed to steer the Marine Navigation Act 2013 successfully through Parliament. Again, that is a tribute to her commitment and her technical’s longstanding involvement with the sea. She does a brilliant job of representing her constituency. She pointed out how we need to move forward in maritime matters and mining.

I will start by giving some context. The UN convention on the law of the sea established that the mineral resources of the seabed are the common heritage of mankind and sit beyond national jurisdiction. As my hon. Friend well knows, reserves of terrestrial minerals are dwindling. There is a rich opportunity out there, which she rightly points out is critical to many of the new technology challenges that we are facing and rising to meet. That has led to pressure on the International Seabed Authority to set out a framework for mining the seabed. There have been 29 exploration contracts so far issued from 20 countries to bodies including state-owned enterprises and commercial organisations with a state sponsor, which has been the model that the UK has put forward. I believe that it is approaching two licences so far.

The Deep Sea Mining Act, of which my hon. Friend was the proud steward, enabled the domestic deep sea mining sector to be regulated in a modern way that has due regard for the economic opportunity and aims to prevent damage to the environment. The ISA is now working towards agreeing a mining code that contains technical, financial and environmental provisions by a deadline of March 2020. The UK delegation has been leading at those negotiations.

Given your geographic interest, Mr Hosie, you will know that we have a very profound heritage in the extraction of hydrocarbons and minerals, both onshore and offshore, with the proudest tradition of high environmental standards. We will continue that commitment to transparency, science and evidence-based policy making and environmentally sound regulation to ensure the effective protection of deep sea habitats and biodiversity. The mining code, once it is in place, will enable the ISA to issue so-called “exploitation contracts”—that sounds awful. We should perhaps find a new name for them—perhaps “exploration contracts”. Of course, the UK would need to consider whether these regulations need to be supplemented with additional domestic provisions in line with the Deep Sea Mining Act 2014.

The UK has sponsored two 15-year exploration contracts on behalf of UK Seabed Resources Ltd, which is a subsidiary of Lockheed Martin, the US corporation. The contracts are for polymetallic nodules in the Clarion Clipperton fracture zone of the Pacific. As my hon. Friend has pointed out, these activities and others may allow us to access minerals and metals and achieve safety and security of supply of those materials in the long term.

Also, my hon. Friend rightly joined up the dots to point out that when we talk about our clean growth strategy and the opportunity for the UK’s economy to benefit from investment in low-carbon technologies, such as battery storage and solar energy, they require some of the self-same minerals and metals that are there to be found. If we do it carefully, this work will help us to protect our environment and meet our climate change obligations while creating hundreds of thousands of jobs.
A MOG—machinery of government—change is a very boring term. This whole area has been subject to cross-Government movement recently, and indeed it has been moved to my Department, and I am now the responsible Minister. My hon. Friend will know that I take the issues in my portfolio seriously and try to get things done. Hopefully, it will give her some comfort to know that this subject now sits within the clean growth area of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, having been transferred recently from my excellent colleagues in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I mean no disrespect to them when I say that it may now form part of a more coherent view of the economic potential before us. As the responsible Minister for oil and gas in the UK as well, both onshore and offshore, I assure my hon. Friend that the proud commitment to high regulatory standards will of course apply. In BEIS, we are leading a cross-Whitehall working group to co-ordinate Government activities ahead of the finalisation of the mining code.

My hon. Friend asked me about some of the activities that the Department is undertaking. We have undertaken to analyse the potential economic value to the UK of the first two licences granted in the Clarion Clipperton fracture zone. That work should be completed this summer, ahead of the UN’s ratifications of the regulations this year. We have also made a commitment to the ISA that UK Seabed Resources Ltd, our commercial operator, will undertake a plan of work throughout the period of exploration, reporting back in a very detailed way on all of its exploration activities, including the considerable amount of work it has done on environmental exploration, so that we have a good dataset upon which to base any future regulations.

My hon. Friend will know that this is a long-term investment, so it is quite right to do the turf-rolling now and indeed to make sure that the regulations are fit for purpose. I think it is accepted that commercial-scale deep sea mining operations will probably not begin before the middle of the next decade. Having said that, she pointed out that other countries are starting to move faster than previous estimates suggested, so it may well be the case that these challenges are pulled forward and that we will need to move a little faster. However, understanding the environmental implications of mining some of the deepest seabed or seafloor regions, particularly in the Pacific, is a monumental task.

I pay tribute to the superb piece of work put together by the cross-party Environmental Audit Committee, which is chaired by the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh). The Committee did a really superb piece of work in looking at many of these issues, including sustainable seas in general, but very specifically the opportunities and challenges of deep sea mining. That work is really well worth a read.

My hon. Friend asked me essentially what the Government’s plans are. The decision on whether or not our UK-sponsored contractor will go into production will be a commercial one, but we will need to consider—on the evidence—whether we are prepared to sponsor an exploitation licence and on what conditions such a licence should be applied.

I have mentioned before my hon. Friend’s very coherent and eloquent statements about the economic importance of deep sea mining; I suspect that she might have had something to do with persuading the former Prime Minister of the value of this activity, and she quoted some superb statistics to show why it should be examined with great interest. I emphasise, however, that we need to understand our obligations to protect the seabed as well as the water columns and the currents, because the last thing we want to do is to start treating the seas as an infinitely exploitable resource.

We will continue to ensure that effective and binding environmental standards have been adopted and adhered to before we grant any commercial exploration licences, and that the mining activity is part of a well-evidenced environmental plan. My hon. Friend knows that we will continue to use our significant global influence to promote at global level the adoption of our transparent, science-based and environmentally sound approach, and a set of principles that are based on precautionary work, rather than responsiveness.

I am pleased to report that the UK is taking a leading role in international negotiations. As my hon. Friend knows, perhaps better than many others, we have a wide range of deep sea scientific and engineering expertise, and the opportunity to onshore many of the jobs and much of the intellectual property from that is profound. The important question we need to ask ourselves is how to balance exploration in environmentally sensitive areas against the potential risks. I am confident that we can do that; we have done it in many other environments around the world and can continue to do so.

My hon. Friend asked some specific questions about funding for the proposals and about research and development investment. I am pleased to say that UK Research and Innovation would be open to accepting a deep sea mining proposal in a future industrial strategy challenge fund competition. She also asked whether we have made an economic assessment of the dependency on rare earth minerals. I do not know, but I will find out and write to her. I am sure that someone has done that analysis and I am keen to see it.

I offer my heartfelt thanks to my hon. Friend for securing such an interesting and timely debate. As the Minister responsible, I am pleased to tell her that I am committed to taking the issue forward, taking into account the opportunity and what we can do to ensure the work is done in the most environmentally sustainable manner.

Question put and agreed to.

11.27 am

Sitting suspended.
Recall of Women to Prisons

[Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the recall of women to prisons.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. During my time as MP for Swansea East, I have engaged with many women in the criminal justice system by visiting prisons up and down the country and mother-and-baby units in them, and it has always been made clear to me that the reasons why women are in the criminal justice system are multifaceted and complex.

The Prison Reform Trust's report “Broken Trust: The rising numbers of women recalled to prison” illustrates the fact that the reasons for that are also multifaceted and complex, and the number of women being recalled is rising quickly. Of course, it is right that women are recalled to prison in some instances—if they are at imminent risk of causing harm to the public or of reoffending, for example—but this debate is not about that; it is about the huge increase in the number of women being recalled to prison and whether that increase is helping women to break their cycle of criminality and creating safer communities and opportunities for the women themselves.

The “Broken Trust” report points to a number of reasons for the steep rise in the number of women being recalled. I will cover those in more detail later. I think that it will be useful now to make clear the current situation regarding the recall of women to prison. An individual can be recalled to prison if they have served a sentence of more than a day. A probation officer will normally initiate the recall. About 3,800 women are currently in prison in the UK—we have one of the highest female imprisonment rates in western Europe. The female offender strategy highlights that about nine in 10 women in prison on remand or serving 12 months or less pose a low or medium risk of serious harm to the public. In the year ending September 2018, there were 1,846 recalls of women to custody while on licence.

One significant contributory factor in the steep rise in the number of women being recalled is rising quickly. Of course, it is right that women are recalled to prison in some instances—if they are at imminent risk of causing harm to the public or of reoffending, for example—but this debate is not about that; it is about the huge increase in the number of women being recalled to prison and whether that increase is helping women to break their cycle of criminality and creating safer communities and opportunities for the women themselves.

The “Broken Trust” report points to a number of reasons for the steep rise in the number of women being recalled. I will cover those in more detail later. I think that it will be useful now to make clear the current situation regarding the recall of women to prison. An individual can be recalled to prison if they have served a sentence of more than a day. A probation officer will normally initiate the recall. About 3,800 women are currently in prison in the UK—we have one of the highest female imprisonment rates in western Europe. The female offender strategy highlights that about nine in 10 women in prison on remand or serving 12 months or less pose a low or medium risk of serious harm to the public. In the year ending September 2018, there were 1,846 recalls of women to custody while on licence.

One significant contributory factor in the steep rise in the number of women being recalled is the Offender Rehabilitation Act 2014—affectively known as the ORA. It introduced a provision whereby everyone sentenced to a day or more in prison would be supervised by probation services on their release. Before the ORA, those sentenced to a term of imprisonment of less than 12 months were not supervised on release. In 2017, 72% of women sentenced to custody were sentenced to six months or less, compared with 56% of men. That demonstrates how the change brought in under the ORA disproportionately affects women. As the “Broken Trust” report states, on page 3:

“From the moment it was announced that post-custody supervision would be extended to people sentenced to less than 12 months, two things were obvious: this would result in the imprisonment of large numbers of people; and the impact would fall disproportionately upon women.”

Reforms that are meant to be supporting individuals are having the opposite effect and keeping them trapped in cycles of the criminal justice system, rather than allowing them to take positive steps in their lives. That is a direct result of the changes brought about under a previous Secretary of State for Justice. Previously, anyone sentenced to a short period in prison served their term and on release that was it. Putting in place a year of additional supervision—in addition to the prison term—with recalls if people fail to comply, is largely responsible for the huge increase in recalls.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate and on the powerful case she is making. Does she agree that the lack of housing available to women after leaving prison contributes to their vulnerability?

Carolyn Harris: I most certainly do, and I am just coming on to housing, so I thank my hon. Friend for his astute intervention.

The report from the Prison Reform Trust makes it clear that there is a lack of services available to women on leaving prison, which contributes to their being recalled. A lack of secure housing for women when they leave prison is a significant factor leading to the recall of female offenders. Of the 24 women interviewed for the report, 22 said that they required help with housing on leaving prison.

If women leave prison and do not successfully secure somewhere to live, they are more likely to be recalled to prison. The female offender strategy highlights that from April to December 2017, 39% of women allocated to community rehabilitation companies and the national probation service were released into unsettled accommodation, with 18% released into homelessness. That not only puts women in a dangerous and vulnerable situation, but directly leads to them being recalled to prison. “Broken Trust” cites the example of a female offender released from prison without secure accommodation to go to, only to be recalled for breach of an antisocial behaviour order because she slept in a park. She was then released homeless for a second time.

How do we expect women to take positive steps to rebuild their lives after leaving prison if they are not given adequate support services such as secure housing? The relentless cuts made to local authorities by the Tory Government have resulted in a dangerous lack of housing for such women. Furthermore, without a secure home, women will find it more difficult to engage successfully with employment opportunities or maintain a healthy lifestyle. With 60% of female prisoners not having a home to go to on release, we know that is a real issue when they leave prison.

Data secured under a freedom of information request made by The Guardian demonstrates that between October 2016 and June 2018 there was a 25-fold increase in rough sleeping in England and Wales among those who have served sentences of less than six months. It is an absolute scandal that women are released homeless anyway, but even if a woman is found secure accommodation, it must be suitable and provide a safe environment in order to help her rebuild her life. Otherwise, female prisoners are likely to return to the potentially toxic settings that led to their arrest in the first place, such as environments with negative influences, including being surrounded by drugs and alcohol, which often leads them to a breach of their licence conditions and recall to prison. Using drugs is one of the six categories that the National Probation Service data present for recall of an individual to prison. In the “Broken Trust” report, an interviewee shared her experience of becoming homeless once she was released from prison:
“By the third night of my release, I was street homeless. My using got worse, I fell off my script even quicker this time. My life was just chaotic. I was doing whatever I could to survive.”

Earlier this week, the Secretary of State for Justice said in a speech that, as part of the Government’s rough sleeping agenda, they will invest £6.4 million in a pilot scheme to help individuals released from three prisons—Bristol, Leeds and Pentonville—into settled accommodation. However, I want to know what the Government will invest specifically in accommodation suitable for female offenders and their complex needs. If support services in the community to help such women find secure housing continue to be inadequate, women will be less likely to be able to break the cycle of criminality.

Another contributing factor to the high recall rate among female offenders is the high rate of complex needs and problems. Women under community supervision and in custody with an assessment are twice as likely as the men to have a mental health need, and 60% of women in the criminal justice system have experienced domestic violence. “Broken Trust” found that a third of those interviewed needed help with mental health, drug misuse and domestic violence. The report also showed that the relevant probation officers were unable to support them adequately, given their complex needs. Female offenders are much more likely to be vulnerable, so we need to ensure that there are services to assist them in rebuilding their lives, not only to help them but to make the community they live in safer.

Another issue that distinctly affects women recalled to prison is that female offenders are more likely than male offenders to be carers for children or other family relatives, and their recall therefore affects not only them, but their dependants. The length of time for which a woman can be recalled to prison can be just a number of days, but it will cause huge disruption to her and her family. Therefore, what provision is being made to ensure that the lives of those family members and dependants are not thrown into chaos?

The female offender strategy is clear that short custodial sentences are less effective in reducing offending than community orders, and that early intervention is key to reducing the number of women entering the criminal justice system.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. There are too many women in prison, but does she welcome the Ministry of Justice’s move to reduce the number of shorter sentences available? To retain people’s faith in the criminal justice system, early release should be a privilege earned rather than a right automatically given. It is a two-way street.

Carolyn Harris: I am coming on to that statement now.

I welcome the proposal by the Secretary of State to abolish short sentences, which would make a huge difference to women offenders, who are overwhelmingly sentenced to short periods in prison. I urge him to follow through on the proposal as soon as possible in order to create a more effective criminal justice system. Furthermore, there must be a greater focus on funding for early intervention services, which have been cut considerably because of constrained budgets.

It is a stark statistic that 60% of female offenders supervised in the community or in custody who have an assessment have experienced domestic abuse. It illustrates how important it is to make domestic abuse services available to women, either to stop them offending in the first place or to help them not to reoffend. In the Women’s Aid annual survey, those who run domestic abuse services reported that the largest challenge was funding for and sustainability of their services. That will obviously impact on their ability to help vulnerable women. The same report shows that one in five of all referrals to a refuge were declined owing to a lack of space. If the Government are serious about supporting women, there needs to be greater funding for those life-saving services so that refuges do not have to turn away referred women and so that they can be supported before they enter the criminal justice system.

Another report from the Prison Reform Trust showed strong links between women’s experience of domestic and sexual abuse and coercive relationships and their offending. Better funding for domestic abuse services and ensuring that the provision is consistent and joined up across the UK would provide stronger provision for women who are victims of domestic violence, moving them away from entering the criminal justice system.

Given the reports by Women’s Aid and the Prison Reform Trust of the patchy delivery of domestic abuse services for women, will the Government commit to adequate funding of early intervention services, particularly domestic abuse services, so that women are either supported not to enter the criminal justice system in the first place, or not forced to re-enter it? Early intervention services across the UK would have a positive impact on reducing the number of women in prison, thus reducing the recall rate. For example, last year the Welsh Labour Government—I am very proud that I am Welsh—introduced a framework to support positive changes for those at risk of offending, which will have a renewed focus on early intervention services to help stop individuals entering the criminal justice system and to keep people from offending. I can supply a copy of the relevant documents to the Minister should he wish to see them.

Lastly, one of the most important factors that would prevent a woman being recalled to prison is a successful working relationship between the probation officer and the individual. I want to put on the record my admiration for Napo, the union, which I know tries really hard to support the staff, as I know the staff try to support their clients. The report by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of probation into recall described the impact that a negative relationship with a probation officer can have on recall:

“Those who have a poor relationship with their responsible officer are more likely to breach, and the fairness of enforcement decisions may affect this relationship.”

The report also showed that there was limited access to appropriate, women-only provision for female offenders. Furthermore, as I said, it is widely understood that female offenders have more complex needs than male offenders. Probation officers must therefore be properly trained in how to support offenders with complex needs, and must be able to signpost them to services that have resources to help them. That will be possible only if there are adequate support services with a joined-up
approach to supporting the service user as soon as they leave prison. That, combined with positive relationships between probation officers and female offenders, would see the number of women recalled to prison fall.

Given the shocking rise in the number of women being recalled, we have to ask whether this is the most effective way of helping women to break their cycles in the criminal justice system. I welcome the Secretary of State’s comments earlier this week, which echoed the view that it is particularly disruptive to women’s lives for them to be recalled to prison, given that they are likely to have dependants. I want assurances that his proposal to abolish short sentences will be introduced as soon as possible. The female offender strategy is clear that women in prison are complex. The support services need to be well resourced so that, when they are released from prison, they have all the help they need to prevent them being recalled. Responses from the Prison Reform Trust show that a lack of secure and safe housing for women once they are released from prison directly leads to their recall. It is an absolute scandal that we are releasing women who are likely to be victims of domestic violence and have complex needs on to the streets.

There must be more funding for local authorities so that the right support services are in place and we can offer a joined-up approach to support women. Furthermore, there must be more of a focus on early intervention, which will steer women away from entering the criminal justice system in the first place or stop them being recalled. Services must be better resourced so that there is no longer patchy delivery for women across the UK.

Finally, a successful relationship between probation officers and service users is key. Probation officers must have adequate training to help female offenders, who have a variety of complex needs. I want assurances from the Government that they will provide that desperately needed funding. That would demonstrate that they are truly committed to the aims of the female offender strategy. They must properly resource the relevant bodies so that women are supported to break their negative cycles in the criminal justice system.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate can last until 4 pm. I am obliged to call the Front-Bench spokespeople no later than 3.27 pm, and the guideline limits are 10 minutes for the SNP, 10 minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister, and then Carolyn Harris will have three minutes at the end to sum up the debate. Until 3.27 pm, it is Back-Bench time. There is a galaxy of talent waiting to be called. We will start with Wera Hobhouse.

2.48 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on securing this important debate.

Recall of female offenders has gone up by 131%—an odd number, but dramatic—in the last 12 months, since the Government introduced mandatory post-custody supervision. The reasons for the dramatic increase in recall rates are complex, but there is a common theme: community support services, which were once a lifeline for recently released offenders, are no longer available.

Women offenders are far more likely to be convicted for non-violent offences, which means that the majority—72%—are serving sentences of less than a year. Despite the Secretary of State’s acknowledgement that short-term sentences do more harm than good, they are still being issued in their thousands. The startling figures illustrating the failure of the new post-custody system highlight the inability to join up vision and implementation. Too often, women who end up in prison come from a background of systematic violence. Current research suggests that 57% of female offenders have suffered domestic violence, and 53% have experienced emotional, physical or sexual abuse during childhood. Furthermore, research suggests that prison is not an effective deterrent for women, with 61% of those who are inside for less than 12 months going on to be reconvicted within a year of being released.

Recent recall numbers illustrate how our system fails female offenders with backgrounds of trauma. In the Prison Reform Trust’s new research paper, 19 out of 24 women interviewed said that they received no support from support officers to address the complicated and interlocking issues they faced once they had left prison, including the struggle to find accommodation, as we have heard; to identify services to combat drug or alcohol abuse; to reunite with children who were taken into care following their mother’s incarceration; or to take other steps needed to rebuild a life.

The ideas behind the extension of post-custody mandatory supervision were sound. They suggested that the Government were interested in rehabilitating offenders, not just punishing them. However, those good intentions have been smashed to pieces by the consistent and deliberate refusal to fund the services that support people transitioning from prison. Many must wait weeks after release to start receiving benefits, and universal credit claims must be made online, which is not possible for most inmates.

According to Her Majesty’s inspectorate of probation, one in seven short-term inmates leaves prison without knowing where they will sleep that night, and only a small proportion find suitable accommodation on the day of release. One woman recalled to prison and interviewed for the Prison Reform Trust said: “Being a homeless woman is so degrading. They will send me out to no housing. It’s a big, ‘recall me’ sign on my forehead. I have no excitement about going out. I got no place to go and an ex-partner who is very violent.”

It is a bleak situation, made worse when we remember that two thirds of female offenders have dependent children and one third are single parents. Some 95% of the children of single mothers who are sentenced to prison time are taken into care, further perpetuating the cycle of neglect and trauma.

Although female prisoners make up less than 5% of our prison population, the dramatic increase in recall rates proves that our system is failing them. There is something clearly wrong with a system in which female offenders who have served short sentences for non-violent crimes end up being recalled for many more months because they have missed appointments with their support officers due to homelessness.

Centrally, that issue cannot be separated from the continued use of short-term sentences, which are destructive and do not work as a deterrent to crime. There needs to be a presumption against their use and an increased use
of non-custodial punishments. If we as a society believe that our prisons should rehabilitate as well as deter, we must properly invest in support services. Leaving our ex-inmates to fend for themselves while imposing strict regulations on them greatly increases their chances of reoffending. Testimonies suggest that some ex-inmates deliberately reoffend to be readmitted to the system, where, crucially, they have a roof over their head. That cannot go on. We can solve it, but it needs political will and the right financial support.

2.53 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on securing this important debate. With our prisons stretched to breaking point, it is important to have a mature and considered debate about penal reform in the country. From statements made by the Prisons Minister, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), and most recently the Secretary of State for Justice about the futility of short prison sentences, it seems that on this occasion the Department wants to engage in a fruitful discussion.

Two weeks ago, I had a debate on short sentences where I called for a ban on prison sentences under six months. I believe that short prison sentences should also be at the forefront of today’s debate on the recall of women to prisons and that is where I will focus my remarks.

Short prison sentences are an ineffective way to address the root causes of criminality, as they cause disruption to people’s lives, as my hon. Friend so eloquently described. They are too short to help inmates to rehabilitate and serve only as a punishment, which leads to increased reoffending rates. It is important to have this debate because, more often than not, women in particular are caught in a cycle of short prison sentences; and reoffending or recall despite their being convicted of non-violent offences adds to the chaos and uncertainty in their lives.

The 2017 “Guide to Proven Reoffending Statistics” found that both men and women who receive short-term prison sentences were considerably more likely to reoffend in the future. Most women receive prison sentences of less than 12 months and are more likely to reoffend than a male who has a comparable sentence. Short sentences place greater strain on an already overcrowded prison system and do not provide inmates with adequate time to become involved with rehabilitative programmes. Not only are our prisons facing staff shortages, but cuts to prison services mean that inmates cannot access important services that prevent reoffending.

The Government can and must do a better job of bolstering social programmes that aim to reduce the rate of offending among individuals who commit petty crimes. Many who do so feel they have no other option, especially if they are affected by addiction or mental health issues.

It seems to me as well that we cannot talk about this issue without talking about the Prison Service and the real problems that people within it are facing. Over the weekend, a constituent of mine appeared in The Daily Mirror and talked about leaving the Prison Service after only five days, simply because the training was not good enough; he felt intimidated and scared. How can Prison Service staff deliver rehabilitative programmes if they are leaving the service because of lack of training and because of intimidation and threats of violence? The Government need to address that.

It seems that the justice system is blind to the impacts of short prison sentences on mothers and their families. Women are more likely to be a child’s primary carer, so these sentences have greater impact on their lives than on the lives of their male counterparts, who do not often have that experience of being primary carers. Children of women in prison find themselves struggling when it comes to basic necessities, including housing, health and education. In many respects, many of them have failed in the system before they have begun.

The Government can do something about that. According to a Prison Reform Trust report in 2018, every year over 17,000 children in England and Wales experience their mothers going to prison. Just imagine that: suddenly the primary carer in their life is gone; suddenly there is discord and disharmony in their life. Their education will be disrupted, whether they like it or not. The children of prisoners are more likely to be ill. Often, they are displaced from their home and their lives are uprooted. They have to enter new schools, with the stigma of knowing that their classmates know that they are the children of prisoners. They may be separated from their siblings. All of this sounds almost like a Charles Dickens story, but it is happening in this country in the 21st century, and it is something that all of us, as Members of Parliament, should be concerned about and should do something about.

According to the 2018 female offender strategy document, roughly 60% of female inmates are victims of domestic violence. As a result of horrific abuse, these women find themselves in dire situations, with a limited pool of supportive resources. They may be coerced into a life of crime by an abusive partner, or they may turn to petty crime to provide for themselves and their children. If somebody is particularly shoplifting for food, it seems common sense to me to ask why. Are they hungry? Rather than make them criminals, is it not far better to offer them hope?

Women with abusive partners often find themselves cut off financially and unable to keep up with a variety of payments, ranging from bills to council tax payments. Women sent to prison due to non-payment become entrenched in a cycle of instability. How are they supposed to create a better life for themselves and become proactive citizens if they are imprisoned and thrown back into the exact same situation that led them into trouble? If someone is falling behind on their bills, such as council tax, the wrong place to send them is to prison, because that just criminalises them.

I firmly believe that women do not belong in prison, especially if they have not been convicted of a violent crime. They need support and should be placed in a facility that is at least designed to rehabilitate and educate them. These women require a safe space where they can learn valuable skills that allow them to live independently, thus removing their need to return to crime; instead they can become useful citizens to society.

The probation service does not facilitate support for recently released inmates. Indeed, as the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) said, since reforms such as
theOffender Rehabilitation Act 2014 were made, recall numbers for women have risen by 131%—a shocking statistic when compared with the 22% recall rate among men. Something is wrong when for so many women the system is not working. Between 2017 and 2018 more than 1,700 women were recalled to prisons, which is roughly half the female prison population.

In addition to attempting to restabilise and normalise their lives, these women have the added stress of maintaining contact with their probation officers. The constant threat of being recalled creates a lack of trust between offenders and probation officers, and trust is key to ensuring that those women do not return to a life of crime. Offenders have no one to turn to if they face having to slip back into petty crime in order to survive. If a probation officer is on the lookout only for a perceived risk of offending, it seems unlikely that they will be someone to whom an at-risk offender can turn for help.

Two weeks ago, I called on the Government to abolish the practice of administering short sentences to non-violent offenders, and instead to focus their efforts on establishing rehabilitation services, residential centres, and the use of community service orders. For women who are also themselves victims, short stints in prison only cause more problems in often chaotic lives. I am impressed that the Secretary of State acknowledged that short prison sentences do not work. I urge him and other Justice Ministers to put their words into action, to abolish short prison sentences for women, and to create a system that benefits and builds trust in the whole of society.

3.2 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is an honour to speak in this debate under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on her excellent opening remarks.

When the Government brought forward their proposals for transforming rehabilitation about five years ago, I was critical of the plan to separate probation into the National Probation Service for the management of high-risk offenders, and community rehabilitation companies for the management of low and medium-risk offenders. I was critical of the contracts given to community rehabilitation companies, because I did not see the justification for breaking up a successful probation service in that way. I feel that my concerns have been proven right, as shown by the failure of the Working Links contract the other day.

At the time of those proposals, I supported the introduction of post-release supervision for those released from short custodial sentences, and I thought that the Government’s proposed model of through-the-gate support would help to resettle offenders in the community, help women in particular to manage complex and chaotic lifestyles, and contribute to a reduction in reoffending. In the light of experience, I now think I was wrong to believe that that model of supervision for those released from short custodial sentences would be beneficial, and that is partly because of the way in which such support has been delivered.

There has been a lack of genuine through-the-gate provision—to the gate, possibly, and possibly provision after someone is released, but it is not the genuinely, seamless, through-the-gate offer we were promised. As we heard, that was compounded by the chronic lack of support services in the community. That resulted in deeply perverse consequences for women who are massively and disproportionately affected, as shown by Ministry of Justice figures for the proportion of women subject to recall. It is particularly concerning that, in contrast to the experience of men, women released from short custodial sentences are likely to be recalled to prison. The figures flip round the other way for male offenders subject to recall, who have usually received longer custodial sentences.

In addition to the design failures and the problems with the lack of community support, we know that there are real problems with the community rehabilitation companies that provide the specialist support that women subject to post-release supervision should receive. I have heard reports of women receiving phone contact only from their supervising officer, a lack of women-specific support and programmes designed specifically to meet the needs of women, and chopping and changing supervisory staff, which makes it difficult to build that relationship of trust between supervisor and the woman being supervised. It is also clear that most women appear to be recalled not because of further offending, but because of a failure to comply with the terms of their supervision. According to a written answer I obtained from the Minister for Prisons on 5 November last year, only a quarter of women are subjected to recall as a result of committing a new offence.

As we have heard, there are particular reasons why women might find it more difficult to comply with the terms of an order. They may have childcare obligations. If it is difficult to get childcare, they might find it hard to get to a supervision meeting. There is the difficulty of managing complex household needs, the lack of access to stable housing, difficulties accessing transport—women who are less likely to have access to a car may have particular problems with that—and women’s greater range of vulnerabilities. That experience of going in and out—of short periods of custodial sentence and then of being recalled, perhaps on more than one or two occasions—represents a cat and mouse situation that does nothing to help stabilise chaotic lives and support those women away from a path of reoffending. Nor does it help the Lord Chancellor in his rightful ambition to reduce the prison population.

It is clearly time to radically rethink the policy. The Minister will be familiar with the whole-system approach we have adopted in Greater Manchester over a number of years. I firmly believe it offers a much better model of support for women. I am pleased that many of the concepts we have used in the whole-system approach have found their way into the female offender strategy, but I urge the Minister to be much more vigorous and determined in effecting those principles. He should take a “what works” approach to policy and abandon one that clearly does not work.

First, the Minister needs to consider what genuine, through-the-gate support will look like. How can that be designed and resourced for the move from prison into the community? Secondly, we need a commitment to proper investment in community provision. In particular, that should be in sustainable and adequate funding for women’s centres. Thirdly, as we have heard, we need better processes for information and decision making...
by supervising officers when considering recall, and that means better staff training. We urgently need legislation for a presumption against short custodial sentences coupled with building greater confidence in community alternatives, as we are seeing in Scotland. We know that short custodial sentences are particularly damaging to women and their families. They also fuel the recall problem.

Fundamentally, I ask the Minister to join me in rethinking the policy of active post-release supervision that we signed up to in 2015. It is not clear that it is doing any good, but it is quite clear that it is doing quite a lot of harm. I am persuaded that it was not the right policy to adopt. I hope the Minister will be prepared to reconsider it.

3.9 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on securing this important and timely debate on an issue that does not receive nearly enough attention or the attention it deserves. I have long been deeply passionate about reform of our prisons system, particularly in Wales, and I have campaigned on the issue since first being elected to the House.

I preface my remarks by making it clear that nothing in what I am about to say undermines my fundamental belief that any person of any gender should be subject to the same consequence under the law if they commit a criminal act. My comments are not about watering down justice, but about looking at improving outcomes for the benefit of everyone: the offender, the victim and society more broadly. Central to that is a sincere belief that it is foolish and wrong-headed to continue with the “lock up, throw away the key and crime will reduce” attitude to criminal justice, which simply does not work.

Research published last year by the Prison Reform Trust showed that the number of women recalled to prison has more than doubled since the Offender Rehabilitation Act 2014 was passed. That demonstrates that the Government’s rehabilitation strategy is not working. The problem is worsening at an alarming rate. The message is clear: the 2014 reforms to recall must be reversed at the earliest opportunity.

There are no women’s prisons in Wales. I have said before—the Minister knows this—that I would never advocate for one to be opened, but that in itself makes things doubly challenging for women prisoners in Wales, who are uprooted and taken far from their communities, often after committing relatively minor offences. It is for that core reason that we should urgently address short sentences—their damaging impact demands our attention. I believe strongly that getting rid of those sentences will be evicted. She will have no money to secure a new property, and little or no means of travelling back to the community she lived in and any fragile support systems she may have access to. It is no exaggeration to say that the prospect of going back to prison eventually becomes appealing compared with the terrifying alternative. In its recent report, “Broken Trust”, the Prison Reform Trust stressed that the lack of housing post-release needs to be addressed urgently.

The huge distances women are placed from home can have a terrible impact on their ties with family and friends, with bonds often shattered during their imprisonment. Children, loved ones and friends face long, expensive travel and short visiting hours, and the ensuing relationship breakdowns can easily escalate into the breakdown of formal support networks. Too often, women are left in truly hopeless situations, facing the most appalling isolation. The 2014 recall reforms mean that if a woman in a vulnerable situation commits even the most cursory transgression, she can find herself back inside, and back in the well-known cycle of institutionalisation, with all the perils that poses.

Our criminal justice system should, at its core, be about reducing crime, yet the situation as it stands is pure smoke and mirrors, with the supposed short-term win of detaining women for short periods masking the actual impact. The longer-term cost of that—namely, an ever greater number of potential victims of crime—is not only counterproductive but, frankly, shameful.

The 1997 Labour Government were famously elected on a promise to be “tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime”. Although that Government’s record in this area was sometimes chequered, they had at their heart an understanding that the causes matter as much as the crime. We must address the elephant in the room: why do women commit relatively low-level crimes in the first place? Lots of Members have referred to that, and I make no apology for reinforcing what they said. A six-month prison sentence will not help a woman who was forced to steal to feed her children. A short time inside will not help a woman who has a long-standing addiction to drugs, alcohol or gambling. Being put behind bars will not help a victim of domestic violence who lashed out in response to years of oppression. We need to look again at the causes of crime rather than having ridiculous blanket sentencing regimes.

In 2017, the charity Women in Prison found that 84% of women entering prison had committed a non-violent offence. It is precisely for such crimes that women
receive relatively short custodial sentences. In the same year, the Ministry of Justice itself found that shorter sentences were “consistently associated with higher rates of proven reoffending”.

I am pleased that this week the Justice Secretary mooted a move away from short prison sentences but, as with everything with this Government, we will have to wait to see whether the reality stacks up to the rhetoric—perhaps the Minister will give us some assurances about that. But—it remains a but—if what the Secretary of State said this week is true, we might at last have a real opportunity to start turning around the damaging trend among female offenders.

The Prison Reform Trust’s “Broken Trust” report is a call for action that the Government would do well to heed. I support the trust’s call for the establishment of multi-agency outreach services. The complex nature of crime and its causes demand such a multifaceted approach. We cannot blindly continue to treat prisoners as a tick-box exercise, assuming that they will integrate well into society after they leave the prison gates. Far greater attention therefore needs to be paid to work with local authorities and the devolved Administrations.

There are pressures on housing throughout the country, but until we integrate housing services with the prison system properly, we will never sever the link between women leaving prison and elevated levels of homelessness. Too many of us see the blooming numbers of rough sleepers on our streets, and that is just the tip of the iceberg. However unpalatable some might find this, women leaving prison have just as much right to council services and support networks as any other residents in need.

Justice Ministers must work much more closely with the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that those prisoners who are eligible to claim welfare support when they are released have the right information well in advance of the day they walk out of the prison door. Given the plethora of issues with universal credit, I do not hold out much hope of the Government taking action on that—they have consistently let down the most vulnerable in society.

Time does not allow me to discuss all the Prison Reform Trust’s recommendations, but if the Minister will do one thing today, please let it be this: agree to implement each of the report’s recommendations or, if he feels that any cannot be implemented, to explain why not. Some recommendations will cost, but failing to act will have far more significant financial implications for the Treasury long into the future.

In truth, although it might not always be popular to advocate increasing funding to help released prisoners to reintegrate, it remains the right thing to do. Nine years of Tory austerity make the case even more strongly. The fact remains that investing in rehabilitation and specific support services for women who are in prison and, crucially, who are leaving prison, will reap economic rewards as well as social dividends. Reducing the rate of recall to prisons will, in the long run, slacken the strain on our Prison Service, which is reaching breaking point in many places—in some places, it is broken already.

We have heard from the Prisons Minister that he is prepared to resign should he fail on prison safety, which is a major problem. However, it is just as important for the Government to get to grips with the issues outlined today, not least because if prisoner numbers constantly increase in the long term—increase as the Government fail to get a grip—prison safety will only worsen.

My remarks are not a counsel of despair, and the Justice Secretary’s comments this week give rise to some cautious optimism, albeit after significant pressure from the Opposition. Warm words, however, mean nothing if they do not translate into meaningful action. I hope that my message to the Minister is clear: this week’s welcome news cannot simply be about giving the Government a good news day amid the Brexit chaos; the Justice Secretary’s words must translate into real investment in support services and rehabilitation, with a nuanced focus on women and their individual needs. Only then will we truly begin to start reversing this deeply worrying trend.

3.19 pm
Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on securing this incredibly important debate. As a member of the Select Committee on Justice, I have visited a number of prisons, including Downview women’s prison. On every visit to a prison, I hear stories about punitive, arbitrary and often completely avoidable recalls to prison.

Recall appears to operate more harshly in relation to prisoners serving indeterminate sentences for public protection. Although IPP prisoners account for a small proportion of the female prison population, it is important to mention them in this debate. I acknowledge that there are prisoners who pose a genuine risk to society, but the opinion is widely held that IPP sentences are not the way to deal with them. Such sentences have now been abolished and the Parole Board has a priority target of reducing the IPP prison population significantly. Of the 440 women recalled to prison in the three months between July and September last year, four were IPP prisoners. Although there are substantially fewer women on IPP tariffs compared with men—I think there are 46 women on IPP tariffs—between 2010 and 2017, 40 women were recalled due to breach of their licence conditions.

At present, an IPP prisoner’s licence can be terminated only after the they have completed 10 years in the community following their release—an extremely lengthy period. I have significant concerns that the terms by which the licence and recall system operates are set at too low a threshold, with the result that prisoners flip between detention, parole boards and release on licence once more. I urge the Minister to look at the issue of removing the last of the IPP prisoners in the prison estate with some urgency.

In the year ending September 2018, there were 1,846 recalls of women to custody while on licence—a significant number, considering that the current female prison population stands at 3,809. The first set of data since the implementation of the Offender Rehabilitation Act shows that more than three times as many women were recalled to prison since the ORA changes.

As has been said extensively in this debate and others, short sentences have huge implications for women and their families. A recent report by the Prison Reform
Trust show that 17,000 children in England and Wales are affected by maternal imprisonment. Those 17,000 children might have to be cared for by somebody else, be rehomed, leave school or drop out of education altogether. Sometimes recall is necessary, but a decent justice system is also a humane one. In the current system, licence conditions are often seen as a tick-box exercise, rather than a more holistic approach being taken. It is clear that it is not working. Those 17,000 children did not commit crimes, but recall can have a catastrophic impact on them.

We must not forget that, although women can be perpetrators of crime, more often than not they are victims of crime. The Prison Reform Trust data shows that, shockingly, nearly 60% of women prisoners have previously experienced domestic abuse. If we are to solve the issue of female prisoners, this debate must go well beyond recall and prisons, and delve into the wider issue of women in society. As the Prison Reform Trust succinctly states:

“women can become trapped in a vicious cycle of victimisation and criminal activity. Their situation is often worsened by poverty, substance dependency or poor mental health.”

Given that women are often the principal carers for children, it is obvious that the impact of recall and imprisonment is far-reaching.

Some 84% of sentenced women entering prison committed a non-violent offence. When I spoke to the women in Downview prison, I was struck by the fact that none of them was the ringleader in the crimes they had committed. All the women I spoke to were ancillary to the crimes and all the ringleaders were men, so the situation needs looking at holistically. At present, women are more likely than men to be given a prison sentence for a first offence, with one in four women sentenced to less than one month and 55% to less than three months. Women are also more likely to complete their community order or licence period supervision successfully, so there is a huge question about whether the vast majority of women prisoners ought to be in prison in the first place.

The 2007 Corston report called for a distinct, radically different, visibly led, strategic, proportionate, holistic and women-centred approach. Much of the report focused on community support, sentencing reform and alternatives to custody. I fear that, 12 years on, progress on women prisoners has fallen far short of Baroness Corston’s original recommendations. The Secretary of State for Justice has signalled an intention to move away from the model of short sentences, but I want to see a greater number of men in the prison estate. I therefore welcome the message from the Ministry of Justice in relation to short custodial sentences, but I want to see legislation on that issue and more robust community sentencing, so that those who are passing sentences have confidence that no non-custodial sentence—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I have been generous with the hon. Lady, but she is a minute over her time and I have to call the first Front-Bench speaker: Stuart C. McDonald for the SNP.

3.28 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on a typically thoughtful and persuasive case. Indeed, I think that every Member in the galaxy of talent here today has contributed thoughtful and persuasive arguments.

I agree absolutely that hon. Members are right to express serious concern about the huge increase in the number of women recalled to prison. As we heard, the number has tripled since the introduction of the Offender Rehabilitation Act 2014. That is truly an extraordinary and shocking development. I understand that the latest statistics show that there are 29 recalls to custody for every 100 releases of women offenders on licence. I am not usually one to make comparisons with other jurisdictions, but I will do that today. Although there are difficulties in making direct comparisons, it is interesting to note that in the 10 years to 2015—the figure is not completely up to date—the comparable figure for Scotland is between four and five recalls per 100 releases—one sixth or less of what we are now seeing in England and Wales. We have to ask why that is.

The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) made a very honest speech about how she had been persuaded at the time of the 2014 reforms, but now, in the light of the numbers, she has reconsidered. I think that if I had been in this place in 2014, I would have been attracted by what the Government were apparently proposing, but the numbers in themselves do seem to make a case for repeal of the 2014 provisions relating to supervision after sentences of less than 12 months. At the very least, there must be a significant review of how those provisions are operating. Even during the passage of the Bill, prison reform organisations warned that many people serving short prison sentences have complex and multiple needs, which increase the likelihood of breach of licence conditions. As the hon. Member for Swansea East said, the Prison Reform Trust is among those who have concluded that that is exactly what has happened, referring to a “coercive response” that was brought about by the Act creating a distrust between offenders and responsible officers. The trust stated:

“The threat of recall accentuates the fault lines in relationships that are already fragile, inhibiting women from confiding in their responsible officers about difficulties that, eventually, lead to their recall.”
Accordingly, two fifths of recalls for women are apparently down to a failure to keep contact with a responsible officer, which contrasts with the figure provided by the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston that suggests that only a quarter of recalls relate to further offending behaviour.

For the second and final time I will compare this system with how things operate in Scotland. In Scotland there is no automatic requirement to supervise those released after a sentence of less than four years, although judges can impose a supervised release order in certain cases where that would be necessary for public protection. That might provide a better balance and focus than the system introduced in England by the 2014 Act, and a lack of compulsory supervision does not mean that support is not available.

Chris Evans: I know this is a strange thing to say, but most people who reoffend were released on a Friday when there is no access to services such as housing, social security or whatever. What is the experience in Scotland? Has anyone considered the days on which prisoners are released?

Stuart C. McDonald: I must confess that I do not have the answer to that today, although the issue has been flagged up to me previously. I will look at it again to see whether a policy is in place to try to address that issue, as it seems significant.

There is broad agreement that women who are released on licence desperately need more support, and we are finding that supervising officers are simply not able to resolve or help with problems of unstable housing, debt, abusive relationships, mental health and the various other issues that hon. Members have highlighted. In fairness, the Government recognised that in their most recent female offender strategy, published last summer, which notes that a “lack of access to supportive community services can contribute to recall to custody” and that the aforementioned problem of not keeping in touch with supervising officers was driven by a lack of safe accommodation, as well as substance misuse and other issues.

Few Members present would not agree that residential support in the community that provides holistic support to turn lives around is far preferable to prison recall. The Government’s strategy document gives various examples of successful residential support options, including the marvellous Turning Point 281 centre in Glasgow. Such places are not soft options; they are a serious challenge to help women turn their lives around and address the root causes of their being on the wrong side of the law, whether that is substance abuse, adult or childhood trauma, financial problems or debt, mental health issues, or domestic abuse. As hon. Members pointed out, we need a coherent, comprehensive and joined-up network of services, and that requires resourcing a whole-system approach with sustainable funding, such as that described by the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston.

My most important point—here I agree with everyone who has spoken in the debate so far—is that short-term prison sentences of less than a year are, to all intents and purposes, pointless. As the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston said, the Scottish Government are moving to a presumption against sentences of under 12 months, which hopefully will lead to a significant reduction in the number of women receiving custodial sentences. I also welcome and support the positive moves made by the UK Government. Short sentences do not allow time or space to address the root causes of offending behaviour, and as hon. Members have said, they often exacerbate existing problems, breaking up families and social networks and disrupting employment and housing.

Reform could make a significant difference and help far more women to turn their lives around than locking them up and making things worse. I encourage and support the Government in that endeavour. Again I congratulate the hon. Member for Swansea East on securing this debate. She is right in what she has argued for today, and I very much hope that the Government have listened.

3.34 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to follow so many strong and passionate contributions. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for securing this important debate. She is a passionate advocate of supporting women in prisons and vulnerable women more generally.

The “Broken Trust” report found that the number of women recalled to prison has more than doubled since the end of 2014. Equally shocking is the fact that 40% of recalls were due not to breaking conditions or reoffending, but to losing contact with the offender manager—a point made by several Members today. It is not right. It is heavy-handed, disproportionate and in no one’s interests but those of the probation providers.

The conditions for recall were set out by the National Offender Management Service, now Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service, which put forward a test by which recall decisions must be judged. The test operates on a scale, with “threat to the public” at the top, but the test is clearly not being adhered to. Recalls should be for public safety alone, either to protect members of the public or to prevent imminent offending. Instead, it has become a box-ticking exercise for private probation companies more interested in profits and contracts.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I wanted to attend this debate, Mr Hollobone, but I had to be in the Chamber for a statutory instrument and could not be in two places at one time—although, I do try to do that sometimes. Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that the Prison Service must answer the question as to why the use of recall of women continues to increase when they are far less likely to commit serious offences? Why is the trend not slowing down as it did for men? That poses a question for the Minister, who must consider how the resettling process is carried out. Can it be improved and regulated better? Clearly it can.

Imran Hussain: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. That point has been made by various Members today and the questions have been posed. I will continue to explore further some of the concerns he raises.

Because of the bureaucratic approach, probation companies are not respected or trusted by the women they should work with. Instead of seeing the complex
needs that women face, probation companies look past them and see them as risks, so that homelessness, joblessness, poverty and childcare are not needs to be met, but risks. It is outrageous, particularly when years of austerity have resulted in closed independent support networks and therapy groups in the community and left probation as the only means of assistance. The probation companies see the women not as vulnerable but as potential reoffenders, whereas others would see them as women who needs help, and they issue them with recall orders, sending them back to prison, even though they have done nothing wrong.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East, I want to cite real examples. One woman slept rough for two weeks before signing for a flat in a new area. She contacted the probation service to say that she had settled in but that she had not heard from them and did not know whether to attend the old or the new office, the address of which she did not know. She was instead told that there was a warrant out for her arrest and then returned to prison for 14 days. That directly affected her settling into the new area and delayed her social services assessment. As if that was not bad enough, her paperwork stated that she had been recalled because “a period of stability in custody would benefit her”.

She had a house and she had stability, but still they recalled her. It is shocking.

Probation staff are under significant pressure, with ever-growing workloads and directions from above to fulfil quotas. The culture of privatised probation means that no thought is given to the rule to consider the specific needs of female offenders. We have seen that clearly with community rehabilitation companies believing that that need is fulfilled not by funding a network of women’s centres, but by making available a female offender manager. With pressure to be rid of female offenders so that CRCs no longer have to deal with their often complex needs, what is created is the disproportionate and excessive recall that many hon. Members have spoken about today.

The rapid rise of recall is worrying, and so too is the disproportionate and negative impact it has on women. By repeatedly dragging women back into our prison system, we are trapping them there. A woman might complete her short sentence, but if she does not get help she may be recalled, serve a couple more weeks and then get out. If she still cannot get help she may be recalled again, thus entering a cycle. My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East was absolutely right to describe it as being trapped in the criminal justice system.

The Ministry of Justice has abolished the use of IPP sentences—imprisonment for public protection—as my hon. Friend said, but it has created problems by locking in offenders with no prospect of getting out or ever actually being free or alive and kicking. Make no mistake: prisons are in a state of emergency. Women cannot access help in them, violence has exploded and safety has plummeted. Far too many women are killing themselves, and many more are committing acts of self-harm.

That leads me to the question of the suitability of prison and short sentences for women in the first place—an issue that many hon. Members have spoken about. The women we are locking up have committed crimes of poverty such as petty theft. More than 80% are inside for non-violent offences, and they are often troubled and vulnerable. More than half have mental health issues, have suffered child abuse or domestic abuse, or are struggling with substance misuse. There is no way we can deal with the problems that drive them to offend in the first place in prison because there are not enough experienced officers or the support services to aid them. We are clear that we must end super-short sentences, which cause too many women to be in prison for petty crimes. That is the only way women will be able to access the support they need to tackle their offending. That is the only way we can keep the public safe.

The Justice Secretary spoke about this matter on Monday, and the Prisons Minister has done so on previous occasions. I sincerely hope that we do not see another plan that comes to nothing in reality. We are having this debate because of a plan that has come to nothing. At the heart of the rise in recall is the Government’s failure to address female offenders’ needs and reduce their reoffending. If we do not have women offending or serving short sentences in prison, there will be no one to recall.

The Government set out a strategy and goals nine months ago, but they are yet to set out how they will achieve them. They offer warm words but no way forward. They propose residential women’s centres, which are a revised policy of the previous Labour Government, but they have promised only five and there are no signs of where they will be, how they will be funded and who they will be for. Will they house homeless women or those with housing? Will it be judges or the probation service and the Prison Service that send them there? Months later, we still do not have those answers. Perhaps the Minister will start by answering some of those pertinent questions about the female offender strategy.

Kate Green: Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be very helpful if the Minister could show us, either today or in due course, the evidence about the efficacy of residential women’s centres? An even better solution might be simply to support them in their own homes and in the community.

Imran Hussain: My hon. Friend makes a very pertinent point. She is right, and I hope the Minister will address that issue.

The Government also delivered a huge funding cut to the female offender strategy. They promised £50 million but reduced it to £5 million over two years. How they intend to achieve any of the strategy’s goals with such insufficient funding, particularly given that it is double-counted and has already been announced elsewhere, is a mystery. I do not want to alarm the Minister, but there is just one year of the strategy and £5 million left, with no sign of progress or more funding next year. Again, can the Minister provide answers about where the money for the five residential centres will come from? What progress has been made? Those are important questions that he and others have not yet answered.

The excessive use of recall for troubled women who have done nothing wrong after release, and whose recall is the result not of their failings but of those of CRCs, is an absolute scandal. The Government were warned that the Offender Rehabilitation Act 2014 would force women through needless hardship, but they neglected to listen.
As well as providing answers to the questions that have been asked, the Minister must use his response today to announce a review of the impact that the extension of recall for short sentences has had on women. He must set out plans that will ensure that people are detained only on the orders of judges, not probation officers. Ultimately, he must set out a coherent plan for ending short sentences, which trap many vulnerable and troubled female offenders in the criminal justice system, and for ending the involvement of private companies in our probation system, which has left it target-driven, not people-driven.

3.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, which I seem to be doing quite frequently. I congratulate the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who is a doughty champion for her constituency and for women. She has a clear, injective focus and, in the context of this debate, a clear purpose. Many genuine, heartfelt words have been spoken during the debate.

The hon. Member for Swansea East and for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) highlighted the best point at which to intervene is not when a woman is in the criminal justice system or in custody, but before getting to that point. It is better for such women, for society and for their children to maintain their family life, reducing the risk of their falling into offending. The hon. Member for Swansea East is right to draw attention to work in Wales in that respect. Within the Ministry of Justice, I am the Minister responsible for relationships with the devolved Administrations, and I look forward to working with Jane Hutt—I have met her already—on that and with the Welsh Government on the blueprints for female offenders, to ensure that we have a joined-up approach. It is also important that such support is gender and trauma informed and helps a woman as a person, rather than taking place in a silo. Hon. Members have touched on a number of factors that play a part in recall—multiple needs, housing, substance misuse, trauma—and on what the statistics say about why most women have been recalled to prison. The main reason comes down to the particular challenge of an offender being out of touch with the supervising officer.

In 57% of cases of women offenders being recalled, the offender had failed to keep in touch with the supervising officer; where the sentence was for less than 12 months, in 71% of cases of female offenders being recalled to custody, again the offender had failed to keep in touch with the supervising officer. I do not mean that they had simply missed an appointment with the probation officer and therefore needed to be punished. Indeed, the power to recall any offender to custody is not to be used punitively. Rather, the probation officer had felt that all reasonable efforts to trace an offender had been exhausted and that there was no other way to bring the offender back in touch.

We must recognise that in some circumstance there is something inherently risky in a situation in which a probation officer is unable to assess an offender’s risk because contact cannot be made. Recalling such an offender might sometimes be unavoidable. The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge highlighted

Although serious crimes will still justify a custodial sentence in some cases, we were clear in our vision, which was set out in the strategy, for fewer women to get custodial sentences, especially short custodial sentences, and for women to serve custodial sentences in better conditions when they are imposed. The evidence suggests that short sentences simply do not reduce the risk of reoffending among women who have such sentences imposed on them. Our aim must be to protect society from crime and to reduce the number of victims. We must therefore look at what reduces the risk of reoffending, future offences and victims. That runs through the heart of our strategy.

In the shorter term, as we deliver on that strategy and vision, we must ensure that we support women under supervision in the community, so that they are not recalled to prison, with all the disruption and distress that causes. Hon. Members have rightly highlighted the impact on family life—often a short sentence or recall is not enough to make a difference to the life of that woman or reduce the risk of her reoffending, but more often it is enough to make matters worse, causing huge disruption to accommodation, family life and home life. The hon. Members for Swansea East and for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) highlighted that the best point at which to intervene is not when a woman is in the criminal justice system or in custody, but before getting to that point. It is better for such women, for society and for their children to maintain their family life, reducing the risk of their falling into offending. The hon. Member for Swansea East is right to draw attention to work in Wales in that respect. Within the Ministry of Justice, I am the Minister responsible for relationships with the devolved Administrations, and I look forward to working with Jane Hutt—I have met her already—on that and with the Welsh Government on the blueprints for female offenders, to ensure that we have a joined-up approach. It is also important that such support is gender and trauma informed and helps a woman as a person, rather than taking place in a silo. Hon. Members have touched on a number of factors that play a part in recall—multiple needs, housing, substance misuse, trauma—and on what the statistics say about why most women have been recalled to prison. The main reason comes down to the particular challenge of an offender being out of touch with the supervising officer.

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[Edward Argar]

those female prisoners serving IPP sentences, and I will reflect carefully on the points she made. However, there can be a number of underlying reasons for an offender to be out of touch, particularly female offenders, given their complex needs, which in many cases form the context of their offending. The HMPPS guidance therefore encourages probation officers to identify alternatives to recall wherever possible, while upholding the integrity of the conditions imposed in the licence.

Earlier this month I had the privilege of visiting Brighton Women’s Centre, which I am pleased to say we recently awarded funding as part of the female offender strategy. That centre, like many across the country, is an excellent example of how women’s centres can play an important role in supporting female offenders to turn their life around. The proposals for five residential women’s centres, which Jean Corston would argue she originated back in 2007, have attracted a lot of attention and form an important part of our approach. Clearly, the foundation of the support services for women will always be in those women’s centres, working in and with the community.

I was grateful that the Brighton service users were willing—incredibly courageously—to share with me, a stranger, their stories and backgrounds. I was particularly interested to hear about the excellent work that Brighton Women’s Centre is doing in partnership with its local CRC. It has begun to use the centre as the location for probation appointments—a trusted space with trusted people—and it means that women who are already using the centre to address other needs can meet their probation officer in an environment that is already familiar to them.

I was told that this co-location model has already seen a 15 percentage point improvement in attendance for reporting appointments for female service users at the Brighton Women’s Centre premises between July 2018 and December 2018. That provides me with optimism. There are models out there that can help to drive down the number of women being recalled to prison because they do not keep in contact with their probation officer. Of course, they can also address other factors that might be problematic in those women’s lives.

We are also working hard to meet the needs of those women who are newly released on licence. CRCs introduced through-the-gate services in 2015 to support offenders in their transition from prison to the community, by providing resettlement support for accommodation—rightly highlighted by many Members today as a hugely important challenge for those leaving prison—and support with employment, finance, mental health and substance misuse.

We know that these services are not currently meeting the standard required. That is why we are investing an additional £22 million a year over the duration of the current CRC contracts, to improve the support given to all offenders on release from custody, with new and enhanced arrangements from April this year. They will include sustained support to find proper accommodation and employment on discharge from prison, and there will be approximately 500 more staff working with offenders after April 2019.

The important role that women-specific services, such as women’s centres, can play in helping a woman to turn around her life is clear. We have announced and awarded the £5 million of investment, alongside our female offender strategy, to support community provision. That is allocated to a range of organisations to support and enhance existing provision, and to develop new services.

In conclusion, we are clear that we wish to see fewer women being recalled to prison for breach of licence and fewer women serving short custodial sentences, and we believe that we are adopting the right approach to achieve that.

3.57 pm

Carolyn Harris: I thank everyone who has spoken today for their contributions, because we have had a really grown-up debate. If colleagues will indulge me and my emotions slightly, I spend a lot of time when I am in my constituency, and when I am visiting other parts of the country, meeting women who are in this situation, where they are in prison or have been recalled to prison. Unfortunately, because of the nature of their lives, they will not have heard what we have said today; they will not know that we are interested in them and care about them. All they feel is that the whole system is meant to set them up to fail. They do not really care that we are having these discussions; they are more interested in what we are going to do to help them. So I ask the Minister please to bear in mind that most of these women are victims, all of them have experienced trauma, and it is our moral duty to make sure we do not continue to set them up to fail. If I could hug them all better, I would, but unfortunately I have only one pair of arms. I thank everyone again for coming today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the recall of women to prisons.

3.58 pm

Sitting suspended.
Aberystwyth to Carmarthen Railway Reopening

[IAN PAISLEY in the Chair]

4 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I beg to move,

That this House has considered reopening the railway between Aberystwyth and Carmarthen.

Diolch yn fawr iawn, Mr Paisley. It is a pleasure and an honour to serve under your chairmanship.

The Carmarthen to Aberystwyth rail line fell victim to the infamous Beeching axe in 1965. Together with the closure of the Afon Wen to Bangor line, this closure has meant that for more than 50 years, people in Wales have had to cross the border into England to travel between the north and south of their country by rail.

That is precisely what happens when a country allows another country to determine its transport policy. To this day, decisions over rail infrastructure remain the preserve of Westminster, with Wales left to deal with the far-reaching financial and economic consequences. What appears reasonable on Whitehall spreadsheets and maps has far-reaching and always overlooked consequences in Welsh communities. The people of my country face the indignity of a dilapidated transport system, with no line linking the north and the south, while having to pay, via their taxes, for England to get an incalculably expensive vanity project that links the north and south of that country. At the same time, the British Government refuse to provide full Barnett consequentials for Wales.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I have full sympathy with the hon. Gentleman, having spent three happy years in Carmarthen, which, as he knows, is home to the successful University of Wales Trinity Saint David. How are we to attract students to that world-class institution when it is really difficult to travel between Carmarthen, Lampeter and Aberystwyth? I am told there is a great university in Aberystwyth, too, of which the hon. Gentleman may have attended at one point.

Jonathan Edwards: I was fully aware of the hon. Gentleman’s history in Carmarthen. He will realise the importance of a north-south link in the context of the west of our country. I will deal with his point about universities later, but he is absolutely right to highlight the importance of linking those higher education institutions to enable us to develop the economy of the west of our country.

Let us knock on the head the British Government’s fake truth about the Barnett consequentials from HS2. Unlike Northern Ireland and Scotland, Wales does not receive its full share of spending from HS2. In the latest statement of funding policy, which accompanied the last comprehensive spending review, Wales had a 0% rating for HS2 whereas Scotland and Northern Ireland had 100% ratings, showing once again that the British Government regard my country as nothing more than the west of England. This week, the boss of HS2 essentially said he has no idea how much the project will cost and no way of calculating it. Mr Paisley, I am sure you can appreciate our concern in Wales about the current arrangements.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): My hon. Friend mentioned north-south links and talked about HS2. There is actually a north-south rail link on the west coast of Wales, but if someone wants to go by train from Aberystwyth to Porthmadog to Llandudno Junction, a critical part of their journey will be on the delightful but steam-powered Ffestiniog railway.

Jonathan Edwards: I am grateful for that intervention by my party’s parliamentary leader. I have long had an ambition to go on that rail line, but that shows the lack of serious investment in Welsh rail infrastructure over the years.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the most peculiar things about the current devolution settlement for rail infrastructure is that the Secretary of State for Wales makes bold statements about looking to expand lines and open new lines but Wales, which has 11% of the track, has had only 2% of the infrastructure investment in the nine years for which the Conservative party has been in government? That simply is not sustainable if the British Government are going to continue to hold all the economic levers for railway infrastructure investment. They must invest—they must step up to the plate and do their job.

Jonathan Edwards: I have a very simple answer to that problem: devolve responsibility for rail infrastructure to Wales, as is the case in Scotland and Northern Ireland. That would give us the key consequentials.

I will return to that point, but I want to continue concentrating on HS2 for a minute. If we consider that the Infrastructure and Projects Authority estimates that it will cost £80 billion, Wales would get about £4 billion if we received our full share. This is not just about HS2, of course; there will also be HS3 and Crossrail 2. The former Mayor of London, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), calculated that London will need more than £1 trillion of investment to cope with the extra demand of planned investments by 2050.

Just to be clear, I am not calling for a high-speed line between north and south Wales. I am not even calling for an electrified line. What I am here to ask for is a line, so that the people of my country can travel by rail between the north and south of their own country without having to leave it.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): I am more sympathetic to the hon. Gentleman’s arguments on this subject than he might expect. He refers, not unreasonably, to the people of our country, but this does not affect just the people of our country; it affects the people of any country who happen to visit Wales and might bring wealth and investment to our aid. They do not have to be from Wales.

Jonathan Edwards: The hon. Gentleman is perfectly right. I will go on to talk about the development of the Borders line in Scotland, which has been an incredible success. I have no doubt that a north-south railway would be a huge attraction to the tourists who come to Wales and to that sector of our economy.
The facts on rail spending in Wales are sobering. According to the Welsh Government’s Minister for Economy and Transport, Ken Skates, Wales has 11% of the British state’s rail network, but has received only 1% of the investment—that is 11% of the network and 1% of the spend. There is no such thing as a Union dividend for Wales, and it is a record that shames every single Unionist politician based in my country—I do not mean to upset my near neighbours.

The economic consequences of that imbalance should send a shiver down anyone’s spine, let alone those who aspire to see the British state as a vaguely cohesive unit. Of the British state’s 12 nations and regions, only three are in surplus. It will not come as a surprise to anyone to hear that those areas are none other than London, the south-east of England, and the east of England. The wealth per head in inner London, based on the latest figures, is an incredible 614% of the European Union average. To put that into perspective, in the communities that I represent in the industrial valleys and the west of my country, that figure is only 68%. That disgraceful record is no accident. It is the direct result of British Government policy, based on a philosophy that the role of Westminster is to throw all the resources at London, with the nations and regions left to share out the crumbs. In Wales, we are no longer dealing with crumbs, but with the dust the crumbs leave behind.

The excellent researchers at the Wales Governance Centre have calculated that, had transport infrastructure in Wales kept pace with spending in London since 1999, an extra £5.6 billion would have been invested in Welsh transport. In such a case we would not be having this debate today, because the Carmarthen to Aberystwyth rail line would already have been built. Indeed, we would have not only that line, but the Swansea Bay metro, the Cardiff Bay metro, and full electrification on both north and south main lines. Imagine the economic productivity gains for Wales and the far-reaching consequences for the wellbeing and opportunities of my fellow countrymen and women if that were the case. Wales is relatively poor because Westminster decides to keep us poor.

The British state is broken beyond repair. Brexit was largely driven by those disgraceful imbalances, and the great tragedy of this moment in history is that Brexit will more than likely exacerbate those imbalances, rather than offer a remedy. Had the British state remained in the EU, communities in its poorest parts were likely to have received £13 billion in convergence funding in the next spending round—a 22% increase from the 2014-20 spending cycle, according to the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions. West Wales and the valleys is a convergence area and therefore a direct recipient of EU regional aid. Here we are almost three years after the referendum, and only a year from the end of the current European convergence period, and the British Government have yet to provide a single detail about their shared prosperity fund.

We all know that Wales is about to be done over once again, despite the clear promises that we would not lose a single penny—promises that were made by the Secretary of State for Transport. If Brexit Britannia is not to turn out to be a 21st-century Tartarus, there must be a major rethink of policy priority, with a long-term view of economic planning based on dealing with the gross geographical wealth inequalities within the British state. Central to that will be the need to ensure an equitable share of infrastructure investment.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. He makes a valid point about the need to reconnect our communities and bring about economic regeneration in the western part of Wales. Does he agree that other benefits will come with connecting Aberystwyth and Carmarthen, not least for our local health services, and particularly for individuals in Aberystwyth who find the trek down to Glangwili and Carmarthen by bus or car far too onerous?

Jonathan Edwards: My hon. Friend is right, and I congratulate him on his work since he was elected as the Member of Parliament for Ceredigion in pushing forward this whole project. He is absolutely right, and that is one of the benefits that I will mention later, because for health and other public services, having a spine rail line linking the two largest towns in the west of our country will be hugely beneficial.

Unless the British Government can be unhhooked from their obsession with high finance and London, the structural imbalances of the British state economy of low productivity, low wages, and high personal debt will continue unabated—indeed they will get worse. The economist Grace Blakeley writes forcefully in the New Statesman this week about the need for an economic green new deal. The Carmarthen to Aberystwyth line fits into that sort of stimulus to a T. It is not just about the rail line itself, but how it would act as a literal economic spine. It would provide a much-needed north-south economic focus, which is a far more natural focus for those of us living in the west of Wales, as opposed to the obsession with east-west links. The communities are ideal for any economic strategy based on environmental investment because of our abundance of natural resources.

Too often, the missing link is physical connectivity. The line would open up significant opportunities for bulk freight movement, linking the western ports of Holyhead, Fishguard and Pembroke Dock with the southern ports of Swansea, Cardiff and Newport. If the west of my country was linked from top to bottom, it would link three universities—Bangor, Aberystwyth and the University of Wales’ s campuses in Lampeter, Carmarthen and now in Swansea. The line would promote greater collaboration between two university health boards, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) said, and a range of other public services. It would make the hospital in Aberystwyth far more viable. We have a threat at the moment of services being restructured in the west of Wales.

Aberystwyth and Carmarthen are two of the largest towns in the west of my country, yet anyone who wishes to make that journey by train today would face an average journey time of seven hours and five minutes. The fastest possible route is five hours and 52 minutes. The old rail line closed to freight in 1973. Since 2000, calls to reopen the line have intensified. I pay tribute to the dedicated work of the campaign group, Traws Link Cymru. We were lucky enough to meet it a few weeks ago in the office of my hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion, and it has done incredible work in developing the case. Its proposed route would use much of the
existing line, with a new section from Altwalis to Carmarthen, in the constituency of my friend, the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart). Stations along the route would include Pencader or Llandysul and Llanbydder in my constituency, and Lampeter, Tregaron and Llanilar in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion. The expected journey would be one hour thirty minutes, compared with the more than two hours 20 minutes that the bus service takes. Despite the slow march of the bus route, it provides a service for more than a quarter of a million people per annum. The link would have a huge impact on Welsh connectivity, providing for a figure-of-eight system for Wales and reducing the rail journey between Aberystwyth and the capital city of Cardiff by more than two hours.

Opponents of the project will throw back the cost-benefit analysis. However, more than 55,000 people live on the proposed route, compared with the 50,000 who live on the Aberystwyth to Shrewsbury line. The mid Wales line thankfully survived Beeching’s axe, and its passenger numbers are increasing, providing a vital link between Welshpool, Newtown, Machynlleth and Aberystwyth.

As a result of the Budget deal between Plaid Cymru and the Welsh Labour Government, Mott MacDonald was commissioned to undertake a feasibility study on the project. It calculated that if the rail line was up and running by 2024, it would generate 370,000 trips. That would rise to 425,000 by 2027 and 489,000 by 2037. Public appetite for rail is growing and the Minister will be more than familiar with the incredible success of the Scottish Borders line since it was reopened.

In the case of Carmarthen to Aberystwyth and the link to journeys further north, we are talking about, in the words of “Lonely Planet”, “one of the most beautiful countries in the world”. What better way to appreciate the splendour of Wales than on a pan-nation rail journey, especially considering that 85% of all visitors into the catchment area of the rail line are day tourists. The hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire made that point eloquently.

The report puts the approximate cost at £775 million. For the British Government, that is not a lot of money, and they have shown they can find the money when they need to, whether that is £1 billion to bribe 10 MPs and they have shown they can find the money when they need to. I have no doubt. The report calculates that the project would create 2,584 gross jobs along the line, with only 144 of them directly attributable to the railway. It calculates that £170.1 million per annum will be created in gross GVA. I am confident that those figures could be magnified if a proper detailed economic strategy was put in place to increase the impact of the line.

Liz Saville Roberts: I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning the old line between Afon Wen and Bangor. We talk about advantages for south-west Wales, but moving ahead with that line would replicate those same advantages in north-west Wales, which has just as much need of them and just as much need of improved transport links.

Jonathan Edwards: I fully agree with my hon. Friend. Wylfa Newydd, which is now viewed as a white elephant and in grave danger, was seen as the saviour of the economy of the north of our country. The reality is that we need a major project in Wales; we need a major project in the west of our country.

Ben Lake: My hon. Friend is generous with his time. To elaborate on his point about the railway’s potentially being a spine of the economy, it could also be the spine of a more integrated transport network, allowing bus services that currently service the main towns to be redirected to the smaller villages, thus bringing a lot more connectivity to the more rural areas of west Wales.

Jonathan Edwards: Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I was born and raised in the Amman valley in Carmarthenshire and he was born and raised in Ceredigion. We understand the challenges of travelling very small distances within the communities that we represent. This project could integrate public transport and get people out of their cars. It could actually make public transport viable.

Our horizons should be broader. Why not do something really innovative and exciting as part of this project and operate battery or hydrogen-powered passenger trains on the line? I am not an engineering expert, but why not design the line with inclines leading up to stations and declines leaving them, to allow a battery-powered train to regenerate? I am led to believe that Network Rail has trialled a battery-operated train, the Class 379 Electrostar, between Harwich International and Manningtree. Bombardier is a world leader in producing battery-powered trains, so there are opportunities to create manufacturing jobs within the British state on the back of the project.

With the new nuclear power station, Wylfa Newydd, in difficulty, the west of my country needs a new big idea, as I said in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts). This rail line would cost considerably less than the exposure of the British Treasury to a new nuclear power station.

In a recent meeting with Traws Link Cymru, I was supplied with a letter dated April 2017 to the former Member for Lincoln, Mr Karl McCartney, from the then Transport Minister, the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard). Mr McCartney had a great interest in the project because he used to be a student at Lampeter University. In the letter, the former Minister said that “if the Welsh Government progress positively with the studies conducted and subsequently decide that the reopening of this line is a transport priority for Wales, I would have no objection to fund and deliver the scheme.”

Will the Minister to confirm that the British Government have no objection to funding and delivering this scheme if the Welsh Government make the appropriate request? If not, will he finally give Wales the tools to do it ourselves?

4.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) on securing the debate.

I share the hon. Gentleman’s interest in ensuring that the corridor between Aberystwyth and Carmarthen in which this former rail line is located has the transport
The station will increase accessibility to the rail network, improve transport integration and provide an alternative to car journeys. It is on schedule for completion by April next year.

The line from Aberystwyth to Carmarthen was closed to passenger traffic in 1965, although a section remained open to freight until 1973, as the hon. Gentleman said. I am aware of the local group, Traws Link Cymru, which campaigns to reopen the line. The group was established in 2013 and calls for the reinstatement of rail links across west Wales. I pay tribute to its work. It has raised the profile of the case for reinstating that 55-mile link. The scheme has been discussed here on several occasions, including a debate in November 2017.

Our rail strategy, “Connecting people”, includes exploring opportunities to restore capacity lost under Beeching where it unlocks growth for housing or commercial development, eases crowded routes or offers value for money. The strategy makes it clear that any potential line reopening would need to demonstrate a strong business case if Government funding were sought. If we are to invest in reopening routes, they have to unlock economic or housing opportunities, or break up a point of congestion.

The Government have, however, consistently explained throughout the years that local authorities and local leadership are best placed to decide on and take forward transport schemes that will most directly benefit their local areas. We work closely with individual authorities to help them to take forward schemes that they are interested in progressing.

The rail planning process is led by Network Rail with input from a wide range of stakeholders and funders. In March 2016, Network Rail published its Welsh route study, which sets out its strategic vision for the network in Wales over the next 10 to 30 years. That route strategy will inform decisions by funders for the period up to 2024, and the reopening of the route between Aberystwyth and Carmarthen is identified as a stakeholder aspiration. It has not, however, been identified as a potential priority for funders during that period.

As the hon. Gentleman said, the Welsh Government and local authorities have commissioned useful reports over the years. A scoping study commissioned by the Welsh Government, which reported in October 2015, set out all the issues to be considered in a full feasibility study into reopening the line. The report identified a large section of former track bed that remains in place, but there are other engineering challenges. It discussed the potential routes to obtaining consent, along with the operational and environmental considerations.

In November 2016 a strategic case jointly commissioned by Ceredigion/Cardigan County Council appraised potential options for improving strategic connections between Aberystwyth and Carmarthen. It recommended that road-based options were taken forward and a rail link not pursued further. That was followed by a Welsh Government-funded £300,000 feasibility study completed only last year that estimated the cost of reinstatement at £775 million.

The study identified numerous challenges, including the continued need to accommodate the Gwili Railway Preservation Society, which runs on part of the former track bed. It considered the environmental impact: ground conditions, property impacts and the need for environmental infrastructure that it needs to flourish and grow, and I agree that the potential role of reopening that line needs to be carefully considered by regional partners alongside potential improvements to existing transport links. He thinks that that area of Wales is one of the most beautiful in the world. I entirely agree. My name might be Jones, but I have to say that I am a Yorkshire Jones, rather than a Welsh Jones.

The hon. Gentleman says that the Government are not investing anywhere outside London and have ignored Wales. I do not accept that. The Government have committed to investing in Wales. We delivered the Wales Act 2017, which places the Welsh devolution settlement on a firm footing and builds further powers in areas such as transport, elections and energy. We are providing a boost of more than £550 million to the Welsh Government’s budget, including more than £25 million from a 5% uplift in the Barnett consequentials. By 2020, the Welsh Government’s block grant will have grown to more than £16 billion before tax devolution adjustments, which is a real-terms increase over the spending review period.

The Williams review is looking at the structure of our rail industry and includes a review of devolutionary arrangements. I hope that we will see more devolution in our services, but let us see where that goes. We do not yet know what Mr Williams will recommend.

The UK Government recognise that improving transport connections is an important part of helping people to access job opportunities, supporting business growth and access to education in Wales. Throughout control period 5, which covered the period from 2014 to now, Network Rail invested £900 million in the Welsh rail network. That includes a £50 million project to upgrade the north Wales railway, including new signalling on the north Wales mainline from Shotton to Colwyn Bay, which was completed only last year.

Network Rail’s proposed investment for the rail network during CP6, which starts in April and runs to 2024, is £1.34 billion. The Welsh Government now have responsibility for franchising rail services in Wales, and franchises bring investment. The new Transport for Wales franchise will recruit an additional 600 members of staff and invest £194 million in station improvements.

We have committed £125 million to the upgrade of the Valley lines as part of a wider contribution of £500 million to the Cardiff capital region investment fund, which will help to drive growth and employment increase in the Cardiff region that we all want. Through our investment, Wales is benefiting directly from a range of projects.

HS2 was mentioned as a white elephant. I do not accept that. HS2 will deliver the capacity and connectivity that our United Kingdom needs. It will benefit the people of Wales, most obviously by bringing forward by six years the delivery of HS2 to Crewe to give access to north Wales. The idea that the Government are focused only on London is simply not correct.

In addition to the spending I mentioned earlier, Bow Street station near Aberystwyth was announced as one of the five successful new station fund 2 stations in July 2017. The scheme received close to £4 million from that fund in addition to £2.4 million from the Welsh Government.
Small Modular Reactors

4.30 pm

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered small modular reactors.

It is an honour and privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. This debate is so important for my constituency, the nuclear industry, the country and—if we are going to slow down the rate of climate change—our planet. The three parts of the energy trilemma are reducing carbon emissions, securing the supply of power and ensuring affordability. The Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change reports that, if we are to slow down the rise in global temperatures this century, nuclear will feature as a hearty part of the energy mix.

Government have recognised that. It is this Government who are investing in nuclear new build. It is this Government who have begun investing in the technology advances of small modular, advanced modular and nuclear fusion innovation, in partnership with industry. And it is this Government who have ensured, as we leave the European Union, that the necessary non-proliferation nuclear safeguard regimes are in place and that we will be able to operate internationally, under the roof of the Office for Nuclear Regulation, which also has responsibility for safety and security. The industrial strategy and the nuclear sector deal are great policy advances, but I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to tell us, in his response to the debate, what is being done to promote policy to progress.

More wind farms—on and offshore—and the abundance of solar panels mean that, in addition to much more, intermittent renewable energy, reliable low-carbon nuclear is needed to make the UK energy system secure and affordable. During the long dark hours without any sun, or when the wind is not blowing and the blades do not turn, we can all depend on fission—on the splitting of atoms—to heat water, to create steam, to turn the turbine that generates electricity, which is then transmitted on our national grid, and to provide baseload power for district heating—24 hours a day and 365 days a year, for up to 60 years.

There is a demonstrable need for clean, low-carbon electricity now and long into the future. The anticipated requirement for electric vehicles alone could reach additional capacity of 18 GW by 2040. And in Copeland we have an indisputable capability. Nowhere else in Europe could there be found such a concentration of knowledge and skills, yet we face an uncertain future. First it was Moorside, and then Wylfa: the headlines have not been positive for new nuclear, despite significant Government efforts and financial incentives.

Economies of scale, based on the size of a reactor, have been, at least until very recently, widely regarded as the most cost-effective method of development, but the “bigger is better” argument may well be contested by small modular reactors. Calder Hall, which began construction in 1953 in my constituency, generated electricity from 1956. It was officially opened by the Queen in 1957 and consisted of four 50 MW Magnox reactors, which transmitted electricity on to the national grid for 47 years, until 2003. Today, we are desperately fighting to get a whopping 3.4 GW power station over the line. Moorside—the proposed new generation III nuclear
**Trudy Harrison**

power station, which is to be built adjacent to the Sellafield site—has been beset by a range of ongoing problems over many years.

Following what happened at Fukushima, the increased cost of engineering means that nuclear is getting more expensive. The return on investment is becoming prohibitively difficult to predict, and the availability of companies capable of constructing large-scale gigawatt-plus reactors is limited. Sadly, there are no large-scale British civil nuclear companies operating today.

Let me be clear: the development of small modular reactors is not in competition with large gigawatt reactors. Small reactors have a complementary role in contributing to the energy mix. Because of the economies of scale that could be achieved by building multiple reactors, having many more small modular reactors could be the key to our energy future.

The Government’s nuclear sector deal aims for a 30% reduction in the cost of new build and advocates the merits of a fleet-build approach. The reduced-cost, repetitive-formula, standardised, modular method of construction has yet to be rolled out in the civil nuclear industry, but it has transformed the car and aerospace industries. As we look for ways to secure the necessary resurgence of nuclear power, I ask the Minister whether it is time to do what we have done in those industries in our energy sector.

Small modular reactors of up to 440 MW in size, with a diverse range of technologies, are currently being researched and developed across the UK, thanks, in part, to Government funding. Of course, small nuclear reactors are nothing new; for 50 years, our Royal Navy’s continuous at-sea deterrent has relied on a mini light water reactor to keep it powered for years at a time without the need for refuelling—a fact that the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Stevenson) celebrates well and often in this place.

Rolls-Royce has mastered the art of small-space engineering, and is now one of many companies developing its technology on a slightly larger scale.

**Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Does she agree that companies such as Goodwin International, which the Minister has visited in my constituency, could help? It has already been working in the defence industry, which she touched on, and could really help to commercialise SMRs in this country.

**Trudy Harrison**: Absolutely agree. It will be no surprise that I commend Goodwin International for the work it does in the defence industry. This is all about ensuring that British companies can contribute and can benefit companies in the supply chain, which provide components and, most importantly, jobs and apprenticeships. I understand that 125 new apprenticeships are coming from Goodwin, and there will be many more in the future.

**John Stevenson** (Carlisle) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate, which is important for not just our country but our county. She talks about the private sector. Does she agree that there is a role for the Government, who should make a real commitment to supporting the SMR sector? That may include a financial contribution.

**Trudy Harrison**: I thank my hon. Friend for that important reminder that we cannot do this without Government support. We have the capability and the demonstrable need. The industry is desperate to be part of the solution, but we must have the Government’s financial policy and industrial support to take this forward.

From light water reactors to heavy water reactors, and molten salt to sodium cooled, the innovation in fission technology is most certainly alive and kicking. Some of our greatest, most innovative companies are now interested in building small reactors in the UK. Moltex, Atkins, NuScale, EDF, DBD, U-Battery Developments, Westinghouse, Sheffield Forgemasters and Rolls-Royce—these companies and hundreds of others involved with their supply chains, such as Goodwin, need our political, financial and industrial support.

Today, there are about 50 civil small modular reactors at various stages of research and development across the world. Fleet build is widely anticipated to bring a swifter return on investment, with lower barriers to entry and standardisation. As politicians, it is surely our job to ensure that policy takes possibility towards probability. Constructing single or incremental small modular reactors on nuclear-licensed sites, where the existing industrial power requirement is currently dependent on fossil fuel, is surely a credible, sensible and more sustainable way to power the UK and beyond.

There is one such location on the outskirts of the Sellafield site in Copeland. Fellside is a combined heat and power plant with a capability of about 170 MW, but it is due to come out of service later this year. It is outwith the nuclear licensed site boundary, but it has the benefit of the Civil Nuclear Constabulary for security, and obviously has a huge adjacent industrial power requirement, which is currently dependent on gas. Will the Minister consider Fellside a suitable, if not perfect, site for a future small modular reactor, and value the huge potential for further advanced manufacturing facilities in Copeland?

This is not just about being the first, although we do have an impressive track record of firsts: the first civil nuclear reactor, the first Magnox reprocessing plant and the first thermal oxide reprocessing plant. In the words of my Prospect union rep: “With the most experienced workforce in the nuclear industry, West Cumbrians do it best”—and we want to keep doing it.

I hope the Minister will tell me and the other Members in this debate who share my passion for nuclear how his Department will create the right market conditions to enable developers to bring new reactors to market and to create national and international markets. Grasping the opportunity to meet our domestic power requirements and capitalising on the early-adopter benefits of a multi-billion-pound, global export market while tackling the energy trilemma of security, affordability and environmental sustainability will mean that Cumbria continues to be the centre of nuclear excellence.

This is not rocket science—although we do a bit of that at the National Nuclear Laboratory—but a case of multiples: the more we build, the cheaper things get.
Many of the UK’s 15 nuclear reactors will come to the end of their long-serving lives by 2030, leaving us perilously vulnerable and dependent on fossil fuels. We must get serious about meeting the world need for affordable and reliable electricity, while slowing down global warming before it is too late.

Thank you, Mr Paisley, for listening most intently. I look forward to a robust debate and to the Minister’s considered response to the points that I have made and that other Members will no doubt make as well.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order. Before I call Mr Shannon, I advise Members that each speaker will have three minutes. I intend to call the SNP spokesman just after 5.5 pm, then the Labour party spokesman—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): Three minutes for him!

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): No, the hon. Gentleman will get more—otherwise, the Minister might only get three minutes. I will call the Minister at 5.20 pm.

4.42 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Paisley. It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Copeland on securing the debate and for the thoughtful way in which he set out the case for her constituency and, indeed, for the whole of the UK. We must have the ability to produce energy as essential. I have always supported the Government’s attempts to do that. Again, I congratulate the hon. Member for Copeland on securing the debate and thereby giving us a chance to contribute.

I support small nuclear modular reactors; we need that form of energy for the foreseeable future. We need to secure it and find a way forward, and I support the Government’s attempts to do that. Again, I congratulate the hon. Member for Copeland on securing the debate and thereby giving us a chance to contribute.

4.45 pm

Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): I declare an interest because my eldest son is part of the Rolls-Royce team that looks after the reactors in the Astute class submarines that have been so reliable and that keep us safe. As we have heard, large nuclear reactors over 1 GW are proving hard to deliver, not only in this country but worldwide, so small modular reactors may be part of the answer.

It is true that nuclear is the safest and greenest way to generate electricity. It delivers for the environment, which is why I am astounded that green parties around the world campaign against nuclear energy. In Germany, the green coalition forced the Government of the time to abandon nuclear generation. Indeed, it tried to prevent the Czechs, with their Temelin plant, from generating there.

I saw an interesting interview on YouTube the other day with President Putin, who was complaining that the Germans were angry that they were so reliant on Russian gas. He said, “Well, what do they expect? They’ve abandoned their nuclear stations. They’re abandoning their brown coal stations. What do they expect to burn—firewood?” Then he turned, in a rather sinister way, and said, “We have a lot of firewood in Siberia.”

Coal is a dangerous fuel to burn. Statistics from China indicate that, in 2014, there were 931 fatalities in its coalmining industry—the first time in history that the figure had been below 1,000. In fact, between 1996 and 2000, there were an average of 7,619 deaths in the Chinese coal industry, which is 20 deaths per day. When coal is burned, it has an effect on air quality, and statistics I have seen say that nuclear generates 440 fewer deaths per unit than brown coal. In terms of climate change, nuclear is 83 times less likely to produce carbon dioxide than coal. Nuclear is the answer to air quality and to climate change.

Other renewables are not in the clear either. Deaths from photovoltaic solar panels on rooftops make them 16 times more dangerous than nuclear—people fall off roofs—and wind generation, particularly out at sea, is four times more dangerous. Of course, when that issue is raised, people trot out Chernobyl. We need to make it
clear that we have learned lessons from Chernobyl. I have been to the Chernobyl plant, and it is not the same sort of plant. I had a Lada car once, and it was not the same as a Rolls-Royce.

We have seen 17,000 cumulative reactor years in 33 countries in the nuclear industry. If we can build in some passive features as well, we will have a great future and the UK will once again be a world leader in nuclear technology.

4.48 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) on securing the debate.

Nuclear remains the most dependable low-carbon energy source to deploy in the energy mix alongside large-scale renewable projects. We must be open to all research and development of low-carbon and environmentally friendly technologies, just as Finland’s Green party endorses. Nuclear and renewables have a symbiotic relationship. That may change, but from where we stand, it is likely that the greatest advances in technology, such as advanced modular reactors and fusion, will arise from nuclear origins.

My constituency is among the lowest waged in the United Kingdom. The median full-time earnings for 2018 were £21,840—almost £8,000 less than the UK average, and £5,800 lower than the Welsh average. With the rural economy of Wales greatly dependent on ever dwindling public sector jobs and minimum wage leisure and hospitality employment, the development of the future economy of my constituency and county cries out for a range of employment.

Rural Wales suffers generational depopulation as our young people move away to seek job opportunities elsewhere. In Welsh-speaking areas such as Dwyfor Meirionnydd, that is a double loss. It is therefore imperative that the Government recognise the potential of Trawsfynydd, M-SParc and Bangor University to not only grow the economy of north-west Wales but act as catalysts to stimulate supply chains across a region stretching from Caergybi to Cumbria.

I also call on the Government to support their own industrial policy. A small modular reactor or an advanced modular reactor at Trawsfynydd will help to transform not only the economy of Trawsfynydd but the wider supply chain across north Wales and north England. In view of the accepted need to develop an SMR or AMR, coupled with the nuclear sector deal’s proposal to site a thermal hydraulic facility at Menai Science Park in Ynys Môn, it is now surely urgent that the Government publicly recognise that Trawsfynydd is an ideal site for a first-of-a-kind development.

Let us speak plainly: the Government must sense the appetite for co-operation that leads cross-party representatives to spell out that the future of an indigenous nuclear industry in serving the economic and energy needs of Wales, England and beyond is dependent on the SMR or AMR programme going ahead. I am proud to work alongside trade union representative Rory Trappe of Blaenau Ffestiniog, who campaigns doggedly for the UK Government to specify Trawsfynydd as an SMR site because he recognises the potential for a range of jobs over a 60-year lifespan. This is an opportunity for well-paid work for up to three generations of local families and for families across wider north Wales and the north of England. I close by repeating that: well-paid work for three generations of families in rural, Welsh-speaking Wales.

4.51 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) on securing this timely debate.

As I see it, continued instability in the middle east, coupled with an increasingly hostile Russian state, means that it is now vital that we once again establish our own independent source of clean, affordable, low-carbon domestic energy, to achieve our energy security. Since the first nuclear power station was connected to the national grid in 1956, nuclear has become a major contributor to the UK’s energy market, with 21% of all electricity now generated in that way. However, with seven stations due to be decommissioned in the next 10 to 15 years, the stark reality is that the UK faces a potential energy gap before new conventional nuclear stations can be brought online. To bridge that gap, we must look towards innovation. In small modular reactors, which take a relatively short period of time to construct—estimated to be between two and five years—I believe we have a ready-made solution.

It is estimated by a UK small modular reactor consortium led by Rolls-Royce that the design, development and production of a fleet of small modular reactors has the potential to create up to 40,000 skilled jobs in the nuclear supply chain and to add more than £100 billion to our economy. Translated to a local level, with Derby being the centre of Roll-Royce’s nuclear operation in the UK, a sustained programme of SMR production in the city would see significant new job opportunities open up for my constituents, as well as in the supply chain.

It is clear that the Government have made a degree of progress in fostering this new technology in partnership with the UK’s civil nuclear sector. The small modular reactor competition was launched in 2016, followed by £56 million to develop and regulate designs in 2017, but with the clock ticking we need to accelerate the UK’s efforts to develop this technology. I therefore urge the Minister to review the Government’s energy strategy and to put a renewed emphasis on supporting the nuclear industry.

We have a golden opportunity to become a world leader in new nuclear technology and at the same time to secure an independent supply of domestic energy. I once again congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland on bringing this important debate to the House. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

4.54 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) for bringing forward this important debate. I begin with a message to the Minister: Hartlepool has the best and most skilled workforce in the industry, and we already have a licence for our site. The Civil Nuclear Constabulary, which has been mentioned, keeps our nuclear facilities...
and workers safe right around the clock. I know that we all support its federation in its attempt to resolve pension and retirement inequality issues. I hope and trust that that matter will be resolved soon.

One of the big positives about the new technology is that it shows that the nuclear industry remains a major asset for meeting our future energy needs. Our world needs more low-carbon power. The nuclear sector deal sets out pledges from the Government and the industry itself to make cost reductions in nuclear, and initiatives to support the sector. Arguably, SMRs are central to that vision. They meet the increased demand for low-carbon solutions and produce clean, affordable energy; they are much smaller than traditional nuclear reactors, and over their lifecycle they could deliver £62 billion into the economy and create up to 40,000 jobs, as the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) highlighted.

Our friends at EDF Energy successfully operate the advanced gas-cooled reactor in Hartlepool, which provides electricity for more than 3% of the UK, with a net electrical output of 1,190 MW—enough to power 1.5 million homes—but that reactor is coming to the end of its lifecycle, and decisions need to be made about the future provision of nuclear on the site. EDF has lots of good ideas and is keen to develop alternatives. If necessary, that may include further extending the life of the current plant or developing next-generation technology, like at Hinkley Point C.

Sadly, as we have seen with projects at Anglesey and Moorside, we cannot rely 100% on foreign investment to build our fleet of next-generation nuclear. That is why SMRs—developed and driven by a British consortium, based on tried and tested technology, offering the same output as traditional larger reactors with a lower carbon footprint—are important. The UK’s nuclear sector is among the most varied in the world, but its future needs to be secured by direct Government investment in projects such as the development of SMRs. Either way, given the circumstances the industry faces, we need to know whether the future of nuclear energy in Hartlepool is secure. I seek the Minister’s assurance that it is.

4.57 pm

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): I reiterate my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) on securing the debate and, more importantly, on being a real advocate for Copeland and the nuclear industry. I have played a secondary role to her and have held a couple of nuclear conferences in my constituency. I am grateful to the Minister for attending the one I held last year.

I am disappointed that the original development at Moorside did not go ahead. NuGen did a huge amount of work and it is to be congratulated on that effort. I pay tribute to Tom Samson and his team for the work they did. It is a disappointment that the development did not go ahead. The investment would have helped to transform Cumbria—not just west Cumbria but the whole county—and brought tremendous economic benefits. In addition, it would have provided 7% of our national energy needs and made a significant contribution to the low-carbon economy.

I believe the Government could and should take a proactive interest in the nuclear industry, including by investing directly in it. None the less, Moorside did not happen, so I look to how Cumbria’s strengths can be used in the future, particularly with regard to the possibilities of SMRs. Cumbria has two unique selling points: tourism and the nuclear industry, which employs a huge number of people. Some 10,000-plus are employed at Sellafield, we have the National Nuclear Laboratory and the Low Level Waste Repository, and there is a highly skilled supply chain. The industry’s impact on the area is significant in terms of employment, apprentices, graduates, research and skills. We must use the opportunities and skills we have to ensure that Cumbria exploits the alternatives that are available in the nuclear industry.

I have talked about the local interest but, as I say, there is also a national interest. We are moving to a low-carbon world. How will we achieve that? Renewables undoubtedly will be a significant element, and I am a big supporter of solar, but nuclear clearly has its place in the energy mix. I have supported large nuclear plants, but clearly we need to get behind the development of SMRs, which may well be the future for our country. They offer greater flexibility, many commercial opportunities and a real chance for the UK to rediscover its nuclear development expertise.

I believe that if we do that, Cumbria will play a central part. As I have already said, we have the skills and the expertise, the research facilities and the land, but probably most importantly, we have a population that supports the nuclear industry. Our people want to get behind the industry; in the interests of Cumbria and our national economy.

4.59 pm

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) on securing this debate. I welcome the Minister back to his place. I know he has been a strong supporter of nuclear. He has been helpful to me and others in this difficult time after the suspension of the Wylfa project, which has been a huge blow to the whole of north Wales and the nuclear sector deal.

I want to be positive in my speech today. I am a pro-nuclear, pro-renewables and pro-energy efficiency Member of Parliament, and I think we need all those things in the energy mix. I want us to go forward. I share the frustration of the hon. Member for Copeland about turning policy into action. My hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) and I were on the old Select Committee on Energy and Climate Change arguing for SMRs some eight years ago. We wanted to see that work moving forward and we visited many places in the United Kingdom where we have the resources, the skills base and the technology that can make SMRs a reality.

The Wylfa site is, according to objective people, the best development site in the United Kingdom. I want the project with Hitachi to go forward, but I want nuclear skills to be developed in the interim period, too. As hon. Members from Cumbria will know, consortiums are being set up between Cumbria and north Wales. They are working together as the North West Nuclear Arc to bring together skilled providers, the nuclear industry and host communities to develop the skills base.

In the short time I have, I want to ask the Minister whether the energy White Paper will help SMRs as well as large-scale nuclear, as the large projects have failed...
when they are private sector-led. We need a proper funding formula to ensure that our energy projects are developed here in this country. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) said, the advantage of having the SMRs developed in this country is that the domestic supply base can be in this country and we can rely on British innovation to make it happen, rather than being totally reliant on foreign countries investing in our nuclear sector.

I volunteer to be on the Committee that scrutinises the energy Bill when it is introduced, because I want it to work. I want the new regulated asset base formula that the Minister is proposing to be flexible enough that all technologies can benefit from it. I want success in this country. As the hon. Member for Copeland said, Britain has a proud record of pioneering nuclear technology. This is the next generation. We have to get the formula right. We have to get Government support. I am in favour of more Government support, because that is long-termism. If we are to meet our low-carbon emissions goals for the future, we have to invest now, and Government have to take a lead.

5.3 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): It is great to see you in the Chair, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my neighbour, the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), on securing this debate and on continuing to be a champion for the industry. It is great to work with her on that. It is good to see the Minister in his place. There were some doubts about that time last week, and it is probably a good job the debate is happening this week, given everything else that is happening.

I endorse everything that has been said about small modular reactors. Fellside should be right up there at the forefront as a pathfinder for SMRs in this country. However I will use my brief time to say that while SMRs are absolutely necessary, they can never on their own be sufficient to solve the huge energy gap now opening up in our future.

The Minister and his boss are probably doing God’s work in trying to wrench the Government from total madness on the Brexit deal, but that illustrates the lack of focus across Government on our wider energy future at a critical time. We have the crisis derailing the Moorside deal, and Wylfa is in a very difficult patch. Where will the Government now publish the protocol for “Techno-Economic Assessment of SMRs”. Have the Government now published the protocol for that, and if they have, are they now at a stage where they can at least begin to distil the number of interesting designs, to see which ones they are potentially prepared to support and which ones they are not? I hope the Minister will be able to bring us up to date with what is happening in that process. Is it now yielding some definite outcomes, and is there a preferred SMR design that the Government are looking at?

5.5 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I shall be very brief, partly because I have to be very brief, but also because it would be useful to hear what the Front Benchers have to say in response to the debate.

I have been in correspondence with one of my constituents, Ron George, and I have copied that to my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), who is on the Front Bench. Mr George is a great supporter of molten salts reactors; he has looked at the three different reactor models that are possible. When the Minister replies to the debate, will he consider some of the issues that Mr George has raised with me? They largely relate to a letter that Mr George received from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy in August 2017, which was about the process of deciding what is an appropriate reactor design to take forward.

In March 2017, the Government launched the small modular reactor competition to see what was out there in the marketplace. There were more than 30 entrants and last year the Government gave eligible participants the opportunity to make presentations and so on. My question is: where has that process got to? It was supposedly going to result in a “Techno-Economic Assessment of SMRs”. Have the Government now published the protocol for that, and if they have, are they now at a stage where they can at least begin to distil the number of interesting designs, to see which ones they are potentially prepared to support and which ones they are not? I hope the Minister will be able to bring us up to date with what is happening in that process. Is it now yielding some definite outcomes, and is there a preferred SMR design that the Government are looking at?

5.8 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Paisley; I believe that this is the first time that I have served under your chairmanship.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) on securing this debate. Normally, I would look around Westminster Hall and see all these friendly faces and think, “Great, it’s going to be a very consensual debate,” but a debate needs a dissenting voice and this afternoon’s debate will certainly hear one from me. Before I do that, however, I congratulate right hon. and hon. Members on the passionate case that they have made. I have been looking for words and points that I can agree with, and I do agree about the need to tackle the trilemma, particularly the issue of climate change and affordability. However, I cannot say that new nuclear is the way to do that and the small modular reactor development is not going to change that.

There has been a common theme among some hon. Members today that renewable energy is not reliable. In October last year, 98% of Scotland’s electricity was generated by wind power and we are on track to produce all of our electricity from renewables by 2020. That is possible through the Scottish National party’s environmental policy support.
The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has always been a passionate champion of nuclear; I understand that although, again, I cannot agree. The right hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill) said that the safest and greenest power is nuclear. Actually, the safest and greenest power is renewables. There is no half-life and nothing to clean up. If he wants to come up and speak to some of the people who saw the clean-up at Dounreay to hear about the eye-watering cost and the danger to the public from that British nuclear project, he is welcome to do so. The fact that he once purchased a Lada car tells us everything about his choices. I will leave it at that.

The hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) talked about generational depopulation. I absolutely agree that that must be tackled and there must be ways to do that, but nuclear does not fix it. We need a challenge on well-paid work.

Albert Owen: I echo the point made by the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts). In peripheral areas, the nuclear industry has been a saviour in many ways. It ensures longevity and skills. People who left school at the same time as me are still working in it. The hon. Lady highlighted that. We want renewables and nuclear, not either/or.

Drew Hendry: I understand that. The one thing I was agreeing with is that there must be more solutions on offer. There must be a mix, but I respectfully disagree about nuclear. I was going to highlight the hon. Gentleman’s support for renewable projects, which a couple of people have mentioned.

I will not use my time to go through every Member’s speech, but the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) made a powerful case. He incidentally made the Minister something of a deity and said that he was doing the Lord’s work. I am not sure which Lord, but we will come back to that.

The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) talked about the SMR competition. A warning about competitions from the UK Government can be found in Peterhead, where the carbon capture and storage competition was launched, and £100 million was spent before the £1 billion—[Interruption.] The Minister is trying to wave me away from that bit. The people of Peterhead will not forget the UK Government’s betrayal and the cancellation of that carbon capture project, which could have given the UK a five-year lead on carbon capture and storage. That is all gone.

Trudy Harrison: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Drew Hendry: I will not give way, because the other Front Benchers have to get in and I have to restrict my comments.

The first SMR is not due for 10 years. The costs are uncertain. There will probably be limited access to sites, planning delays and rising costs. The UK Government have pursued costly, dangerous nuclear energy over cheap renewables out of misplaced ideology. We have heard about the delays at Wylfa and the collapse of Woodside. That is the pursuit of ideology over pragmatism, and it does not work. The Government are letting people down.

The UK Government are already spending vast amounts on nuclear schemes about which there are safety concerns. They were about to lend £15 billion to Hitachi in Wales for Wylfa before the project collapsed because even that was not enough money. At Hinkley Point C, there is a £30 billion cost to the public sector. The Minister will argue that that is not the case, but the strike price amounts to what the public will be paying over that period to cover the cost of delays, complications, overspends and up-front costs. That is from the National Audit Office, not from me.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Will the Member draw his remarks to a conclusion?

Drew Hendry: The fact is that there is a very good future in renewable energy. If the Government set down their ideological opposition, particularly to wind and solar, they would be able to do a lot better in providing the mix that is required.
the public, and the unwillingness of Hitachi to go ahead with it, despite substantial assistance from the Government of up to about £75 per MWh for production.

First, it is clear that small modular nuclear reactors have to get their costs down to be viable. The Minister needs to be apprised of that. The Government claim to have invested substantial amounts of money over a period of time in the development of small modular nuclear reactors. There was a competition in 2016 and the then Chancellor—

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to bring his remarks to a close.

Dr Whitehead: I think I may have a bit of time, but I will make sure that the Minister can get his comments in.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): You have been speaking for five minutes and 50 seconds.

Dr Whitehead: I will try to draw my remarks to a close as rapidly as I can and make only this point on the funding of small modular nuclear reactors, because it is important. The Government initially said that £250 million was available for research, development and a competition. That competition did not take place. That figure was recently replaced by £58 million of funding, which was subsequently reduced to £44 million. Only £4 million of that has been spent, on developing initial feasibility studies for those who want to develop small modular nuclear reactors—

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order. I really have to ask you to conclude.

Dr Whitehead: Will the Minister clarify what is being spent at the moment on supporting small modular nuclear reactors, and how that will support the development of cheaper and more effective small modular nuclear reactors in future? That is the imperative.

5.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): I will try to deal with this briefly. However, before that, in answer to the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), we all have great moments in our political careers. I am sure that the Prime Minister’s will have time to go through all the points raised by hon. Members, except of course the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) for the sake of Hansard, I am joking. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) on securing this excellent debate. The term “Trudy-isation” is beginning to enter our parliamentary language, and she has Trudy-ised the whole debate on small modular reactors.

The development of small modular reactors is very much at the core—excuse the pun—of the Government’s strategy for the development of nuclear power, which we know is an important part of the mix. I would like to answer in detail the shadow Minister’s questions about money, but I do not have the time. Suffice it to say that we are considering a consortium bid. Rolls-Royce is at the centre of that, but many other companies are involved. I obviously cannot go into detail, but this is of the magnitude of money that the shadow Minister mentioned, and it is very close to fruition. We worked closely with all members of the consortium to develop it.

The good thing about this debate is that every Member bar one was very much in favour of the development of nuclear energy, our sector deal and everything we are trying to do to make sure that nuclear remains an important part of our mix, for several reasons. There are security reasons. The point was made about the excellence of offshore and onshore wind and all sorts of wind, but the wind does not blow all the time. There is the green energy point of view, because this will develop a significant amount of carbon-free power. My right hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill) quoted President Putin, who made the point that countries that have tried basically to have no nuclear or coal energy do not know what to do. We will not put ourselves in that position. Modular reactors are an important part of our future.

Times are changing and costs are going down. The shadow Minister made the point that we have to be very careful about the costs of small modular reactors. Those are very well known, which means that we have to look at scale. Building one was the original problem, particularly for the two sites at Moorside, which were mentioned by my hon. Friends the Members for Carlisle (John Stevenson) and for Copeland. The hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) spoke so well about Anglesey. The hon. Lady who is the spokesperson for Plaid Cymru—


Richard Harrington: And she is the Westminster leader. I beg the pardon of the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), but I was trying to avoid making a mess of her constituency name, which I have done before—I will not fall for that one again. I will, however, have a good go at saying Trawsfynydd, because I have been there. It is an excellent site for small modular reactors, as are Anglesey, Moorside and many others. The good thing about them is the support of the local community for nuclear, because many have seen the benefits that nuclear has brought in the past, such as prosperity and good-quality, highly paid employment.

In the time that I have left—I believe that my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland should be left a couple of minutes at the end—I will talk briefly about the financing models. Clearly, one of the big problems about nuclear generally has been financing. Everyone knows that, and that the large chunk for current nuclear power stations is about £15 billion-plus, and could be £20 billion. That is a significant sum of money. The two projects we have talked about—Moorside and Wylfa in Anglesey—are not to take place in the timescale we had hoped for because of the financing.

However, I believe that the efforts we are putting into the regulated asset base model will open up nuclear again—a modern way to fund it. Institutions are very
interested. On the small modular reactor side, my Department organised a very successful conference for the first time—in a high-tech area of the midlands, rather than one of the traditional sites—and quite a few financial institutions attended. We are in talks with the Treasury and inside the Department about developing that finance model. Logically, I believe it will work for smaller nuclear developments as well as large ones, because institutions obviously like to invest in smaller chunks.

The Government are very committed. We are helping small modular reactors. Apart from dealing with the consortium that I mentioned, we are providing funds to give the regulators the kinds of facilities necessary for the regulatory process. Quite a lot is going on, and I had wanted to speak for about 20 minutes on this subject. Earlier I was waving my hands at the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey not out of disrespect for him personally or because of anything he said, but because I wanted more time to go through my speech. However, I have galloped through the major points. I would just like formally to put on the record that the Government’s policy is firmly behind nuclear and very much behind—

Albert Owen: Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington: The hon. Gentleman will have to be very brief.

Albert Owen: Will the Minister give us timescales for the publication of the possible energy White Paper and for the models being tested by the House? That is important.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): You have time, Minister.

Richard Harrington: Thank you, Mr Paisley. The answer is that that will happen in the next few months—in early summer, I hope. Since the hon. Gentleman brings the question up, I confirm that our intention is that nuclear, and the small modular reactors side of it, will be developed in the White Paper. I noted—I am sure the House authorities will, too—his offer to serve on the Bill Committee. That is a little presumptuous, but I hope he may do so. I will conclude my remarks there, because my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland deserves the last word in this important debate.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Thank you, Minister. I call Trudy Harrison to wind up.

5.28 pm

Trudy Harrison: I thank the Minister for his remarks and for his ongoing support for our nuclear industry. That is absolutely clear and welcome to me and the overwhelming majority of Members in the Chamber. I thank them all, although I do not have time to list them all. Their contributions have been absolutely fabulous. However, I cannot let the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) get away with the strike price comparison. The comparison of £57.50 is not fair, because it does not build in the cost of storage. If we look at any potential for more renewable energy, the cost of storage must be built in. My understanding is that it would be 600 times what we have today.

I should declare an interest, as my second daughter is a degree apprentice with an electrical design company, Athena PTS, which works across nuclear and wind, and with solar panels. She tells me that the strike price would be about eight times the cost of a diverse energy mix including nuclear. It is very unfair to compare the current strike price of £57.50 against the nuclear strike price.

Aside from that, I thank all Members. The support for nuclear is incredibly strong, and we can look forward to a prosperous future for the nuclear industry.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered small modular reactors.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Thursday 21 February 2019

[GRAHAM STRINGER in the Chair]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Greater Manchester Spatial Framework

1.30 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. It is also a pleasure to be joined by hon. Members from across Greater Manchester. The cross-party interest demonstrates the real concerns about the spatial framework that exist among residents across our county. The Greater Manchester spatial framework will be the principal housing and planning document of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. It represents the combined authority’s plans for the management of land for housing, commerce and industry in the next 20 years. It will have a permanent effect on the location and the shape and character of local communities.

I am acutely aware that hon. Members participating, and other people watching, may have a strong sense of déjà vu, because we have had this debate before. Just over two years ago, I introduced a debate with the same title in this same room to discuss the same spatial framework policy. Since the highly controversial first draft in 2016, however, much has changed in the GMSF, including the controversial plans that originally sought to build on more than 8% of Greater Manchester’s green belt. After attracting criticism from across the political spectrum and getting negative responses from thousands of residents, the authority was forced to go back to the drawing board and rethink.

After months of delay, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority published its revised draft of the GMSF in January, which is substantially different from the original in many details. It is also the subject of a second period of public consultation, so it is right that we take a second look at it. Although the details of the GMSF have changed, controversy surrounding it remains. Those contentious points have centred on three areas: the overall housing numbers, the proposals to build in places that are designated as green-belt land, and whether the accompanying infrastructure, particularly transport, will be sufficient.

To be clear, I am not against development per se, nor am I against the concept of the framework itself. On the contrary, a cross-county approach to strategically sharing housing allocation is to be welcomed, because we need to provide new developments to address the housing shortage and to provide jobs for generations to come. However, that should be done in a way that is sensitive to the local environment and the wishes of local communities. It should also happen only where there is genuine need and infrastructure to support development.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Wragg: I happily give way to my Greater Manchester colleague.

Kate Green: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate and I apologise that I need to leave to return to my constituency before the end. He is right to draw attention to the importance of infrastructure development alongside the development of employment space and housing. That is particularly important in Partington and Carrington in my constituency. Does he agree that there will need to be sequencing, so that we do not get the infrastructure development after, but in advance of, or at least in conjunction with, the housing and employment space development?

Mr Wragg: The hon. Lady makes an important point. She is correct that, to get residents to buy into that level of development, they will need assurance that it will not simply add to congestion on local roads, and that there will be adequate provision of hospitals, doctors and school places. That would be the same in all our constituencies.

Since being elected in 2015, I have campaigned alongside residents to protect the local green belt, particularly around the village of High Lane, from massive developments such as those proposed under the GMSF. I have attended public meetings, led debates in the House, submitted a petition from more than 4,000 constituents, worked with my constituency neighbours and lobbied three different Housing Ministers about the matter. I want to put on the record my thanks to all the local people who, with their letters, signing various petitions, organising demonstrations and making their voices heard, have supported the campaign so far, and I hope they continue to do so. I also want to thank my colleagues from across the region who have led similar campaigns in their constituencies, particularly my constituency neighbours in the Borough of Stockport, one of whom, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), we are delighted to see on the Front Bench and will speak for the Opposition today. At this time of apparently unsurmountable political divides, we have been able to work on a cross-party basis. If we can work in such a way, there is hope indeed. Despite my opposition to parts of the framework, I also want to thank the combined authority for listening to people and for taking note of their concerns and revising the plan.

What is the upshot of the policy changes, and is the revised GMSF any better? From my own constituency perspective, one major improvement is how the overall housing targets under the framework appear to have, in effect, been assessed at a county-wide level rather than a purely local authority one, which means that some of the house building targets from the first draft can be redistributed across the local authority boundaries to where local housing need is perhaps higher or land availability greater. The approach is sensible and was a change that I and others called for in response to the first draft.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) rose—

Mr Wragg: I happily give way to the shadow Secretary of State.

Andrew Gwynne: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He and I are both Stockport Members of Parliament. He knows that some in Stockport, principally the Liberal Democrats, have talked about
pulling Stockport out of the county-wide co-operation on planning. Does he agree that that would be absolute folly because the situation that he has just described, whereby some of Stockport’s housing growth can be shared across the county, would not be available to Stockport should it pull out of the GMSF?

Mr Wragg: The shadow Secretary of State is absolutely right. It is highly irresponsible for any political party to make such broad statements, which could increase the pressures on local green belts by some 5,000 for the Borough of Stockport. He is completely right to place that on the record this afternoon.

The updated proposals also mean changes at a local level in Stockport and will instead see the number of new houses earmarked for building on the green belt reduced from 12,000 to 3,700. In my constituency of Hazel Grove, the figure has been reduced from 4,000 to 1,250. Critically, plans to more than double the size of the village of High Lane with an extra 4,000 houses have been reduced to 500. However, to fit some of the new homes needed, new sites at the former Offerton High School, Gravel Bank Road and Unity Mill in Woodley and Hyde Bank meadows in Romiley have been suggested under the revised plans. Those sites will be much smaller than the original High Lane proposals at about 250 homes each, and in some cases will partly use previously developed land.

The revised plans that greatly reduce the amount of green belt to be sacrificed show that when local people come together and we work on a cross-party basis we can get results. I have consistently urged that the overall number of houses needed to be reduced, and that where houses are to be built we should follow a robust “brownfield first” policy. I therefore welcome the fact that the revised GMSF plans do both of those things. The result of the changes is a step in the right direction, in many aspects, as regards the controversial elements of the framework. However, as ever, there is more work to be done.

Almost half of the UK population live in rural, semi-rural or suburban communities close to green-belt land. The green belt is a vital barrier to urban sprawl and is hugely valued by local people. Our road infrastructure and transport capacity already struggle with existing demands. The proposals for development will risk making matters worse. The green belt encourages regeneration of our towns and makes the best use of our land. It therefore protects the countryside and all the benefits that that brings.

To protect and enhance the countryside, which borders the homes of some 30 million people, we must press on with the “brownfield first” approach. The green belt should not be used for housing development on the scale currently proposed. The fact is that we need more housing, but it should be implemented following a vigorous “brownfield first” policy. Insisting that brownfield land, which has had development on it previously, should be prioritised for the building of homes would encourage the regeneration of our towns and would ensure that the best use is made of our land. Importantly, it would ensure that housing is located where there is already the necessary infrastructure, and where local services can be augmented and improved.

To minimise the pressure on the green belt, it is important that we identify as best as possible all brownfield land. We should look at areas that are vacant or derelict so that we can optimise their potential for development before considering green-belt sites. Credit is therefore due to the Government for the creation of the brownfield register, following the Housing and Planning Act 2017. It has enabled hundreds of additional brownfield sites to be identified, and so has removed a considerable amount of the pressure on the green belt. Some good progress has been made in that area.

Thanks to the brownfield register, we know that Greater Manchester has at least 1,000 hectares of brownfield land spread across 439 sites, which have not yet been fully developed for housing. That is enough to build at least 55,000 homes, and it is likely that more such land can be found. Stockport has a reasonable number of those sites, although not as many as other areas. Stockport’s brownfield register, which is administered by the local council, has made it possible to identify sites within the urban area suitable for the development of up to 7,200 housing units. That is a considerable amount more than when we began this process a couple of years ago.

The Campaign to Protect Rural England estimates that, across the country, there is enough brownfield land to build some 720,000 homes. That figure has been revised upwards from the 2017 estimate of 650,000. Those brownfield sites have the potential to contribute significantly to the construction of the homes that are needed.

Another significant development since the last debate came in September 2018, when the Office for National Statistics released its most up-to-date population figures and household forecasts. Its publication of the new household projections led to a reduction in the overall numbers generated by the standard method for assessing local housing need. They proved to be nearly 25% lower than previously thought. Consequently, they gave rise to a national need target of some 213,000 new homes per year.

In October 2018, the Government published a technical consultation on the update to national planning policy and guidance. I commend them for a masterpiece of obfuscation. The consultation paper set out proposals to update planning guidance on housing need assessment to be consistent to the Government’s ambition to increase housing supply. They propose that planning practice guidance should be amended to specify that the 2014 ONS projections provide the demographic baseline for local housing need, rather than the 2016 figures. They produced their consultation response just two days ago, so colleagues may be forgiven for not having read it yet.

Despite clear opposition to the proposals from organisations and individuals, the Government have signalled their intention to ignore the latest ONS figures and use the outdated but higher 2014 projections. That means that they will overlook the latest ONS forecast, and instead stick to the previous target of 300,000 new homes per year, which will, I am afraid, lead to increased pressure on green-belt land.

I have a number of questions for our excellent Minister. First, I want to make a rather technical but nevertheless important point. I reiterate the point that I made when I wrote to the Secretary of State in December in response to the Department’s consultation. I believe that the 2016 projection should be used to provide the demographic baseline for the standard method. I strongly disagreed with the Ministry’s proposals, and I still do. Failure to
use the most up-to-date evidence in creating policies is, I think, directly contradictory to the rules of the national planning policy framework. Moreover, there were 493 responses to this question, and of those organisations that responded, more than half—55%—disagreed with the change; only one third agreed with the proposal. In fact, more than two thirds of local authorities opposed the plans. Individual respondents, of whom I was one, were overwhelmingly opposed; the figure was 86%.

I have concerns about the Government’s response to the ONS figures and the message that that may send. If the Ministry selectively considers evidence that justifies its housing need figures, that suggests that the direction of travel is only one way. It seems a departure, I contend, from evidence-based policy making. It is a case of cherry-picking facts to ensure that the means justify the ends. I therefore urge my hon. Friend the Minister to reconsider the approach of his Ministry in this area.

Secondly, there must be stronger consideration, at individual site level, of what is being lost in terms of green space or green belt, particularly with regard to wildlife corridors and recreational spaces. A local site of particular concern to me is the area at Hyde Bank meadows in Romiley in my constituency. It contains the well used community facilities of Tangshuttle fields, including playing fields, three football pitches and a children’s play area, and is adjacent to Tangshuttle meadow, which is a popular local green space, a nature reserve, a community orchard and allotments. The loss of that green space would damage the local environment, the community and the health and wellbeing of local people, and it is but one example from the GMSF second draft document.

Finally and importantly, as I mentioned at the beginning of my speech, more attention must be paid to how local infrastructure will support the new developments where and when they may be approved—that follows on from the excellent intervention by the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green)—particularly in respect of roads, traffic and local amenities. Although it would obviously have fewer homes than the 4,000 previously proposed, even a relatively small site—250 homes—would mean at least 250 extra cars on the road; there would probably be two or indeed three cars per household.

Many of the site-specific proposals in the revised framework refer to road and rail upgrades, in the immediate vicinity of sites, to provide access to the developments and to manage traffic in and around the new estates. However, beyond that, the framework generally gives no further details of what that will entail in the surrounding areas. It makes only vague references to developing travel plans or travel corridors, or general improvements to highway infrastructure. Without any level of detail, it is very hard for local politicians or local people to know the true impact that there may be on their area.

Kate Green: Of course, the issue about capacity on local roads also applies to national highways and motorways and, in particular, the M60. The development of Carrington, which I warmly welcome for Trafford, is right by the junction to the M60. We need to have the co-operation of Highways England, as well as local roads authorities, in ensuring that we have adequate capacity to support the planned new developments.

Mr Wragg: The hon. Lady is spot on. There is a similar situation in my constituency with the M60 road and the junction at Bredbury, with one of the proposals being to expand Bredbury Parkway.

In summary—you will be relieved to hear that, Mr Stringer—the revised GMSF plans and the response hitherto show that when local people come together and when politicians work together on a cross-party basis, we can make our voice heard. Although I welcome the significant reduction in the amount of green-belt land released in Stockport, the policy of “brownfield first”, inclusion of appropriate infrastructure and further local public consultation remain top priorities for the Greater Manchester spatial framework.

I think that the Government are potentially entering difficult territory if they proceed as planned with updates to the national planning policy and guidance and continue to disregard the latest ONS household projections. This is an area where I would strongly urge the Minister to rethink, just as the combined authority has shown its ability to rethink with this draft.

We should now all look at the details of these revised proposals. With the combined authority’s consultation open until 18 March, there is still good time for residents to make their views heard. What is needed now is a robust system of local consultations, especially in my constituency around the newly proposed sites in Offerton, Woodley and Romiley. We should ensure the efficient use of brownfield land, and that any new housing developments are properly supported with additional transport infrastructure and local services.
However, all of us present in Westminster Hall know that those brownfield sites will not be the ones to be developed if the developers are holding the ring on this issue. The spatial framework does not provide for the sequencing of land development, to enable us to have a genuine “brownfield first” policy whereby sites that commanded community support were developed, obviating the need to use the green belt.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend makes a really important point, because this issue is about more than the sequencing of the disposal of sites for development; it is also about market economics, or supply and demand. If there is an oversupply of green-belt land that does not meet the real housing need of the conurbation, is it not the case that in 25 years’ time our successors might be debating in this place the next version of the Greater Manchester spatial framework, speaking with regret about the missed opportunity whereby we had lost green-belt land but those brownfield sites were still brownfield?

Jim McMahon: That is absolutely the point, and it will be echoed by thousands of people in Greater Manchester who are not happy with the current settlement.

In my constituency, we had a programme called housing market renewal. The idea was that areas of the housing market that were underperforming would be transformed through modernisation, demolition and rebuilding, to create urban environments where people were proud to live—not houses that were simply built to service the industrial revolution but houses that were fit for the future, too. In 2010, when the coalition Government came to power, that scheme was cancelled overnight. That left many streets in my constituency with their windows boarded up. Actually, many of those houses eventually had the boards taken off and are now in the hands of private landlords, who are making an unreasonable amount of money from housing benefit, so that people can live in what I still consider to be substandard accommodation.

The principle of a brownfield fund is really important. Not only is green-belt land more advantageous to build on, but green-belt sites are often the sites that are commercially viable to build on. The problem with many brownfield sites is that mediation—such as taking out any services that might have been there for a different road layout, removing contamination, and removing a lot of very expensive material to landfill—costs a lot of money. In areas such as Oldham, where some of the house prices are depressed—that is certainly the case in Oldham town—it is just not possible to reconcile the high development costs with the end-sale value of those properties. So there must be Government intervention to bridge that gap. None of that is proposed as part of this new settlement for the community, so, as has already been stated, we will have a situation where green-belt land is taken because it is developable and viable and it will make a profit for the developer but, for a range of reasons, brownfield sites will be left as eyesores.

Many sites in active use in my constituency are waste transfer sites—abattoirs or former haulage yards, for example. They are currently earmarked for employment use, because that is their current use, but they are in predominantly residential areas, so the road layout does not service large-vehicle movements. The community would love those sites to be re-categorised for residential development, but that is not allowed under this process because there is a requirement that sites be practically deliverable within the life of the plan. Of course, if the current landowner has no immediate intention of developing that land, it cannot be included because it has no reasonable prospect of being delivered.

We all know that demand for sites for employment use is changing rapidly. Oldham used to have 300 mills. Those that remain are now self-storage. People always said, “We’re always going to need storage, so there’s always going to be a role for Oldham’s mills.” Until, of course, we built high-bay warehousing out of town on the green belt because distribution companies wanted more than mills with five floors, in which it is more expensive to move goods around. That shift in demand should be taken into account.

Local areas should be allowed more flexibility to re-categorise and transform dirty industrial sites into new residential sites. That is not the case at the moment, due to the requirement for there to be a reasonable prospect of a site’s being brought into use within the life of the plan. That does not enable local areas to lead from the front and say to landowners, “We have a better vision for our community than a waste transfer site.”

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for providing that clarification. Just for clarity, he is saying that he is concerned not about the number of houses that are built but about where they are built in his constituency, and that he would like to see higher-density
housing on brownfield sites. I agree with that aspiration. I hope he recognises that that is perfectly within the capability of the local authority and the Mayor in Manchester to decide through their plan process. If he would like to meet representatives of Homes England to talk about the marginal viability funding that we can and do provide for trickier sites that require remediation or other action to make them viable, I would be more than happy to facilitate that.

**Graham Stringer (in the Chair):** Order. I remind hon. Members that interventions should be short and to the point, and that Members should speak when they have the Floor, not from a sedentary position.

**Jim McMahon:** I accept the Minister’s energy on this issue, and I welcome the opportunity to sit down for a meeting. However, the question will be whether he can show me the money. We can have as many conversations over a cup of tea as we like, but it will not get a brick laid in Oldham. We need to see cash, to redevelop the sites that we are talking about and for vital public service infrastructure.

A problem in Oldham is that our schools are oversubscribed; we have an expansion programme in our primary sector and we are looking for sites for new secondary schools to deal with the growth in the number of children who need educating. No facility is being offered by the Government to meet that demand, nor on transport links—we have lost a million miles of bus routes in Greater Manchester. GP practices are overwhelmed. The local A&E has missed its targets constantly because of the number of people waiting on trolleys for four to 12 hours. We cannot build houses without accepting that public infrastructure is needed to service them.

Housing need will be particular to each area; it will be different in Oldham from that in Stockport, Trafford or anywhere else. The real issue for the Government ought to be how much public money is spent on housing benefit payments, given to private landlords for housing that does not meet the decent homes standard. It is a scandal. Billions of pounds are spent every year, including in my town, on renting substandard terraced housing built to service mill workers that has no resale value as such. These houses can be picked up at auction for about £40,000, but landlords charge £500 a month rent to tenants, many of whom will be in receipt of housing benefit. It costs us taxpayers more to pay for that substandard accommodation than to build new social housing or to help people to get on the housing ladder.

We keep hearing that austerity is still in place, and that it is still difficult to find resources. Surely that gives us a bigger responsibility to make sure that money spent in the system is spent to the best effect. The experience in Oldham is that it is not. Too many people live in overcrowded accommodation that does not meet the decent homes standard. We could use that money better. That goes beyond Homes England’s land viability fund. Homes England will say that funding will bridge the gap if homes built on derelict sites have lower-end resale values. However, what if there are streets and streets of terraced housing that are not of the standard required to meet the challenges of the future and to provide people with a decent place to live? We need an urban renewal programme of significant money, geographically anchored, to transform the housing markets in those areas.

The other point I would make is on the community’s feeling in the process. Any situation like this, in which we talk about changing where people live, will be emotive. Many people who live in my constituency, including myself, are dislocated, relocated or newly established former Mancunians. We moved to Oldham, the gateway to the Pennines, because we wanted a different type of lifestyle: we did not want to live in the urban streets of Manchester. By the way, many Manchester properties that we lived in, including the one that I grew up in, have been demolished as part of clearance programmes. Many estates in Royton, for instance, were developed in the ’60s and ’70s, when there was an urban clearance programme in Manchester. People made an active decision to move from the streets of Manchester and to a better lifestyle, with a bigger house with a garden, and fields that they could take their dogs for walks on and where children could play. The idea that that is being taken away—in a process that I am afraid lacks transparency at some points—does not sit well with local people. I will explain what I mean by that.

The original call for sites in 2016 meant that landowners and developers could put forward the sites that they wanted to be considered for development. In that process, I would expect—I have made these representations within Greater Manchester—that there to have been a record, a scoring mechanism and a proper assessment of those sites to determine which then went into the 2016 consultation. I cannot see what assessment was used for some of those sites that have been put forward, and why some had been recommended by developers but not proposed within the plan. I am afraid we are seeing the same thing again.

There is a new site that is massively problematic for my constituents around Thornham Old Road in Royton. That was not part of the original 2016 consultation. It has now found its way into the revised plan. During the consultation, Redrow, the developer, sent letters to the surrounding properties because it apparently wanted to buy one of the houses to knock it down and use the site as an access road. That was before the consultation had even finished, yet we wonder why local people do not have confidence in the system’s being fair, transparent and properly assessed.

It feels like we are being hit from all sides. We are being hit by a Government who are imposing a target that leaders locally are saying is inflated and does not present the latest population data. That means that those leaders are forced to go into the green belt when they would prefer not to. The process is being far too developer-led, not community-led. Not one area in my constituency has a neighbourhood plan developed by the community, where they get to design what their community development will be in future, so they feel as though it is being done from the top down.

**Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con):** Why don’t you do it, then?

**Jim McMahon:** Because the resources needed to produce a plan are significant. Like me, the Minister knows that since 2010, capacity in planning authorities has been massively swiped to one side by Government austerity.
Councillors are struggling to deal with day-to-day planning applications, let alone a voluntary neighbourhood plan process that is hugely time-consuming.

Mr Wragg: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point on neighbourhood plans that I neglected in my remarks. We need to be clear about how the GMSF will take account of those neighbourhood plans. I have three such plans at various stages in my constituency. We need clarity on how they will integrate with the overall GMSF.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): You were being heckled before.

Jim McMahon: I have been heckled by the Minister and the Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake)—I hope the officials do not join in, or it will get a bit out of hand. We were promised after the original consultation that there would be no loss of green-belt land, and we were promised a radical rewrite. I accept completely that Greater Manchester has to comply with the requirements placed on it. I do not hold any Greater Manchester politician responsible for the housing target passed to them, but it cannot be a radical rewrite when for my part of the Borough of Oldham. It is a place where character and nature of what I consider to be a very special area of Oldham.

That is very important.

I briefly wanted to talk about some of the land issues that we have. In August, we will be reflecting on 200 years since the Peterloo massacre, where working people demanded the right to vote. Many in my constituency as it stands today did not return home. They were killed at Peterloo. One of the contributing factors to Peterloo—this is, I accept, a local history point—was that the Rochdale magistrate had been given word that the rebels or radicals had practised military manoeuvres in their hundreds at Tandle Hill in Royton. Word got to the Rochdale magistrate, and they sent word to Manchester. That definitely contributed to the feeling that there would be a riot and civil disobedience that could not be controlled.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. May I ask the hon. Gentleman to quickly come back to the spatial strategy?

Jim McMahon: What I am saying is relevant, because the marching ground at Tandle Hill was eventually planted out with a beechwood to stop people marching there. It is now Tandle Hill country park, which is adjacent to the site proposed for development at Royton. These are important historical sites. The country park is also where the Tandle Hill war memorial is placed. Given the topography of Tandle Hill, it is no surprise that it is on a hill. When someone is stood at the memorial, they are looking down at the sites proposed for development. The development would change the character and nature of what I consider to be a very special part of the Borough of Oldham. It is a place where people can come together, where there is more to life than just work, and where people can enjoy the countryside. That is very important.

It was an issue that the north of the Oldham borough was taking a disproportionate share of redevelopment when the south of the borough had none. We made recommendations that there should be a more fundamental review to make sure that each area took its share of development. In consequence, hugely problematic new sites have been added in the Bardsley and Medlock Vale area of Oldham.

By and large, the community would find a way to reconcile with some of those sites—for instance, a former landfill site that lends itself to development—but because different processes have not been brought together, former public open space is being redeveloped for housing at the same time as new sites are being proposed that take away the green belt around that community. Not only have people lost their immediate urban open space to development, but they are likely to lose the field at the back of their estate too, which further cuts them off.

I do not want a devolution of blame or targets that does not meet with what local people want; I want the Government to genuinely give local people the freedom and ability to decide the future of their communities. It is not enough to say, “We are doing that with the Greater Manchester spatial framework”, because the people who are being forced to make the decisions have been hamstrung by Government-imposed targets. The Government know that and they can do something about it.

I am proud of my local authority. The leadership of Oldham Council is working hard to set a new vision for our town, to give our town direction, and to give us hope and optimism when, to be honest, the Government have walked away from our town. The council wants to use the spatial framework to frame that vision, but it is being forced to go into areas that it would rather not go into, as is the Mayor of Greater Manchester, who has been clear about that.

Let us use the debate as an opportunity, not to restate what we already know—it feels as if that is how the Minister is beginning to line up—but to genuinely reflect on the contributions that have been made and try to seek compromise. If Parliament and the Government learned how to compromise a little more, our politics would be in a better place.

2.12 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon). I am grateful to the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) for securing this important debate. It is a shame that it is on the Thursday afternoon of the non-recess week, so, unfortunately, a lot of our Greater Manchester colleagues are in their constituencies. The hon. Member for Hazel Grove has outlined the background to the Greater Manchester spatial framework, so I will not go over that. I am sure that the Greater Manchester MPs who are here are fully au fait with the scheme, having lived and breathed it for the last three years.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s remarks about preserving wildlife. This morning, in Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions, with reference to the recent report about the decline of the insect population, I asked about the increasing fragmentation of our landscape, which is leading to a decline in pollinating species. We must make sure that these plans do not add to that environmental problem.

I am pleased that the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, took away the original GMSF for revision, and that in the revised version the amount of...
green-belt land earmarked for development in my constituency has been reduced from 4.6% to 2.9%. I also understand that we need a plan. We need housing and employment opportunities plus the infrastructure—roads, schools, health services and public transport—to support them.

I am pleased that Andy Burnham has recognised the need for a joined-up plan that considers all development needs. I am also aware of and pleased about the protective effect of a plan on preserving the remainder of our green-belt land. Without an agreed plan, our green space would be at greater risk from speculative development.

Although the new proposals have reduced the amount of green-belt land proposed for development, what remains is still causing a great deal of unhappiness and outright anger, as in the constituency of my hon. Friend, the Member for Oldham West and Royton. Several well-organised “save the green belt” groups have formed, and they continue to protest against the proposals. Since the new plans were announced, I have been inundated with complaints and comments from constituents. Many appear to hold me personally responsible for the plans, which were drawn up by the 10 combined authorities.

Several green-belt sites in my constituency cause a great deal of concern. I will mention a couple in detail, but there are six in total, including the large Northern Gateway proposal of 1,000 new homes, with a new employment area, plus the link road at junction 19 of the M62. Most of the objections I have received have been to the proposal for Crimble Mill of 250 homes, with redevelopment of the mill, which is a listed building. That is a new proposal, which was not in the first draft, and yet in the council’s own strategic housing land availability assessment of 2017, the area was discounted for development because of flood risk. Many constituents have been in contact to ask me what has changed in the past two years to make the land suitable for building on. I have urged all my constituents to feed their concerns into the online consultation. It is really important for them to do that, in order for their views to be heard properly and, I hope, to be taken into consideration and to make a difference.

Another proposal is to build 450 houses in Bamford, in the northern part of my constituency. That number has been reduced from 750 homes in the initial proposal, but residents remain concerned about the number of houses and the fact that they will all be expensive, non-affordable homes. That is perhaps an unintended consequence of this Government starving our councils of funds—they propose the building of executive homes in order to maximise council tax revenue to replace lost Government funding. There is hardly an incentive for councils to build affordable homes.

As I said, there is a lot of anger in my constituency, with a protest “save the green belt” march planned for Sunday 3 March. Campaigners will come from Middleton and Slattocks in my constituency and from other areas such as Royton, Chadderton, Shaw, Milnrow and Newhey. That march will congregate at Wandle Hill, which we have heard a great deal about from my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton.

Under the previous plan, the borough of Rochdale was set to lose 4.6% of its green belt. As I said, under the new plan that has been reduced to 2.9%, so 15.9% of the borough will remain green belt. That is the highest such figure in the region, out of the 10 combined authorities. Six hundred and forty-five hectares of land are earmarked for development, but that will be offset by 175 hectares that will be protected for the first time. However, many constituents are rightly sceptical about the assignation of parkland such as Queen’s Park in Heywood to the green belt. My constituents can see through that.

We need to be sure, as other Members have mentioned, that every available brownfield site is used first, so that the often-repeated phrase “brownfield first” is not just a slogan but a reality. That is a question for the local authorities as well as for the Minister, but I am interested to hear from him what financial help the Government will make available to councils to undertake the remedial work that is required to develop brownfield sites. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton went into a great deal of detail about that, and I fully support his comments.

Will the Minister make the most up-to-date population projections available to local authorities, to enable them to plan on the basis of realistic figures? We have heard from the hon. Member for Hazel Grove about the impact on the plan of the ONS figures that were released in 2018.

This is a difficult debate. None of us wants to stand in the way of progress or the growth and development of Greater Manchester, but we must get this right without losing our green spaces unnecessarily.

2.20 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) on securing this debate. I will call him a friend, because although we are from different political parties, we represent constituencies in the same borough and have worked together on a number of issues. Sometimes the artificial barriers that this place sets up mask the real co-operation between Members on both sides of the House.

I believe in plan-led systems. They work best when larger areas co-operate over a wide geography, and I have experience of that. Before I became the Member of Parliament for Denton and Reddish, I served for 12 years as a councillor on Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council—one of the 10 councils that make up Greater Manchester. I remember very well, in my early days as a Tameside councillor in the mid-1990s, the proposals to introduce the Tameside unitary development plan. It was intended to replace the Greater Manchester structure plan, which had been in existence since the formation of the Greater Manchester County Council in 1974. The Greater Manchester structure plan, like the Greater Manchester spatial framework, covered the entire county. It made sense, because it meant that economic growth, housing growth and infrastructure planning happened on a county-wide basis, and that there could be co-operation across all the constituent authorities. Spatial planning actually worked. It is no good having 10 individual plans, because all 10 councils want to chase after the same goose that lays the golden egg.

Sadly, that is the situation that we fell into. When the Greater Manchester structure plan became obsolete, the then Conservative Government of John Major instructed the 10 metropolitan borough councils of Greater Manchester to get on and do their own thing.
Each of the 10 local authorities produced its own unitary development plan. That was great for someone looking inside the box of just the city of Manchester—you served as a leader of that local authority for a considerable time, Mr Stringer—Rochdale, Oldham, Tameside or Stockport, but of course those boroughs do not act in isolation from one another.

With devolution, with the creation of the Greater Manchester combined authority and with the election of a Greater Manchester Mayor, I saw a real opportunity to get spatial planning right for the whole county so we can pool and share not just our resources, through things such as business rate retention, but our strengths as a destination—as a place to live and do business. I am biased. I will not get into a debate about which is the second city of this country; I will leave that to Birmingham and London, because we all know that Greater Manchester is the best place in the United Kingdom.

I saw those things as an opportunity, but I feel as though it is slipping away. We have had some really good co-operation on things such as housing targets, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove said very seriously, if Stockport were to go it alone, the housing needs that would fall on Stockport would mean that it would have to eat into the green belt. It is a very constrained borough, in the sense that it is surrounded by the green belt on three of its four sides. The only place where there is no green belt is where Stockport meets the city of Manchester and Tameside, but there is no room for it to grow that way either, because it has developed right up to those boundaries. By co-operating—not only has Stockport done that, but all the other outlying boroughs have done it to a lesser or greater extent—Salford and Manchester have been able to take around 40% of the housing growth for the entire county. That is good, because it will reinvigorate a large swathe of redundant brownfield sites in east Manchester, which borders my own constituency, as well as in the city centre and central Salford. The sites have lain derelict for decades and it is right that they are utilised first.

I do not just want to see growth in the central core, important though that is. There will only be a certain space that comes with houses with gardens. There will have to be housing growth not just in the central core of the conurbation, but in the outlying areas. My hon. Friends the Members for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) and for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) are absolutely right. Unless we can get proper sequencing of “brownfield first”, there is a real danger for our conurbation.

The urban regeneration in the city centre is happening because land values have gone up, which makes brownfield sites worthy of developing, but similar brownfield sites—former old industrial sites that are now suitable for housing in Oldham, Rochdale, Tameside and parts of Stockport—will not have the same land value, and that value falls even further if there is an oversupply of green-belt land. This is about free market economics, and supply and demand. If I am a developer and a mass of sites have been identified, I will go for the cheapest site that gives me the greatest return. Frankly, in Greater Manchester, that is a green-belt site.

There could be much more buy-in to the loss of green-belt land. We all recognise that some green-belt land will have to be developed in the future growth of our city region, but if green-belt land is to be taken, we must have a proper “brownfield first” approach. I do not want to be here in future years saying that my constituents were proved right because the derelict site in the centre of Denton is still derelict 10, 20 or 30 years on, but the green-belt land surrounding Denton has been eaten up by development. If the green-belt land has to be built on—I accept that some of it might have to be—let that be because the brownfield land has been exhausted and it is absolutely necessary to build on the green-belt land. We should be creating sustainable communities. For a community to be genuinely sustainable, we need urban regeneration alongside new builds.

I want to commend the two councils in my constituency. Stockport Council is very ably led by Councillor Alex Ganotis, who is standing down in May. I thank him for his public service. He has done a great job of emphasising the need for urban regeneration. I particularly thank him for what I think will be a great legacy of his: the future regeneration of Stockport town centre. As part of the Greater Manchester spatial framework, with Andy Burnham using his new mayoral powers to create mayoral development corporations, Stockport is going to have the first mayoral development corporation in the country. It will regenerate Stockport town centre, which has got so much going for it. At the moment it is quite derelict on the edges. The historic core of the town—an absolute beauty—does not have the retail offer that it should have. However, the more people we get living and working in the town centre, the more vibrant and active it will become. I commend Stockport Council for its approach to urban regeneration, and I look forward to the mayoral development corporation transforming Stockport into the employment, residential and retail hub that a town of that size should be.

I also pay thanks to Councillor Brenda Warrington, leader of Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council, not least because she is my parliamentary agent; until last month she was also my constituency party chair. She, too, has approached the spatial framework process with fresh eyes. She understands that the environment matters, too; the built environment matters, and the natural environment matters.

One lasting legacy of the old Greater Manchester Council, and something I am really passionate about, is the transformation of the river valleys across Greater Manchester from industrial blackspots in the 1970s to linear country parks. In every part of Greater Manchester, there are river valleys that 45 years ago were industrial wasteland, but anyone standing in them now would think they had always been open countryside. One thing that unites the whole of my constituency, cross borough as it is, is the Tame valley.

I raise the Tame valley because the main campaign that has brought the hon. Member for Hazel Grove and me together is a campaign against the extension of the Bredbury Parkway industrial estate. I am not against economic growth, and Greater Manchester needs to grow economically. It is not a bad thing to want jobs to be created in Greater Manchester, in locations where our constituents can access them, but I have an issue with Bredbury Parkway. The existing industrial estate is locked in by the infrastructure in the hon. Gentleman's...
constituency. It has direct motorway access on to the M60 at Bredbury roundabout, but unfortunately most HGVs cannot use it because they cannot get under the low railway bridge on the main line between Manchester and Sheffield.

I have met Highways England, Network Rail, Stockport Council and the prospective developers. It is fair to say that the prospective developers do not want to pay for any infrastructure upgrades—certainly not of the magnitude required. Highways England and the highways authority of Stockport Council say that the road cannot be lowered under the bridge, because it has already been lowered to its maximum depth; if it is lowered any further, the bridge will fall down. Network Rail says that to rebuild the bridge would involve the closure of the main line between Manchester and Sheffield, which would require funding of many millions that we will not get.

If there is any extension to the Bredbury Parkway, HGVs will have to come through Denton in Tameside to get on the motorway network at Crown Point. My constituents will not have that. They are already blighted by a considerable number of HGVs coming from the Bredbury Parkway scheme. Any extension would not be acceptable to them on traffic grounds or, indeed, on air quality grounds. My constituency is one of the most air-polluted in Greater Manchester. Two motorways run through it—the M60 and the M67—and anything that makes air quality even worse for my constituents is, frankly, not acceptable.

However, the situation is worse than that. The developers propose, aided and abetted by the Greater Manchester spatial framework process, to build very large distribution sheds in the “v” of the Tame valley. Everything at the top of the hill, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Hazel Grove, has basically already been developed, and everything sloping down to the River Tame, which is the constituency boundary as well as the local authority boundary, is currently pasture. Those sheds would be terraced, but—this is worse—they would come right up to the river bank. On the opposite bank are not one but two local nature reserves, which are very precious not to the people who live in my constituency, but to those in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency.

It would be fine to destroy the green belt in that way if we took the jobs argument alone. However, this is not a Stockport local plan—this is not a matter just for Stockport—but a Greater Manchester strategic plan, and over the whole county there is an oversupply of new land for economic development in the spatial framework, so the argument for removing the green belt at Bredbury automatically disappears. That land is not just green belt; it is the Tame valley. It is the thing that unites Tameside and Stockport, and every part of my disparate communities of Dukinfield, Audenshaw, Denton, Reddish and the Heatons. That is why I am so cross; it is why I will continue to oppose the Bredbury Parkway scheme, together with the hon. Gentleman; and it is why I hope those who propose the Greater Manchester spatial framework exercise common sense with the next revisions, which will be published after the consultation ends.

I want very briefly to refer to the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue), who cannot be here. I would probably have had to give her the same dispensation as I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton, because they are both members of the shadow Housing, Communities and Local Government team. She feels really strongly about this issue, so she has asked me to say a few words on her behalf. She has led a campaign with local councillors in Wigan against the use of land to create warehouses by junction 25 of the M6. In 2013, a similar scheme was thrown out by an independent planning inspector, but planning permission has already been submitted for warehousing the size of six football fields, and the jobs have been advertised.

That poses an important question: what is the point of even consulting on a spatial framework if developers can usurp the system as they seem to have done? That is precisely what is happening at Bredbury, where the developers have already held a public consultation. It makes a mockery of the plan-led system. I hope to get reassurances from the Minister that he takes very seriously the principle that developers and others should not seek to usurp the plan-led system, but that we need to get the plans in place before developers seek to develop cherished protected sites.

The other thing that has been mentioned—

Andrew Gwynne: I am bringing my comments to a conclusion. I just want to touch on the second issue of the numbers. We need clarity from the Minister about whether we should use the ONS numbers or the earlier numbers he set out. That brings me back to my first point about supply and demand. If we have an over-supply of green-belt land because we have used the wrong set of figures, how can the Minister give assurances to any of our constituents that those brownfield sites will be developed first?

I hope that the Minister will take on board the concerns we have raised and that he understands our sincerity. We want the best for Greater Manchester—we want our city region to grow and be prosperous—but it has to be sustainable for the future of all our communities.

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): I will attempt to comply, Mr Stringer. It is a great pleasure to appear under your wise and steady hand for the first time. I apologise for my agitation during the debate, but I am eager for houses to be built across our great land for a generation that is crying out for them.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) on securing the debate and on recognising the importance of the plan-making functions of local authorities and the importance of Greater Manchester, which is a place I know well, having been brought up at the far end of the M62 in Liverpool. I look forward to celebrating the relationship between our cities on Sunday afternoon, when the greatest football team of all time will play Manchester United.

Ten local planning authorities make up the Greater Manchester area, which is a key element of the northern powerhouse. The Government fully recognise how vital
joint working between those authorities is to the success of Greater Manchester. The northern powerhouse is about boosting the economy by investing in skills, innovation, transport and culture, as well as devolving significant powers and budgets directly to elected Mayors.

In that spirit, the Government have placed faith in the people of Greater Manchester and their elected representatives to shape their own future. We have backed that up through the devolution of a wide range of powers under the leadership of an elected Mayor. It is the Mayor’s role to work collaboratively across Greater Manchester, and across the political parties, to provide the leadership and coherent vision required. Of course, local MPs should play an important role in the development of his plan.

The Government have also set out a national planning policy in the national planning policy framework, which we revised last year. That sets the overall framework for planning nationally. Local authorities need to bring forward plans for their local areas that respond to the particular nature, challenges and opportunities in their areas, some of which have been outlined by hon. Members.

Our starting position is that we trust local planning authorities, or groups of local planning authorities, as in Greater Manchester and many other parts of the country, to work together to produce plans that reflect the spirit of co-operation and joint working that we want to see. As a matter of law, plans are subject to a range of engagement and consultation with communities and other organisations. That consultation is a vital element of the plan-making process.

Plans are then subject to rigorous examination by independent planning inspectors, who are appointed by the Planning Inspectorate. The planning inspector or, in some cases, a panel of planning inspectors, assesses plans against the national planning policy framework and any other material planning considerations before coming to their conclusions. Ultimately, planning inspectors make recommendations about the soundness of the plan. Paragraph 35 of the NPPF sets out four tests of soundness that plans must pass, namely that they are positively prepared, justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

I am sure that hon. Members will understand that I cannot comment on the content or merits of the draft Greater Manchester spatial framework, as that could be seen to prejudice the Secretary of State’s position later in the planning process. I am aware that the draft spatial framework is out for public consultation until 18 March. I encourage anyone with views about it to respond to the consultation and take an active role in its development, as several hon. Members have. Knowing the tireless work that all hon. Members perform, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove, put into representing the interests of their constituents locally, I am confident that they will take on such a role.

**Jim McMahon:** The development of the spatial framework and the housing target were determined in this place and passed on to Greater Manchester to resolve. We agree with the spatial framework and the need to plan ahead, but there has to be a compromise. One Malthouse compromise has already died a death, so let us redo it for the Greater Manchester spatial framework.

**Kit Malthouse:** The original compromise lives on—

**Jim McMahon:** Malthouse 2!

**Kit Malthouse:** Watch this space. I will come on to housing numbers, but I just want to finish this.

The plan-making process means that there will be a further round of consultation before the plan is submitted for examination by a planning inspector. I understand that that is likely to take place in summer 2019. Anyone with views about the document should make them known at that stage and, given that the timing is not yet fixed, those interested should remain in contact with the Greater Manchester authorities, as I know that all hon. Members and their residents will. The Government fully recognise the need to plan for and build more homes. We are committed to delivering 300,000 additional homes every year by the mid-2020s, and every part of the country has a role to play in reaching that target.

To some specifics, on the green belt, it would be wrong to think that this was just a numbers game. Clearly, the Government are committed to protecting the areas that communities value, including the green belt. The NPPF was revised last year and maintains strong protections for the green belt. It sets a very high bar for alterations to green-belt boundaries, and although a local authority—or even a collection of them, as in this case—can use the plan to secure necessary alterations to its green belt, that is only in exceptional circumstances.

The Government do not list those exceptional circumstances, which could vary greatly. Instead, it is for local plan makers and the Planning Inspectorate examination to check that any change is justified. At this stage, it is worth pointing out that there is obviously a difference between green belt and greenfield. In some cases, I think that hon. Members might be confusing the two terms—one is in regulatory protection, the other is not. Fundamentally, it is for local authorities and local decision makers to provide the evidence base whether for variation of the green-belt boundary or for possible mitigation changes to the boundary by creation of space elsewhere.

It is still the case that the green belt overall in the country is bigger today than it was in 1997. We have taken particular steps to protect it. I also point out that in the NPPF that came out in July 2018, we put greater emphasis on seeking to develop brownfield land, especially within the green belt, as a priority.

A number of Members have mentioned the importance of the environment. As I hope everyone knows, we are in the middle of a consultation on the notion of biodiversity net gain in our housing and general development across the country, and that will conclude later in the year. It is absolutely right that in all we do we should seek to make the environment as much of a priority as we possibly can, and to accommodate and make space for nature.

Several Members mentioned the need for infrastructure. Plans are also about securing the necessary infrastructure to support development. It is essential to identify the type, scale and timing of the infrastructure required in any area, and that applies to smaller-scale infrastructure such as doctors’ surgeries or children’s playgrounds, right up to new hospitals, waterworks or rail connections. By identifying what is needed and where, the planning
system can help to deliver the required infrastructure, either directly through tools such as section 106 agreements or the community infrastructure levy, or indirectly by signalling to utility companies or Government agencies such as the Highways Agency that certain items are required. Those agencies and companies can then build things in their own investment plans.

As I am sure hon. Members are aware, the Government also provide a number of opportunities for local authorities to bid for funding to assist with infrastructure. We have a £5.5 billion housing infrastructure fund, which can be used to bring forward housing sites and to release land for housing in a number of ways, including large infrastructure projects such as the multimillion-pound funding package for Carlisle that we announced last week, which put in a bid.

I am sure that the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) is aware that Oldham has submitted a bid to the housing infrastructure fund for marginal viability funding, which is designed to overcome exactly the sort of problems that he raised in his speech with difficult or marginally viable sites that might require work or some Government assistance to get them under way. We and Homes England are working with his local authority to solve some of the problems that he mentioned.

The hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton also mentioned neighbourhood plans. They have been incredibly popular across the country. About 13 million people now live under a neighbourhood planning system. We have provided £26 million of capacity support for neighbourhood plans, and I recognise that it takes a lot of commitment from local people to take control of planning in their local area. If the hon. Gentleman is having difficulties with neighbourhood plans, I will be more than happy to look at whether we can offer some kind of support because, however long I am in this job, I am keen to see neighbourhood planning established as a way for local people to take control of planning, so that they feel much less like its victims and more its master, particularly when it comes to design.

One area that we have made great play of in policy over the past few months is design. Where new homes are permitted, it is essential that we ensure that they are well designed. That is why we have established the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, chaired by Sir Roger Scruton. We held an important design conference in Birmingham just last week. We have also appointed a chief architect to work at the heart of Government to champion the important role that good design plays. I highlight the fact that the revised NPPF states that permission should be refused for poor design, especially when it fails to take the opportunities available for improving the character and quality of an area.

As has been said, many residents’ objections to new developments tend to stem from the feeling that the new development will detract from the quality of the area. If we can get design right, if we make space for beauty, if we build the conservation areas of the future and communicate that work coherently, people will, we hope, start to welcome new development in their area as something that will enhance it and make it more sustainable.

Finally, I want to raise the issue of numbers. All hon. Members mentioned numbers. We are very keen to see a lot of houses built in this country—perhaps over the decades to come, because we believe that there is huge pent-up demand. We have set a target of 300,000 homes a year by the mid-2020s, and I have heard nobody politically say that that is not a good and ambitious target for us to hit. The question is where those homes should go.

We have attempted to put in a standardised system to assess local housing need across the whole country on a formula basis. The hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton is right to say that the ONS was tasked with producing the first projections, or the basis of the data for projections, of local housing need. Unfortunately, the numbers that the ONS produced created some very anomalous results across the country. For example, in relation to the city of Cambridge, one of the strongest-growing regions in the country and where there is enormous ambition, the 2016 forecast was that there was zero housing need in Cambridge. Other cities’ anomalous results caused alarm. As a result, we took the decision to step back and restore the 2014 numbers, and then consult further on a more coherent system going forward—one that could be generally agreed across the country. We really did not think that, on the basis of those anomalous results, it was a good time for people to take their foot off the accelerator, given that we all accept the strong need for housing, and that both major political parties have made ambitious promises about their housing targets.

I should clarify what the local housing need target is. It is exactly that—a target. It is a baseline from which a local authority can work to effectively establish the number of homes that it needs in its area. In the examination of any plan, a local inspector will look at the plan and accept properly evidenced and assessed variations from that target. If, for example, there are constraints such as an area of outstanding natural beauty, green belt or whatever it might be, and people can justify a lower number, an inspector should accept that. That said, if local authorities are ambitious for their area and want to address the legitimate housing needs of young people—many now have to live at home, with their parents and grandparents, into their 30s and 40s, even in the great cities of the north—they can go ahead of those targets if they wish. That, combined with the duty that now exists in the planning system to co-operate with neighbouring local authorities, means, we hope, that each area can arrive at a figure for provable, established local housing need, which has been assessed by an inspector, from a baseline that across the country will produce a target, we hope, of 300,000 homes.

Jim McMahon: I think, from what I have heard from the Minister—I must double-check this—that we may be making progress. Is the Minister saying that if Greater Manchester, on a proper evidence base, which could include more recent ONS population growth projections, comes forward with a lower housing target, the Government would be open to that?

Kit Malthouse: I am more than happy to write to the hon. Gentleman to set out the precise way in which the target should be taken into account. There has been a lot of misunderstanding, resulting in the notion that this is a mandated number that local authorities have to hit. We recognise that within the United Kingdom there are lots of variables to be taken into account. If a local authority falls largely within a national park, there are
obviously significant constraints on its ability to produce housing. The planning system must be flexible enough to accommodate that.

At the same time, however, I urge all Members to bear it in mind that we have an urgent national mission to build homes. All parties, when in government over the past two or three decades, have failed to build enough houses to accommodate the next generation. As a result, we have seen falls in home ownership, rises in density, and a homelessness problem, and we need to address that situation. Much of it is about supply, and most of that supply will necessarily be built in the great cities of the north and across the whole of the country because, frankly, as the right hon. Gentleman said, they are great places to live; I speak as a former resident of one of them.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I am delighted to hear what my hon. Friend says about mandated numbers and I should be very grateful if he would write to me as well on this issue, because we have just produced an Island plan, and unfortunately we assess that the target of the Government and the Planning Inspectorate would require us to build 640 new homes on the Island. I believe that we should argue that we have exceptional circumstances, and I should be grateful for advice from him, because the problem is that half that housing is for domestic use and the other half is part of a larger market.

Kit Malthouse: I am happy to copy in all hon. Members who are present for this debate, so that they may understand how the local housing target will work. However, I urge hon. Members to recognise that there is a requirement across the whole of the country for us to look for more houses for younger people and, frankly, not to let local authority leaders off the hook—

Mr Seely rose—

Kit Malthouse: I am afraid that I do not have time to give way again. We must not let local authority leaders off the hook in relation to taking the sometimes difficult decisions—they are difficult; I have been a councillor myself—to build and develop the right types of houses in the right places for the next generation.

I appreciate that there is likely to be a range of views about the Greater Manchester spatial framework; that is to be expected, and shows that people care passionately about what happens in their communities, which is a good thing and I applaud it. The current version of the GMSF has been agreed by 10 local planning authorities and the Mayor as being suitable to be consulted upon. That in itself shows a unity of purpose, and no doubt a degree of compromise.

I suspect that there may be further refinements to the framework, and its policies and proposals, over the coming months. As part of that process, some of the important issues that many hon. Members have so passionately highlighted today may be considered.

2.58 pm

Mr Wragg: There have been excellent contributions in this afternoon’s debate from colleagues from across Greater Manchester, including the hon. Members for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) and for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), the shadow Minister—and, indeed, from my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely), who represents that well-known suburb of Greater Manchester, the Isle of Wight.

I am grateful to them all. I was very grateful indeed to the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton for his brief local history lesson. In 1819, those around Greater Manchester flocked to hear Henry “Orator” Hunt at St Peter’s Fields. They have not quite flocked here this afternoon, although we know that people feel passionate about this subject. None the less, we are hopeful that this debate can end on a more cheerful note than Henry Hunt’s speech did. The Minister is a man of great compromise; he will now tackle the Northern Ireland border, as well as the singularly intractable problem of the Bredbury roundabout railway bridge, which he heard about earlier.

On a serious note, we need appropriate housing figures that are fully justifiable; a proper and comprehensive “brownfield first” strategy; and appropriate infrastructure in place so that the Greater Manchester spatial framework realises its potential to be a great success.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework.
Dog Meat in the UK

[Mr Adrian Bailey in the Chair]

3 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered banning the consumption of dog meat in the UK.

It is a pleasure to speak on this issue. This is, unfortunately, the Thursday afternoon slot—I often refer to it as “the graveyard slot”, and today it certainly is. This is the recess week, and many people who signed the petition and added their names to the early-day motion are away. It is a pleasure to see hon. Members here to make a contribution to this debate on a very important issue.

Like my hon. Members, I am a dog lover, and so is my wife. She is a volunteer at Assisi Animal Sanctuary, just outside Newtownards. Since I was a young boy, dogs have played a huge part in my life. I cannot remember not having a dog; I have had them all my life. I remember my first dog, in Ballywalter when I was a four-year-old, very well. It was a collie dog called Flash. Its name has never escaped my mind. It was probably called that because it was like greased lightning; collies usually are. I also recall vividly a story of letting the dog into the back kitchen. We lived in a fishing village. Someone had left us fish for tea, and the dog ate half of it. We never realised what it was all about; we thought we had eaten the other half, but unfortunately that was not how it was.

We can share small stories about our dogs over the years. I remember as a child—I wonder sometimes how I survived my childhood—having an ice cream with the dog sitting alongside me. Every now and again, I gave the dog a wee lick as well, and I just kept on eating. It never did me any harm; that is a fact. I would not recommend it, but as children we did not have the precautionary attitude to life that we do now.

Dogs are and have always been an extension of my family. My dog—really my wife’s dog—is Autumn. We got it from Assisi. It had been badly treated, and she took it in. I remember that when it first came to our house, it was very nervous and scared. It obviously had a very difficult entry into this world. After it came to our house, it gained confidence. It had our love, and all of a sudden its attitude changed.

Dogs have two things in life that they want: they want to be loved and to love. It is as simple as that. A dog sees things very simply. We had a collie dog early on, and then we had Pomeranians and Jack Russells, and now we have springer spaniels. The reason why we have springer spaniels is that we love hunting and shooting. That is where I come from. Therefore, our dogs have a purpose in life. They say that you never own a Jack Russell; a Jack Russell owns you. As the owner of a Jack Russell, I can say that that is true. We have had many Jack Russells over the years, and they have taken over our lives.

Over the past weeks and months, I have heard enough about the horrifying practices of the dog meat trade to upset any animal lover. I thank animal welfare charities such as the World Dog Alliance for highlighting this issue, and for the work they are doing to stop this horrific practice. I am here today to call on the Government to enact a ban on the consumption of dog meat in the UK. That is why we are all here. It is unfortunate that others could not be here. They wanted to be, but they made other arrangements for the recess week.

Each year, about 30 million dogs are slaughtered for human consumption around the world. In China, it is estimated that 70% of those dogs are stolen pets. That horrific practice has a big impact on families.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. It is unfortunate that more people could not be here; it is probably because of the timing. I have known many people over the years who have campaigned on this issue, particularly about the dog festivals outside the UK. They are horrified by that. Once it comes to light that it is not illegal to consume dog and cat meat in the UK, they are shocked. They have been campaigning for the law to change in another country, but they have not realised that it is not illegal here. That is one reason why legislation should be brought forward.

Jim Shannon: What my hon. Friend says is absolutely right. Many of us are horrified. I see the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) in his place. He has tabled an amendment to the Agriculture Bill that I and my hon. Friend have put our names to. The hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) would have liked to have been here, but as we all know, unfortunately he hurt himself this week and had to go home early. He moved a ten-minute rule Bill this week.

Many of us have suddenly realised that there is a technical loophole in the legislation in the United Kingdom, and we want to use this occasion to highlight the issue and alert people so that they realise that we have not made it illegal to eat dogs or cats in the United Kingdom. It is against the law to kill them and to sell the meat, but it is not against the law to eat them, and that is why we want to bring legislation forward.

My hon. Friend and I, and others here to contribute to the debate, are well aware of the background information. It is truly horrific to observe how dogs are killed and the inhuman treatment they go through. Dogs, like cargo, they are cramped in small cages and put under physical and mental torment as they wait to be killed for their meat. Worse still are the misplaced beliefs dictating that dogs are tastier and that their meat is filled with better properties if the animals are stressed or in pain at the moment of death. That results in the widespread torture of these poor animals. In many cases, dogs are skinned, boiled or even blowtorched alive. If that is not animal cruelty, what is? It is horrific, horrendous and should not be allowed anywhere in the world.

How can we as a proud nation of animal lovers—we make that gesture and statement many times—stand aside as millions of dogs are subjected to that fate? The Government will say that it is illegal to sell dog and cat meat in the UK and that no abattoirs can be issued with a licence to slaughter dogs. That is true, but the fact remains that it is legal for an individual to kill a dog or cat and eat it here in the UK in their own homes. We want to look towards change. That is why the hon. Member for Clacton tabled the amendment to the Agriculture Bill, why the ten-minute rule Bill was moved and why we are here today.
Many others support what we are saying. Thankfully, there are no official cases of dog or cat meat being eaten in the United Kingdom, but we should make explicitly clear that the totally unnecessary practice of eating dogs will never be welcome. Nor can we condone the cruel practice elsewhere in the world.

Emma Little Pengelly: Although in the debate thus far people have made the case that there is no evidence that dog or cat meat is eaten within the UK, it can be very difficult to prosecute that type of crime. Surely the key thing is that it gives the UK the opportunity to be a world leader and join those other countries that have stepped forward to legislate, despite the fact it is not a problem in their countries. It sends a message to those countries where it is a common practice that we believe it is not acceptable. It also sends a message clearly across the UK that we do not want this practice to grow here either.

Jim Shannon: What my hon. Friend says is very true. I will speak later about the number of countries that have signed up and changed the law, as will other Members. It indicates why we are looking for change. Our reputation as a leader on animal welfare is testament to our national love of animals. The Animal Welfare Act 2006 was pioneering legislation in this country. We led the world. It outlined our national duty of care to those unable to speak for themselves, and it set the international standard. Under the legislation, animals in the UK are protected from pain, injury and suffering. I beg the House and the Government to consider our canine companions in the same light.

As anyone who grew up with a pet dog or cat will know, they can, and do, take up a lot of our lives. When I met my wife, she was a cat lover and I was a dog lover. I was not all that fond of cats, to be honest, but it was simple: “Love me, love my cat.” I acquired an affection for cats, and we now have four or five in our house. More often than not, people will say that the cats or dogs are members of the family. Our companions are treasured, loved, and spoiled, yet around the world millions of dogs live short, unimaginable lives and are subject to incredibly cruel practices. I wonder if many Members here could imagine the same fate for their pets.

In Prime Minister’s questions just last week, the Prime Minister said:

“Animal welfare is a priority for this Government.”

We welcome that commitment, which I think was in response to a question from an hon. Member here. She said she hoped

“that other countries will join the UK in upholding the highest standards of animal welfare.”—[Official Report, 13 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 887.]

To maintain that position, we must show, in unequivocal terms, that we cannot tolerate the consumption of dog meat.

Last night, in an Adjournment debate on horse tethering, the Minister referred to legislation in Northern Ireland, where we can impose penalties of up to five years for animal cruelty. We have a positive and enlightening attitude towards animal cruelty in Northern Ireland. The Minister referred to the five-year sentence; I think he hopes that it can be introduced in the mainland as well.

Introducing a ban on consuming dog meat would have a tremendous effect worldwide. Animal welfare charities such as the World Dog Alliance tell us that they face key barriers in their efforts to ban the practice worldwide. A ban would send a powerful message to countries where this horrific and disturbing practice takes place. We can no longer stand idly by. Enacting the ban would demonstrate the UK’s willingness to join global efforts to ban this horrific practice, standing shoulder to shoulder with the many animal rights and welfare charities working day and night to protect our beloved companions and it would save millions of dogs from torture and unspeakable death.

I will say again—I mean this sincerely and honestly; I am a dog lover—that dogs are our companions. They are not, and should never be, food. In practical terms, I ask the Government to consider a simple thing. A ban would put no additional pressure on the Government’s purse strings. We know that no dogs are eaten in the United Kingdom, and therefore that no additional resources would be required to police such a ban. Instead, by simply closing this legal loophole, we would send a powerful signal internationally that we do not condone the human consumption of dogs.

There is a great depth of feeling in Parliament to ban this practice. To date, more than 60 MPs have demonstrated cross-party support in various forms, with 32 backing an amendment to the Agriculture Bill tabled by the hon. Member for Clacton. Both myself and my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) have added our names to that. We hope that the Government will take that amendment on board when the Agriculture Bill is next debated.

As hon. Members will have seen in recent coverage in The Sun, the Daily Express and in the popular online magazine, LADBible, a ban on the consumption of dog meat also has widespread support from the general public. I believe that what we ask the Government to look towards reflects the opinion of the general public. Widespread support for banning the human consumption of dog meat was clearly demonstrated in 2016, when a parliamentary petition protesting the dog meat trade in South Korea received more than 100,000 signatures, resulting in a parliamentary debate in that country. Many of my colleagues have spoken against the practice and have called for action.

I am pleased to say that, since then, South Korea’s largest dog farm has been closed down, and the Mayor of Seoul vowed last week to shut down all dog slaughterhouses. This shows a clear and increasing demand for change from east Asian countries. Last year, a Gallup survey found that only 15% of people felt positively about the dog meat trade. I do not think we can ignore those opinions where we see something wrong happening. There is a change coming there as well.

The movement against dog meat is also visible in China, where 64% of the population support a ban on the Yulin dog meat festival, which my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South mentioned. One in seven people in China has never eaten dog meat and nine out of 10 people in Shanghai want a ban, so even in China attitudes and trends are changing. If we take the stance that other countries have taken, it would be a positive
step in the right direction. Sending powerful international messages and applying pressure can and does make a difference and would add to the momentum.

In September, following mounting international pressure against the dog meat trade, the Hanoi people’s committee urged residents to stop eating dog meat, as it was concerned that the horrific practice was tarnishing the city’s image as a modern and civilised capital. What we do here has influence over there, which is why this debate is so important. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to have the debate and for giving us the chance to be here. I look forward to what other hon. Members have to say, particularly the shadow Minister and the Minister, about how we can move the campaign forward.

Taiwanese and Japanese officials have already written to the Secretary of State to persuade our Government to support a ban. A member of the House of Councillors, Kusuo Oshima, highlighted the similar legal loophole that allows the consumption of dogs in Japan. With the 2020 Tokyo Olympics close at hand, he feels that it would be an honour to work closely with our country, as a leader in animal welfare, to make the change and put legislation in place.

The Environment Minister Yoshiaki Harada and his officials have already committed to follow the progress of the ban in the UK as an animal welfare leader. The introduction of legislation in the UK, as well as in the US, would help to give them the confidence to outlaw dog meat consumption in Japan. Collectively and singly, in this country and across the world, we can make the change that many people clearly wish to see.

Our influence in animal welfare has also been shown through efforts by Chinese officials to introduce a pet theft Bill to tackle the dog meat trade. Two people’s representatives have introduced the Bill because stolen dogs are generally sold to be eaten. It is tragic that when dogs go missing in some parts of the world, they can end up on somebody’s table, although I am mindful that, in many cases, dogs are treated as part of the family. As such, the Bill is a major first step towards introducing a ban on the human consumption of dog meat. I am informed that it was partly inspired by our Pets (Theft) Bill, which is making its way through Parliament. I thank the Government and the Minister in particular for the changes they are making there.

The United States of America is the latest country to enact a ban on the consumption of dog and cat meat. In December, the US House of Representatives took the lead in passing the farm Bill, which states that no person may “ship, transport, move, deliver, receive, possess, purchase, sell, or donate...a dog or cat to be slaughtered for human consumption; or a dog or cat part for human consumption.”

That Bill laid the law down and made the change.

Let us be clear: the US ban is significantly stronger than the UK’s current legal situation. They have gone a step further and I believe that we need to match that. The US ban explicitly forbids the human consumption of dog meat by covering the personal use and possession of dog meat, not just its commercial sale. The recent US regulations, therefore, far outstrip our current legislation. In practice, it is now illegal in the US for an individual to kill a dog or cat to consume its flesh. At the moment, we cannot say the same in the United Kingdom.

Through that pioneering legislation, the US joins the ranks of Germany, Austria, Taiwan, South Australia and Hong Kong, which all have bans in place. The US ban is important because of the motivation involved—clearly, eating dog or cat meat is not a problem in the US. US lawmakers passed the ban solely because of the impact it would have on the international efforts to eradicate the cruel practice.

That is made clear in the letters to the Prime Minister from the Congressman who introduced the law in the US. Congressman Jeff Denham, a proponent of the legislation in the US, has said that adopting this policy signals that “the U.S. will not tolerate this disturbing practice in our country”. It also demonstrates “our unity with other nations that have banned dog and cat meat, and it bolsters existing international efforts to crack down on the practice worldwide.”

Hopefully today in this House, through this debate and through our Minister and Government, we can add our support and our names to similar legislation, raising awareness and moving forward.

In their letter to the Prime Minister, Alcee Hastings, Vern Buchanan, Theodore Deutch and Lee Zeldin—all Congressmen of the House of Representatives—said: “The adoption of this important legislation not only sent a message to people in the United States, but also, those around the world, putting all who engage in this heinous practice on notice that it will no longer be tolerated regardless of where it is found to occur...the slaughter of dogs”—and cats—“does not prevent hunger or improve human welfare, nor is there any economic justification to continue this horrific practice.”

In enacting the ban, the US has played an important role in influencing the international animal welfare agenda. We are here today to highlight that and to raise awareness. Again, I look to the Minister and our Government to do the same.

As we look towards the end of March and our departure from the European Union—the Brexit question is at least part of this—we must consider what type of nation we want the UK to be. Do we want to be outward-looking or insular? Active or idle? A global leader or one that lags behind our peers? I think of all those here today who will go back to their constituencies and homes to be with pets and loved ones this weekend. Do we not owe it to our companions across the great continents and countries of the world to take these steps? We look for the Government to match the change in the USA and the countries mentioned earlier. We look to match the change in South Korea. We look to highlight the issues.

I call on the Government to enact a ban as soon as possible, either through primary or secondary legislation—as long as it is a full and explicit ban on the human consumption of dog and cat meat. Further, any person found to be in violation of such a ban should be subject to a fine and/or a prison sentence of six months. It is time this House sent the message and changed the law, and I believe the Government will find a way to do that.

Mr Bailey, I thank you for giving me the chance to speak. I look forward to the contributions from other hon. Members, and particularly to the comments of the shadow Minister—the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin)—and the Minister.
3.23 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important debate. Without any shame at all, I hope to reinforce a lot of what he has said about this important issue. Some of those watching these proceedings might question why we are discussing it at all. I appreciate that view because I have had letters in my inbox saying that there are other important things going on at the moment that we should get on with, but this issue is important, and all of us, to a greater or lesser degree, have the ability to multitask.

Many of those watching will think that cat and dog meat is already illegal in this great, forward-looking country of ours. Sadly, as has been stated, that is not the case. Amazingly, it is still legal to personally slaughter meat in the UK, and I am sure most people would think such an idea abhorrent. In 2018 there were 20 million dogs and cats in the UK, and those wonderful companions have a positive impact on our lives. In our culture, they are our friends, confidants and playmates. They are our companions, and they have a great, measurable and positive impact on mental health. They are not food and must be protected here and internationally. A proper and comprehensive ban on consumption in this country can do just that.

Granted, as the Prime Minister said in response to my question last week, there are extensive restrictions in place in the UK to prevent the commercial sale of dog meat for human consumption, and I understand that there are similar restrictions in place for cat meat. Yet there is a glaring loophole in the law, as the hon. Member for Strangford pointed out, and as I touched on. That loophole must be closed. Thankfully, 33 colleagues from across the House agree and have signed my amendment to the Agriculture Bill. Of course—I am shamelessly advertising here—we would warmly welcome any others who wished to join us and pledge their support, too.

In the light of our shared desire to close that loophole, I am grateful to the Minister for confirming that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will look into this matter in the coming weeks, and I look forward to hearing what it comes up with. We can close the loophole quickly through secondary legislation, although that would require careful discussion to ensure we ticked all the necessary boxes.

I want to deal with the questions, some of which have been raised, about why we need to address this statutory deficiency at all. I recognise that some may say this is unnecessary or even just virtue signalling, given that there are no recorded instances of the consumption of dog or cat meat in the UK. However, even if it is virtue signalling, I say, “Why not? Let’s signal our virtue—our morality—on this issue to the rest of the world.” We can be ahead of the curve by getting legislation in place now, and can head off any possible incidents here.

Changing the law would also send a powerful signal internationally about our moral opposition to this horrific practice, and encourage other nations to introduce similar measures. The most important point was made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) when he introduced his Bill earlier this week.

During his excellent speech, he told us that Chinese authorities have said, “Until you make it illegal, why should we?” They have a point. We should lead the world on this issue, as we do on other international issues. We have already led the world in opposing ivory poaching, even though we have no elephants roaming the south of England—or anywhere else in Britain, for that matter. We should seek to mirror that example, as we should our world-leading opposition to modern slavery, bull fighting and whaling.

Unfortunately, that is not happening with dog and cat meat. As the hon. Member for Strangford said, we are coming in behind Germany, Austria, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Australia and America, where possession and consumption became an offence this year even though the problem is not widespread in the US either. The US Congress believed it was right to pass a ban regardless, to demonstrate its support for global efforts to eradicate this cruel practice. I would like to thank publicly those Members of Congress who sent a letter supporting my amendment directly to the Prime Minister.

It is important to recognise that that ban in America provided a real boost to the international prohibition campaign. We now have an opportunity to do the same and to help lead the global effort to combat these sickening practices. All we need to do is take the minor legislative step of outlawing the consumption of dog and cat meat with a proper, comprehensive ban. That is the right thing for us to do, as a nation of animal lovers. As I said earlier—it is worth saying again—these are our companions. They are not food.

As the hon. Member for Strangford said, 30 million dogs and 4 million cats—more than all the dogs and cats in the UK—are still slaughtered every year around the world for their meat. Of those, 15,000 are killed during the 10-day Yulin festival in China, which is often accompanied by international condemnation. Those animals are often stolen and, as we heard, kept in small, filthy cages with little food or water. There is a strong but erroneous belief that if they are suffering, their meat is tastier and has medicinal qualities—it does not—and that if they experience high levels of stress when they are killed, they are better to eat. That is obviously wrong. It results in horrendous suffering.

Those animals are often boiled, skinned and blow-torched, and—the hon. Gentleman said it—that happens to them while they are alive. They are blow-torched alive. That is horrific animal cruelty. No animal should suffer such pain and trauma. No person should, either. We should be humane. We should honour these animals that live with us. I thank the World Dog Alliance for its efforts to raise awareness of this troubling issue.

I am sure that anyone with a pet who heard what I just said about animals, and what the hon. Member for Strangford said earlier, would be distressed. We all feel that our pets are to be valued. I, too, am a proud owner of three noisy dogs, and I want to get them into Hansard. They are Mini, a 19-year-old Jack Russell, and Herbie and Humphrey, who are indeterminate, but there is a poodle in there somewhere.

Cherishing our pets is surely a very British value, which can be utilised to prevent animal welfare abuses abroad. The Government are keen to assert our values through the Global Britain scheme, and this is a great opportunity for us to do just that. I recognise that it will take time to change hearts and minds, but nothing
worth having is ever easy. As to how to do that, I believe there are ways to achieve a proper ban through secondary legislation, as I said, so it could be done quickly, but I will not go into that in detail. I want to hear what proposals DEFRA will come back with.

To conclude, I grew up with animals—horses, dogs, cats and all sorts—and that personal experience ensures that I am a keen supporter of animal welfare. It is always high on my agenda. I am keen to see the Government continue their positive recent record on dealing with animal welfare, which has rightly led to international renown. Properly banning the consumption of dog meat in this country—that must include private consumption—will send an international message and set an example for others to follow.

To come back to my opening question, that is why we are present today: to show our moral opposition to such deplorable practices, and to do more than just offer words of distaste, which will do nothing to protect animals around the world—only concrete action and a proper and comprehensive ban here in the UK, followed by a sustained projection of our shared values globally, will do that.

I again thank the Minister for his answer this morning and for his constructive assistance so far. I look forward to continuing to discuss the matter with him in the coming weeks.

3.32 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I thank the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Clacton (Giles Watling) for their impassioned contributions to the debate. I was at the Backbench Business Committee when the hon. Member for Strangford made the case for holding this debate on the consumption of dog meat in the UK. I also take the opportunity to recognise the work of the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin), who is not present, on his Dog Meat (Consumption) (Offences) Bill, which obviously contributed substantially to this debate.

Jim Shannon: I should have said earlier that the hon. Lady’s colleague, the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), also could not be present, but wished to be part of the debate. She accompanied me to the Backbench Business Committee to ask for the debate, so I want to recognise her and what she did to make this happen.

Angela Crawley: I am sure that my hon. Friend will be grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s recognition.

As we heard, the World Dog Alliance has called for an explicit ban on the consumption of dog meat in the UK and has stated exactly why that is necessary. It is acknowledged that the issue is not one that is predominant in the UK, and there is no tangible evidence of such consumption. However, in a recent campaign, the Humane Society International rescued more than 170 dogs from a dog meat farm in South Korea. It is estimated that South Korea has about 17,000 dog farms, breeding more than 2.5 million dogs a year for human consumption. Around the world, it is believed that approximately 30 million dogs are eaten annually.

We heard from the hon. Member for Clacton that the Yulin festival takes place from 21 to 30 June. The lychee and dog meat festival is an annual 10-day event at which more than 10,000 dogs are eaten. Dog eating is traditional in China where, according to folklore, eating the meat during the summer months brings luck and good health. We have heard about some of the abhorrent practices that exist.

The hon. Member for Strangford is a vociferous campaigner on a great many issues. In fact, I cannot think of an issue about which he does not have something to say, which is quite impressive. His contribution was heartfelt, and so is his devotion to his own dogs—whether the collies, the Pomeranians or the Jack Russells. He said that dogs are often loved companions. They are not just family pets but part of our families. He highlighted the terrible conditions and practices, the abhorrent torture and animal cruelty, and the beliefs that fuel the trade in Asia. He called on the Government to set an international example.

The hon. Member for Clacton made an impassioned contribution on this rather unlikely subject. He called for a comprehensive ban, and asked for DEFRA to review the matter. It is entirely reasonable that we call on the Government to do everything they can in this regard.

It is accepted that this is not an issue in the UK, and that there is no evidence that dogs are being consumed here. However, we have heard that the US and other countries such as Germany, Austria, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Australia are leading by example, even though this is not necessarily an issue in many of them. Although the commercial trade in dog meat is illegal in the UK, it is clear that maintaining the highest standards of animal welfare ought to be our paramount consideration. The UK’s Farm Animal Welfare Committee currently advises DEFRA Ministers on this matter. I hope the Minister will consult it on this issue.

Although many aspects of this issue still remain reserved to the UK, many are not. The Scottish Government have established a Scottish animal welfare commission. Like the UK’s Farm Animal Welfare Committee, it will form an animal expert advisory group that will advise on animal welfare, introducing new legislation, issuing Scottish Government guidance and public awareness campaigns. The Scottish Government have also committed to consult on amending the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006. That consultation ended in January 2019. The proposed changes to the 2006 Act include increasing the penalties for the most serious abuses of animals, including attacking emergency service animals. It will also include fixed penalty notices for lesser offences, and will create enforcement bodies to rehome and sell on animals seized when welfare is compromised. The Scottish Government are using the powers that they have to do as much as they can, including on animal welfare, improving conditions, providing CCTV in slaughterhouses, ensuring that domestic animal welfare is improved through licensing, and introducing licensing for animal sanctuaries, rehoming agencies and commercial breeders.

It is essential that all Governments, including the Scottish Government and the UK Government, lead by example and do all they can for animal welfare. The international pressure that the Government can bring to bear on countries where this practice is prevalent is absolutely necessary. It could end the abhorrent practices of the consumption of dog meat. I hope the Minister will listen to the calls from across this House and see what more the UK Government can do in that regard.
Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate. Hon. Members from across the House will join the vast majority of people in this country in being upset at the very thought of eating dog meat. The hon. Gentleman made a powerful case, as did the hon. Members for Clacton (Giles Watling) and for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley). The hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) did so, too, in presenting his ten-minute rule Bill in Parliament on Tuesday.

The very good news is that there is no evidence that dog meat is actually being consumed in the United Kingdom. We all want to ensure that it stays that way. There are questions that need to be asked about the most effective ways to prevent the consumption of dog meat ever becoming an issue in this country. Clearly, if the consumption of dogs started to occur in the United Kingdom, the Government would need to take action. I feel sure that if the Government are considering taking action, they will seek to make it effective.

I fully support the contention that this country needs to join others, such as the United States, in sending a strong message to China, the Republic of Korea and other countries where dog meat is eaten. If we do, we need to ensure that we do not pick on one particular country, in order to avoid apologists for consuming dog meat claiming that the United Kingdom is using this issue as an excuse to attack their country. It is the principle of eating dogs, and the unspoken cruelty that the trade involves, that we need to concentrate on. I echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew):

"The UK government needs to stand up for man’s best friend and ensure that we are upholding our reputation as leaders in animal welfare."

At the same time, I do not want animal welfare campaigns in the UK to divert resources away from other serious issues, such as puppy smuggling, hare coursing or dog fighting, which are actually prevalent and inflict cruelty on dogs in our own country. All cruelty to animals weakens and coarsens our society. People who grow up with a cavalier attitude to animal cruelty are that much more likely to inflict cruelty on other people as well, especially in a domestic situation. Connected to that, I ask the Minister: when are we likely to see the Secretary of State’s proposed animal sentence Bill? Even more importantly, when will we see increased sentences for animal cruelty offences, which have been promised for more than a year but show no sign of being brought forward?

I do not want to prolong the debate unnecessarily, so I will simply say that we fully support any measures that will protect dogs from cruelty. We share the strongly expressed wish of the hon. Member for Strangford and others that this country should use its influence to persuade others to stop eating dogs.

3.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I join in congratulating the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this important debate. It has been said that he is a redoubtable campaigner on many issues, and he certainly is. We welcome his enthusiasm for this subject.

I recognise the interest and concern on this issue generated in recent weeks as a result of several things, including the amendment to the Agriculture Bill tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) and the questions asked earlier today in Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions and yesterday in PMQs. We wish my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) a speedy recovery.

I also thank the World Dog Alliance for its ongoing dog meat campaign, which has drawn people’s attention to the plight of dogs in other parts of the world. They are often kept in dire conditions before being slaughtered, often in brutal and painful ways, as has been set out. Alongside, I am sure, all Members here, I condemn any practice that subjects animals to inhumane suffering and distress. Everyone, from whatever cultural or religious background, can unite in horror at unnecessary pain and suffering.

In this country, and indeed in many—I might say most—others, people just do not eat dog meat, on clear moral grounds. To us, wanting to eat man’s best friend is morally repugnant, as has been highlighted. As well as being loyal companions, many dogs dedicate their lives to protecting us and to making our lives better. They help us by bravely helping the police to restore public order, detecting banned substances, heroically searching for victims of earthquakes, helping to rescue people stranded on mountains—I recognise the work of the mountain rescue teams in Buxton and Kinder, close to my constituency, in this important area—and by providing invaluable assistance to people with visual or hearing issues or other disabilities. As a patron of the Macclesfield and District Sheep Dog Trials Association, it would be completely wrong of me not to recognise the huge contribution that these incredible working dogs make to the lives of many farmers.

Knowing what remarkable acts dogs are capable of, it is all the more surprising that anybody, anywhere, would consider keeping them for their meat. This debate has shown that the public and their representatives in this Chamber are rightly concerned about the welfare of animals, including when they are slaughtered or killed. They expect the Government to ensure that appropriate welfare protection measures are in place to ensure that animals are treated properly and humanely.

The Government abhor acts of cruelty to animals. That is why we have in place laws to deal with such appalling acts. In this country, it is an offence to cause any unnecessary suffering to an animal or to fail to provide for an animal’s welfare. The maximum penalty for both offences is six months’ imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine. The Government have already announced that they will go further and increase the maximum custodial penalty for animal cruelty to five years. That is one of a number of commitments that we have made to improve the welfare of animals. The hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) asked when that would happen, and the answer is that it will be as soon as we can get parliamentary time and get the right vehicle in place, because obviously there are very important measures ahead of us. But it is a huge priority. I hope that the hon. Gentleman can understand that there is a sincere commitment to take it forward.

3.38 pm
Sandy Martin: That is of course the answer that the Minister had to give, but it is exactly the same answer as was given a year ago. This will not be a complicated Bill or one that takes a long time to get through. In fact, I have been told by someone—I am not sure whether this is true—that there could be an increase in the sentencing regulations as part of a statutory instrument; it would take only a day to do it.

David Rutley: I recognise the hon. Gentleman’s frustration and desire to move things forward. I can assure him, on the sentencing point, that that cannot be done by secondary legislation. It requires primary legislation, and that is why we are in this situation. However, I can assure him and others in this Chamber that we are moving forward on that front. The same would apply to animal sentence, on which there was clearly an outpouring of concern several months ago. We are actively working on that issue with stakeholders.

I paid tribute earlier to service animals. To underline the Government’s commitment to protecting them, we are supporting Finn’s law—a private Member’s Bill currently before Parliament. Finn’s law makes it clear that attacking a service animal or dog is an offence under the Animal Welfare Act 2006. The Animal Welfare (Service Animals) Bill will have its Second Reading in the House of Lords on 1 March, having successfully completed stages in the Commons. I was pleased to hear that the Scottish Government are taking similar steps; that is to be commended.

We are going further to protect animal welfare by banning the third-party selling of puppies and kittens. That will ensure that only breeders can sell puppies and kittens for commercial purposes. We are banning certain types of electronic training collars for dogs. We have introduced an updated and improved animal activities licensing regime to cover dog breeding, cat and dog boarding, pet selling, riding schools and exhibiting animals. The new licensing regime came into force last October and means that licensees must maintain statutory minimum welfare standards. The licensing regime also encourages licensees to adopt higher standards, which, when achieved, will mean longer licences and fewer inspections.

I am very pleased to say that, as of last November, all slaughterhouses in England need to have closed circuit television in operation to aid official veterinarians in monitoring and enforcing animal welfare standards.

The Government—led, I am proud to say, by this Department—have animal welfare at the top of their agenda. I again recognise and welcome the steps that are being taken by the Scottish Government, which were highlighted by the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley).

The hon. Member for Strangford eloquently outlined in his speech, and I want to make it clear, that there is no evidence that dog meat is consumed in this country. That is a relief to us all. My hon. Friend the Member for Clacton and the hon. Member for Ipswich also made that point. We have on the statute book a combination of laws that, taken together, make it extremely difficult even to conceive of doing such a thing. Most importantly, it is already an offence to sell dog meat commercially for human consumption. Strict food hygiene measures mean that dogs and cats cannot currently be commercially slaughtered, or sold or given to others for human consumption. There are strict rules for food businesses on slaughter and production of meat for human consumption in the UK, and dog meat would not be permitted under those requirements.

We have specific laws on the sale of food. EU regulation 2015/2283 on novel foods prohibits the sale of dog meat in the EU. That is enforced in England by the Novel Foods (England) Regulations 2018, which make it an offence to sell dog meat in England. That prohibition will, I am pleased to reassure hon. Members, be retained after EU exit. As colleagues will know, the UK has very strict rules on the welfare of animals at the time of killing; the rules are contained in EU regulation 1099/2009. Slaughterhouses must be licensed to kill certain species of animal. No slaughterhouse in the UK is currently licensed to slaughter dogs, which means that dogs cannot be slaughtered for human consumption. We are exploring how that can be strengthened.

Furthermore, it would be highly unlikely that an individual would or could humanely kill their dog, although it is technically legally possible. To humanely kill a dog would involve either a lethal dose of barbiturates—the recommended method—which would have to be carried out by a vet and would render the meat unfit for human consumption, or it would involve the correct use of a firearm, for which someone would need a licence, or the correct use of a captive bolt gun. It is important to emphasise, as hon. Members have, that there is no evidence of the consumption of dog meat in the UK.

I commend the United States for introducing legislation to ban the slaughter of dogs and cats for human consumption, which brings it broadly into line with the position in the UK and the EU. The US legislation is not a complete ban on the consumption of dog meat, as some have claimed. It is important to point out that there are good reasons why we and other countries have stopped short of banning the consumption of dog meat. It would be difficult to prove that someone had consumed it—a successful prosecution would need to prove beyond all reasonable doubt that dog meat had been consumed by the accused, which might require testing.

A relevant comparison is that we do not ban the consumption of drugs—instead, we ban on the possession and sale of drugs, which is the focus of criminal prosecution. Proving beyond all reasonable doubt that someone has knowingly consumed dog or cat meat would be very difficult in practice. Unless we have a witness or video evidence of someone slaughtering, preparing and eating a dog or a cat, a defendant would be able to claim that they were unaware of what they were eating, which would prevent the prosecution from meeting the standard.

Proving consumption to the required criminal standard would also require proving beyond all reasonable doubt that the defendant had ingested the banned substance. That would require a form of intrusive test, such as a blood test. There are other tests, but we will not go down that route now—it could be unpleasant, so let us leave it at blood tests for the moment. For the same reasons, there is no offence in English law of consumption of human meat.

I admire and agree with the intention behind the debate and the campaigners, including those in the Gallery, but it is clear that there are challenges with the proposed solution. The Government have an ambitious programme of animal welfare reform. We want to ensure that we can use the parliamentary time available to
[David Rutley]

deliver on our commitments on animal sentience; on increasing maximum sentences for animal cruelty, as I have said; and on banning the use of wild animals in circuses. Those measures will have a direct and positive impact on the welfare of animals in the UK. I am pleased that the hon. Member for Ipswich is itching to help the Government to take those measures forward. I welcome his support.

I understand, not least from today’s debate, that one of the core aims of the campaign is to set an example and highlight to other countries that the UK considers that the dog meat trade is cruel and unnecessary. I applaud that aim and the contributions that have been made to the debate. The Secretary of State and I are working with DEFRA officials to explore what more we can do to address the matter, as I set out in my response to my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton in DEFRA questions today.

We want to send a clearer message, particularly to those countries where dog meat is eaten, that the consumption of dog meat should never be tolerated. That includes raising the issue directly with other countries. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has discussed it with South Korean counterparts. We are working through other avenues, including with welfare groups such as the Humane Society International, which has been highlighted—the dialogue with HSI was opened just over a year ago. DEFRA officials are exploring opportunities with the Department for International Development. By discussing the issues directly with the countries concerned, we hope to have an effect on the dog meat trade internationally.

I will keep the hon. Member for Strangford and other interested colleagues updated on progress. Once again, I thank the hon. Gentleman for introducing the debate and all hon. Members who have made such impassioned contributions to this important debate.

3.54 pm

Jim Shannon: It is an absolute pleasure to sum up this debate.

First, I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) is very interested in—indeed, she is passionate about—animal welfare and opposing animal cruelty, and she wants to change attitudes. She represents a constituency that very much has that in mind as well.

The hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling), as always, is actively engaged in change. The amendment to the Agriculture Bill is one that we are all very keen to support. He wants us to be a country that speaks up for man’s best friend, and that must be the challenge for us all. As we move forward, let us support our Minister in the changes that he will make.

The contribution by the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) was, as always, significant and helpful. She encapsulated the enormity of this abhorrent practice and kindly reminded us of what the Scottish Government are doing with their legislative change. In many ways, the Scottish Government show the way legislatively on so many other things and this is another example of what they are doing, in this case to improve animal welfare.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin), referred to a nation united against this dreadful practice—the consumption of dogs for food. He wants to join with others in sending that message out, seeking the change in sentencing, which I think we all want to see. It is so important.

The Minister, in a very comprehensive response to all of our comments and requests, outlined the Government position. The Government have not been idle and we recognise that. We are keen to pursue legislative change. He also mentioned all the good things that dogs can do—I did not do that in my contribution, but I wish I had. There are dogs for the blind. I have walked that road—I think that probably all of us as MPs have walked that road—where I put on a blindfold and a guide dog led me. That is an example of what a dog can do.

There are also dogs in the services. One example came to mind while I was sitting here, listening. I remember when I was in Afghanistan with the armed forces parliamentary scheme and I chanced to see some of the dogs that seek out improvised explosive devices. They have a really key role—to save lives. That is man’s best friend again, doing that.

There are all the other dogs that were referred to as well: the rescue dogs, the police dogs and farmers’ dogs. In my constituency, there are very few farms that do not have a dog somewhere, either to bring in the sheep or to bring in the cattle. That is a fact. Dogs are part of our life.

The Government will stop acts of cruelty to animals; they are making the legislative change to do that. This issue also has cross-party support, including from an MP who was a member of another party at the beginning of this week but has now joined the new group. We clearly have cross-party support, from all the parties in this House—I can say that honestly today, from the expressions of support that I have here—including from the Independents.

Again, I thank everyone for their significant contributions, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for making the debate happen. Most importantly, today we have had a chance to stand up for man’s best friend, and that must be the challenge for us all. As we move forward, let us support our Minister in the changes that he will make.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered banning the consumption of dog meat in the UK.

3.58 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Written Statements
Monday 4 February 2019

EDUCATION

Race Disparity Audit

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): I am pleased to make this statement jointly with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington).

At the launch of the Race Disparity Audit in October 2017, the Government committed to “explain or change” the ethnic disparities on the audit’s website Ethnicity facts and figures.

Since October 2017 the Government have taken action in education, employment, health, criminal justice, including recruitment and progression in the workforce.

The audit’s website Ethnicity facts and figures has been continually updated and extended to allow the public to see if ethnic disparities are improving or not across over 160 important areas of public life. This has included the publication of data on undergraduate degree results and entrants at different higher education providers with high, medium and low entry tariffs.

On Friday, the Government announced action to tackle disparities in access to, and successful participation in, higher education for ethnic minority students; and disparities in recruitment and progression for ethnic minority academics. Friday’s announcement aims to tackle challenges that we know are particularly acute for ethnic minority students in higher education, such as their levels of non-continuation, the degree class they achieve compared to their peers, and their progression on to good quality employment.

In addition to the steps already taken to address this, including establishing the Office for Students and legislating for greater transparency and scrutiny through the Higher Education and Research Act, these actions will include:

- Asking the Office for Students to ensure higher education providers demonstrate how they are tackling differences in access and successful participation for students from ethnic minorities—the Office for Students will be expected to hold providers to account, in particular through access and participation plans, which set out how higher education providers will improve equality of opportunity for under-represented groups, to access, succeed in and progress from higher education. The Office for Students will be expected to use its new powers to challenge providers failing to make progress.

- Asking league table compilers to consider performance on tackling inequalities between ethnic groups in university rankings—working with a wide range of experts, stakeholders and league table compilers.

- Encouraging higher education providers to eliminate ethnic disparities in their workforce—using tools such as the race at work charter and race equality charter.

- Supporting student choice through better information, advice and guidance—by reforming the Unistats website using evidence from research with students from disadvantaged and underrepresented groups.

- Building the evidence base on ‘what works’ for improving ethnic minority access and successful participation—encouraging the winning bidder of the newly established Evidence and Impact Exchange to make improving the evidence around addressing ethnic disparities a priority.

These actions will be supported by the Office for Students in its role as the regulator, Advance HE which will launch a review of its race equality charter, and UKRI which will signal its support for reducing ethnic disparities in research and innovation funding.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

DFID’s Work on Safeguarding

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): Ahead of the forthcoming anniversary of the first media stories about the Haiti case, and further to my ministerial statement of 25 October, I would like to update the House on preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment in the aid sector.

Delivering 18 October summit commitments

My last statement was shortly after the international summit I hosted in London on 18 October where donors representing 90% of global official development assistance, NGOs, suppliers, multilateral organisations and others agreed robust actions to deliver root to branch change in the way the international aid sector tackles these issues and I announced specific initiatives supported by DFID.

The five-year project with Interpol to stop perpetrators of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment moving around the aid sector is getting under-way. It will strengthen and digitise criminal record checks, improve information sharing between countries and train staff, so ensuring a more robust law enforcement response against predatory individuals.

The disclosure of misconduct scheme will prevent individuals with a record of misconduct from moving around the NGO sector undetected. Fuller details were published in December and more NGOs are signing up.

DFID is supporting work to verify that our partners meet the global standards on preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse as agreed by donors in October.

The resource and support hub will provide guidance, training and support on safeguarding to smaller charities which are those most likely to need it. There has been strong interest from potential suppliers and DFID expects to sign a multi-year contract by August.

We are working with the UN Victims’ Rights Advocate to develop a statement of victims’ rights for publication this year which will help survivors of abuse and exploitation better understand the redress and support available to them.

In November, the UK NGO platform Bond incorporated the UK NGO summit commitments into the Bond Charter, so covering over 450 organisations.

DFID is working with Dutch counterparts on an action plan for the ombudsman proposal.
Looking ahead

DFID continues to meet regularly with representatives from across the aid sector and is working with them to develop appropriate accountability mechanisms for the commitments announced at October’s summit.

I plan to participate in meetings on safeguarding at the UN Commission on the Status Of Women in March, the World Bank spring meetings in April and the UN General Assembly in September to drive forward progress. DFID is leading a process in the OECD to agree a mechanism this year to monitor the performance of all 30 major global donors on safeguarding.

I welcome the International Development Committee’s continuing focus on safeguarding and look forward to my discussion with them in May. DFID continues to work across Government to drive a coherent approach to safeguarding in ODA projects and to improve the capability of staff.

I sent a clear message a year ago that the whole sector must make zero tolerance on sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment a reality. Today, I repeat that message.

Work led by DFID in the past year has generated good momentum, domestically and internationally. But there is much more to do, and we will continue to lead the way and work with others in the months and years ahead.

*Recent cases*

The case at the International Planned Parenthood Federation underlines the value of the much tougher safeguarding standards I introduced last year. Those standards have required the reporting of this case and robust action to be taken. The case is ongoing and DFID’s Safeguarding Investigations Team created last year is looking at it in more detail.

Charity Commission figures show an increase in safeguarding cases reported by charities last year. I expect to continue to see more reports as people feel safer to speak up and organisations take their obligations seriously.

DFID continues to co-ordinate closely with the National Crime Agency on shared objectives. The draft Domestic Abuse Bill proposes that more types of sexual offences committed abroad by a UK national can be prosecuted in England and Wales. We have recently seen other countries take action against suspected criminal sexual activity in the aid sector.

The UK has been a long-standing supporter of the EU-Japan EPA, which was approved overwhelmingly by the UK Parliament after it was debated on the Floor of the House of Commons on 26 June 2018 with 317 votes in favour and only 1 against.

The EU-Japan EPA was signed on 17 July 2018 in Tokyo, Japan.

The coming into force of the EU-Japan EPA is positive for the UK, the wider EU and global free trade. At its entry into force, 91% of tariffs will be eliminated, rising to 97% over the long term.

Japan and the UK are the world’s third and fifth largest economies respectively and are committed to working together in support of global free and fair trade. In line with this both Prime Ministers have reaffirmed their commitment last month to use the Japan-EU EPA as the basis for our future economic partnership and to work quickly to establish this. Under the withdrawal agreement, the UK would continue to benefit from this agreement during the implementation period.

*JUSTICE*

**Parole Board: Reconsideration Mechanism and Rules Review**

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The Parole Board decision to release John Worboys, and the subsequent legal action taken by the victims to challenge that decision, revealed the need to improve the way the system works. I have been determined to address fully the issues that case highlighted and to continue to make improvements to the system of parole.

An initial review I commissioned into Parole Board decision making, which reported in April 2018, has led to a programme of reform—in particular to increase transparency and to improve the way victims are engaged and communicated with.

I conducted a public consultation on proposals to create a new mechanism to allow for Parole Board decisions to be reconsidered in certain circumstances and ordered a review of all the Parole Board rules. I am pleased today to announce the outcome of that work and to launch a tailored review of the Parole Board which will examine further options for longer-term reform.

The Government’s response to the consultation on a reconsideration mechanism is published today and I can confirm that I intend to proceed to bring forward changes to the Parole Board rules which will introduce such a mechanism. This will make it possible for Parole Board decisions to be looked at again and, if necessary, re-taken where it appears there may have been a legal or procedural flaw with the original decision. It will not be necessary to bring a judicial review, as happened in the Worboys case, making it easier to challenge decisions.

Victims who believe a decision may be fundamentally flawed, rather than having to resort to the courts and engage legal representation to argue their case, will be able to make a case for reconsideration to my officials.

*INTERNATIONAL TRADE*

**EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement**

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The Government wish to inform the House that on Friday 1 February, the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between the EU and Japan came into force. This date was confirmed by the European Commission to EU member states on 12 December 2018.
Officials have access to all the information and evidence—as well as legal resources—and therefore are best placed to put together a fully-informed application to the Parole Board where there appears to be an arguable case for reconsideration. This will also make the process as simple and straightforward for victims as possible. Judicial members at the Parole Board will determine the reconsideration application and how the case should be dealt with—whether the decision should be re-taken and whether a further hearing is required. Reasons for their decisions will be provided to victims.

This new mechanism, together with the introduction of decision summaries provided by the Parole Board from May last year, brings much greater transparency and scrutiny to how and why parole decisions are made; and a means of challenging those decisions where it appears there may have been a fundamental error that requires the case to be looked at again.

I am also publishing today a report on the outcome of the review of the Parole Board rules.

The report sets out the measures taken by the Department and the Board itself to ensure the issues highlighted by the Worboys case were addressed and which deliver on the commitments made by last year’s initial review. The report also explains what more will be done to further increase the transparency and openness of the parole system and to improve the experience of victims. Improvements have been and will continue to be made to the Victim Contact Scheme (VCS), training and approaches to the way Victim Liaison Officers (VLOs) communicate with victims; and the commitments in the Government’s victims strategy published in September will further strengthen the entitlements and support victims should rightly expect to receive.

Changes to the Parole Board rules will be brought forward by way of statutory instrument in the coming months. This will implement the new reconsideration mechanism and the other changes identified by the review that have the potential to improve the system. Between now and then we will be making preparations for the implementation of those reforms—in particular by putting in place the resources, guidance, training, and documentation needed to operate the reconsideration mechanism.

Other key changes announced in the report include:

A series of Standard Practice guidance documents will be published by the Parole Board. This will improve transparency and public awareness of the approaches the Board follows in reaching its decisions—and will support greater consistency in how the Board reviews cases.

A new operational protocol between the Parole Board and Her Majesty’s Prisons and Probation Service (HMPPS) which will clarify roles and responsibilities within the parole system and set out how the two organisations work with each other.

A new policy framework on the parole process will be published, setting out the HMPPS policy and approach, which will include improvements to the timescales the review found could make the process more efficient.

The review has examined how the rules, parole processes and practice can be improved over the short term within the current primary legislation governing the parole system and the existing constitution and functions of the Parole Board. It has been important to take swift action to address the immediate issues and concerns and to restore trust in the system; I believe the reforms announced in the report published today will help to achieve that.

But I would like to examine what further, more fundamental measures might be possible over the longer term, including the possibility of primary legislation. A tailored review of the Parole Board provides the opportunity to do that. I am required to undertake a tailored review of all the arms-length bodies sponsored by my Department once every Parliament and I have decided that now is the right time to launch such a review of the Parole Board.

The tailored review will explore, in light of the rules review changes, whether there is a case for more fundamental reform that requires primary legislation—including whether to change the powers or responsibilities conferred on the Parole Board or whether it should be reconstituted to deliver its functions in a different way. I aim to publish the outcome of the tailored review in the summer.

Copies of the Government’s response to the consultation on reconsideration of Parole Board decisions and the report on the review of the Parole Board rules have been laid in both Houses and are available on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS1295]

**TRANSPORT**

**Lighthouses: Light Dues 2019-2020**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusret Ghanji): A strong and growing maritime industry is vital to the economy of the United Kingdom and it is critical that we treasure and protect this vital artery if we are to remain a world-leading maritime centre.

The work of the general lighthouse authorities, which provide and maintain marine aids to navigation and respond to new wrecks and navigation dangers in some of the busiest waters in the world, is crucial to underpinning that vision while maintaining our vigorous safety record and continuously improving standards of safety.

Reductions in the three general lighthouse authorities’ running costs have enabled the UK to reduce light dues for four successive years. For 2019-20 intend to freeze light dues rates at 37½ pence per net registered tonne. This will mean that light dues will have fallen by 28% in real terms since 2010.

Light dues rates will continue to be reviewed on an annual basis to ensure that the general lighthouse authorities are challenged to provide an effective and efficient service which offers value for money to light dues payers.

[HCWS1296]
Written Statements

Tuesday 5 February 2019

TREASURY

Contingent Liability

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

I can today confirm that I have laid a Treasury minute informing the House of a contingent liability that HM Treasury has taken on in relation to the sale of certain NRAM loans acquired by HM Treasury during the financial crisis. Although the sale of those loans was completed in 2016, the Government are now amending the contractual protections that were provided to the purchaser, in order to facilitate the potential future sale of NRAM.

On this occasion, due to sensitivities surrounding the commercial negotiations, it was not possible to notify Parliament of the particulars of the liability in advance of the amendments to the contractual protections being agreed with the beneficiaries.

The contingent liability relates to certain market standard time and value capped warranties and indemnities confirming regulatory, legislative and contractual compliance. The maximum contingent liability arising from these warranties and indemnities is £1 billion.

I will update the House of any further changes in respect of NRAM as necessary. [HCWS1299]

TRANSPORT

Leaving the EU: Road Haulage

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): The Government are making preparations to allow hauliers and other businesses to continue to transport goods between the UK and the EU, once the UK has left the EU. These include preparations for leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement.

Accordingly, I am today laying a draft haulage statutory instrument designed to ensure that UK law continues to operate effectively in this area if the UK leaves the EU without a deal.

The Government will continue to license UK hauliers to the same high safety, environmental and operating standards as at present, and will require foreign hauliers operating in this country to do the same. The legislation also provides for continued access to the UK market, after exit, for hauliers from the 27 EU member states. Over 80% of haulage between the UK and continental Europe is undertaken by EU hauliers and it is important to ensure that the UK’s supply chains are protected. The UK needs to be sure that foreign products can be imported and UK products exported as usual. Our approach of offering access at this stage aims both to provide the reassurance needed for international freight flows to continue, and also to help ensure reciprocal arrangements for UK hauliers.

On its side, the European Commission has proposed legislation that would allow UK hauliers basic rights to conduct operations to, from and through the EU for a limited period of nine months after exit, if there is no deal. The Commission’s proposal will need to be agreed by the Council and European Parliament, and is being considered by both institutions urgently. This proposal is predicated on the UK’s granting equivalent access for EU hauliers to the UK, and the legislation laid before the House today provides for that access. Indeed, it is a more liberal offer, and we are discussing with the Commission whether there is scope for them to extend the EU’s offer so as to match ours.

Depending on the outcome of these discussions, we will review the UK’s offer to EU hauliers. Our legislation contains provision to suspend EU hauliers’ rights to undertake cabotage operations in the UK. We are putting in place measures to introduce such a suspension, which could be put into effect immediately after exit day if needed. Our expectation, however, is that such a suspension will not be necessary.

In parallel we have been considering bilateral and unilateral measures with EU member states. France is separately progressing with a unilateral measure to provide wider access to UK hauliers in the event of no deal. There are also 22 historic bilateral agreements that would come back into effect if the UK leaves the EU without a deal.

In addition, a multilateral quota of transport licences was introduced by the European Conference of Ministers of Transport (ECMT) in 1974 to support liberalised road freight transport between member states of that body. The licences, known as ECMT permits, allow for access between the 43 member states (which include all EU member states except Cyprus). The UK has an allocation of 984 annual and 2,832 short-term (valid for 30 days) ECMT permits for 2019. These levels were agreed through a long-standing formula approach before it was known that the UK would be leaving the EU. The Government’s expectation is that hauliers should not need an ECMT permit to continue doing a range of business in all or much of the EU, even in the event of no deal. But it is important to continue to prepare for all possible scenarios, and if it should prove necessary to use some of these permits for UK hauliers operating to EU countries, the Government have put in place a scheme to allocate these permits, as detailed under the Haulage Permits and Trailer Registration Act 2018.

UK hauliers have been applying for ECMT permits and the Government expect to inform applicants of the outcome of their applications later this week. As we expect UK hauliers will have other means of ensuring market access to the EU, we will inform UK hauliers of the outcomes to provide certainty, but will allow a period of time before these need to be formally taken and paid for by successful hauliers. This approach has been agreed with road haulage stakeholders. The 2018 Act provides appropriate arrangements for distributing new permits as may be required under any future bilateral arrangements, if these are needed.

Overall, we continue to believe that reciprocal market access will be secured for UK hauliers. While continuing to plan for all eventualities, we also believe that it is right to underline the fact that the UK is taking a positive and pragmatic approach.

[HCWS1298]
Written Statements

Wednesday 6 February 2019

DEFENCE

Ministry of Defence Votes A Annual Estimate 2019-20

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): The Ministry of Defence Votes A estimate 2019-20, will be laid before the House on 6 February 2019 as HC 1852. This outlines the maximum numbers of personnel to be maintained for each service in the armed forces during financial year 2019-20.

[HCWS1303]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Leaving the EU: Reciprocal Healthcare Legislation

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): Current European Union (EU) reciprocal healthcare arrangements enable UK nationals1 to access healthcare when they live, study, work, or travel in the EU and vice versa for EU citizens2 when in the UK. They give people retiring abroad more security; they support tourism and businesses and facilitate healthcare co-operation.

These arrangements ensure that UK nationals living and working in the EU, European Economic Area (EEA) and Switzerland can access healthcare in exchange for paying taxes and social security contributions. The UK also funds healthcare abroad for a number of current or former UK residents. This includes healthcare for UK state pensioners who spend their retirement in the EU and needs arising healthcare when UK residents visit the EU for holiday or study through the European healthcare insurance card (EHIC) scheme.

The Government’s priority is to secure a withdrawal agreement with the EU. However, as a responsible Government, we are preparing for all eventualities, including the possibility the UK leaves the EU without a deal. If necessary, the UK would like to make arrangements with individual EU member states to ensure that there are no immediate changes to people’s access to healthcare after exit day and that there is a strong basis for ongoing co-operation on health issues. The UK is therefore seeking to maintain reciprocal healthcare rights for pensioners, workers, students, tourists and other visitors in line with the current EU arrangements, including reimbursement of healthcare costs, for a transitional period lasting until 31 December 2020. This is only possible with agreement from other member states and we have commenced discussions on this issue.

The Healthcare (International Arrangements) Bill (the Bill) is being brought forward as a result of the UK’s exit from the EU; however, it is forward-facing and not intended to deal only with EU exit. The Bill is intended to support the implementation of comprehensive reciprocal healthcare arrangements with countries both within and outside the EU to enable possible future partnerships.

The Bill can be used to implement complex bilateral arrangements with a member state that may differ to current EU arrangements, or to make unilateral arrangements to assist UK nationals to access healthcare abroad in exceptional circumstances and in the interests of patient safety. The Bill also provides the legal basis to fund and process data relating to healthcare outside of the United Kingdom.

The European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 will convert EU law as it stands on exit day into UK domestic law and preserve the laws made in the UK to implement EU obligations. This means that EU regulations providing for EU reciprocal healthcare arrangements will become part of the UK’s statute book on exit day. Without further legislation, in a no-deal scenario the regulations would not be coherent or workable without reciprocity from member states. Therefore, on 7 February, the Government will bring forward two statutory instruments under section 8 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, to prevent, remedy or mitigate deficiencies in retained EU law relating to reciprocal healthcare.

These instruments also afford the UK an additional mechanism for ensuring there is no interruption to healthcare arrangements for UK nationals3 after exit day in those member states who agree to maintain the current arrangements for a transitional period. Through these instruments, the UK can transitionally maintain current EU reciprocal healthcare arrangements for countries where we have established reciprocity during an interim period lasting until 31 December 2020 and no later. The arrangements would not apply to member states who do not agree to maintain the current reciprocal arrangements with us.

Together with the Bill, these instruments are focused on supporting a smooth transition as we exit the EU. Both of these legislative vehicles are necessary to ensure the UK Government are ready to deal with reciprocal and cross-border healthcare in any scenario. They afford the UK Government flexibility of action and ensure the UK is able to respond quickly to protect people’s healthcare.

The Bill and the forthcoming statutory instruments are intended to support further preparations the UK Government are making with regard to reciprocal healthcare arrangements. The Government have issued advice via the Government and NHS websites to UK nationals living in the EU, to UK residents travelling to the EU and to EU nationals living in the UK. This advice explains how the UK is working to maintain reciprocal healthcare arrangements, but that their continuation depends on decisions by member states. It sets out what options people might have to access healthcare under local laws in the member state they live in if we do not have bilateral arrangements in place, and what people can do to prepare. Our advice to people travelling abroad after exit day is to purchase travel insurance, as we already recommend now. These webpages will be updated as more information becomes available.

The Bill and the statutory instruments feed into a broader body of work by the Department of Health and Social Care and across the UK Government, to ensure health and social care systems are well prepared as we exit the EU.

1 This is a short-hand term for persons who are the responsibility of the UK. They may or may not be UK nationals.
2 This is a short-hand term for EU27/EEA/Swiss-insured individuals i.e. persons who are the responsibility of an EU or EEA member state or Switzerland.
3 Please see footnote 1.

[HCWS1304]
The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): On 23 May 2018, the House was informed that the Government had asked Tom Kark QC to carry out a review of the scope, operation and purpose of the fit and proper person requirement. Tom Kark has now completed his review having engaged on these issues with a range of interested parties, including the Care Quality Commission, NHS improvement, NHS England, and parliamentarians who had expressed an interest. We are today publishing his report on the review of the fit and proper person test as it applies to directors within the health services in England.

Our senior leaders are critical to the delivery of high quality and safe care in the NHS. We owe them our thanks and respect and we need to support them and ensure that they have the right skills and competencies to do these most challenging roles. The review underlines the importance of supporting the vast majority of NHS directors to do a good job and what more could be done in strengthening the leadership in the NHS.

Tom Kark has made seven recommendations and the Government accept in principle the recommendations to develop specified standards of competence that all directors who sit on the board of any health providing organisation should meet, and to create a central database of directors. We will consider all other recommendations including a mandatory reference requirement and a recommendation to introduce a power to disbar directors for serious misconduct. Tom Kark has also recommended that the fit and proper person test should be extended to clinical commissioning groups and appropriate arm’s length bodies.

It is important we consider this review alongside other proposals on leadership and development for NHS managers. I have therefore asked Baroness Harding to look at how best to implement these recommendations through the system wide workforce implementation process which she is chairing and which is set out in the NHS long term plan. We have asked Baroness Harding to consider a range of options and to ensure that she draws on the views of key partners.

I am keen to see the NHS open up to a diverse range of talented individuals from outside the NHS, beyond the traditional NHS background, and more with clinical backgrounds. Excellent NHS directors are vital to delivering a high standard of care and are committed to serving the needs of patients and service users. It is important that we focus on leadership and enhancing the strength of NHS managers as a profession, while dealing appropriately with the small minority of directors whose conduct raises concerns about their suitability for their post.

I would like to thank Tom Kark and his team for their work in delivering this important report.

A copy of the report has been deposited in the Library of both Houses.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): We are fortunate to live in one of the most welcoming countries in the world, which has a proud tradition of promoting respect for the rule of law, for property, and for one another. The Government are committed to creating a just and fair country, where equality of opportunity flourishes and the life chances of all are enhanced.

Recent debates in this House have addressed the topic of unauthorised traveller encampments and Members have voiced their constituents’ concerns regarding the impact on both settled and nomadic populations. Ministers across the Government have been deeply troubled by these concerns, particularly by the widespread perception that the rule of law does not apply to those who choose a nomadic lifestyle, and the sense that available enforcement powers do not protect settled communities adequately.

Unauthorised encampments can cause settled communities significant distress, and for some they perpetuate a negative image of the travelling community, the vast majority of whom are law-abiding citizens.

Recognising these concerns, the Government launched a consultation in April last year on the effectiveness of enforcement against unauthorised developments and encampments. Through this consultation, we sought views from a number of stakeholders—including local authorities, police forces, travelling communities and the general public—on whether there is anything we can do to ensure that existing powers can be used more effectively and if additional powers are required.

A cross-Government response to the consultation will be issued in due course. From an enforcement perspective, the consultation responses signalled clear calls for the Government to take action. We have identified a set of measures to extend powers available to the police, which we believe will enable unauthorised encampments to be tackled more effectively.

First, we will look to amend section 62A of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 to permit the police to direct trespassers to suitable authorised sites located in neighbouring local authority areas. Currently, the police can only direct trespassers to sites within the same local authority area. Extending this power would make it more likely that the police and local authorities could act where a shortage of site capacity exists.

Secondly, we will look to amend sections 61 and 62A of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 to increase the period of time in which trespassers directed from land would be unable to return. Currently, the powers prohibit a trespasser from returning to the area of land for three months. We plan to extend this time period to 12 months. This would provide greater protection to land targeted by the same group of trespassers on a regular basis.

Thirdly, we will look to amend section 61 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 to lower the number of vehicles needing to be involved in an unauthorised encampment before police powers can be exercised. The number is currently six or more. We would like to change this to two or more. This will
increase the opportunity for police intervention and make it more difficult for trespassers to split into smaller groups to avoid enforcement.

Fourthly, we will look to amend section 61 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 to enable the police to remove trespassers from land that forms part of the highway. The police are currently restricted in dealing with these encampments unless there is a suitable pitch in the same local authority area. We would like to remove this restriction so that it is easier for the police to tackle problematic encampments.

I am pleased to announce that the Home Office will soon launch a public consultation on these measures.

Our original consultation responses were clear that the majority of respondents believe we should consider criminalising unauthorised encampments, as has been done in the Republic of Ireland. This view has been echoed in the wide ranging debates in this House. I am therefore pleased to announce that we will conduct a review into how we can achieve this.

In taking this forward, the Home Office will work closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Ministry of Justice, and also the Welsh Government, recognising that local government is devolved in Wales.

I thank Members across this House for their engagement on this important issue.

[HCWS1302]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Unauthorised Development and Encampments

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): The Government have today published their response to the consultation on powers for dealing with unauthorised development and encampments. This statement should be read alongside the written ministerial statement on improving the effectiveness of enforcement against unauthorised encampments today by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Home Department.

Since 2010, the Government have taken concerted action to address these matters, including issuing revised planning guidance on enforcement, updated policy, and reforms to temporary stop notices. In March 2015, the Government issued advice on dealing with illegal and unauthorised encampments to all local authorities, the police and landowners to encourage them to work collaboratively to tackle unauthorised encampments, and to remind them of the array of powers which exist for tackling such situations.

In terms of wider Government support for the provision of traveller sites, the new homes bonus provides an incentive for local authorities to encourage housing growth in their areas, and rewards net increases in effective housing stock, including the provision of authorised traveller pitches. In addition, the £9 billion Affordable Homes programme will provide a wider range of homes to meet the housing needs of people in different circumstances and different housing markets, including funding for new traveller pitches. We have also seen that the number of caravans on authorised sites has increased from 14,498 in July 2010 to 19,569 in July 2018, showing that the locally led planning system is working.

But the responses received in our consultation were clear that significant problems are created by many unauthorised encampments. Responses highlighted the sense of unease and intimidation residents feel when an unauthorised encampment occurs, the frustration at not being able to access amenities, public land and business premises, and the waste and cost that is left once the encampment has moved on.

That is why the Government are today setting out a comprehensive range of further measures across multiple Government Departments and agencies, which will help to achieve the Government’s overarching aim of fair and equal treatment for travellers, while respecting the interests of the settled community. The package includes:

- a set of measures to extend powers available to the police, to enable unauthorised encampments to be tackled more effectively
- a review into the potential criminalisation of unauthorised encampments
- new statutory good practice guidance to support local authorities use of powers to deal with unauthorised encampments and a commitment to keep these powers under review, particularly in instances of deliberate and repeated breaches of planning
- a commitment to further work to ensure that measures are in place to address issues around the clean-up costs which can occur following an unauthorised encampment
- a commitment to work with my colleagues across Government on a strategic approach to improving outcomes for Gypsies, Roma and Travellers, as well as settled communities.

[HCWS1305]
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I would like to update the House on the progress of High Speed 2.

As part of this Government’s industrial strategy we are investing in High Speed 2, a transformational infrastructure project that will improve people’s journeys, create jobs, generate economic growth and help to rebalance our country’s economy. HS2 is more than a railway and the project’s vision is to be a catalyst for economic growth. It has cross-party support and support from councils, LEPs, metro Mayors and businesses who can see the transformational potential.

HS2 is making progress and the benefits are already being seen, notably in the investment and job creation in the west midlands in advance of HS2 services, and around 7,000 jobs have been supported so far, rising to around 30,000 at peak.

Parliament has approved the powers to proceed with phase 1 of the railway, between London and the west midlands, and we are making significant progress. Early works are well under way: HS2 Ltd has revealed the designs for new stations in Old Oak Common, Birmingham Interchange and Birmingham Curzon Street; enabling works on the route are progressing; decommissioning and preparatory works are taking place.

As has been seen with Stratford station in east London, railway stations have enormous power to transform their local surroundings. It is why I approved the appointment of a master development partner (Lendlease) on 22 February 2018 to assist HS2 Ltd in delivering the new Euston station development. This will not only provide unparalleled levels of accessibility, ease and convenience for our passengers, but ensure work with local communities to help unlock wider regeneration, new jobs, homes and opportunities.

Last year, the tender shortlist for a construction partner for the two southern stations was released. In a clear signal of how work is progressing, this morning I am pleased to announce the intention to award these important positions to a joint venture between Mace Ltd and Dragados S.A. for Euston and a joint venture between Balfour Beatty Group Ltd, VINCI Construction UK Ltd, VINCI Construction Grands Projets SAS and SYSTRA Ltd for Old Oak Common. They will bring their global construction management expertise to these vitally important pieces of national infrastructure.

This demonstrates how progress is continuing at pace in order to deliver stations that will be embraced by their local communities, drive economic growth and improve rail journeys for passengers, while at the same time delivering this phase of the project to schedule and cost.

The progress we are making with HS2 is clear evidence that the Government are delivering the infrastructure our country needs to build a stronger, fairer, more prosperous Britain.

[HCWS1300]
Written Statements

Thursday 7 February 2019

CABINET OFFICE

European Union (Withdrawal) Act and Common Frameworks


The report is available on gov.uk and details the progress made in discussions between the UK Government and devolved Administrations regarding common frameworks in the second reporting period covered under the legislation, and sets out that no “freezing” regulations have been brought forward under section 12 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act.

A copy of the “The European Union (Withdrawal) Act and Common Frameworks, 26 September 2018 to 25 December 2018” report has been placed in the Library of both Houses. The publication of the report reflects the Government’s continued commitment to transparency. [HCWS1310]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Sporting Future Annual Report 2019

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): The Government’s Sporting Future strategy, published in December 2015, set out a radical new vision for our approach to sport and physical activity, including how we value and measure their immense contribution to the nation’s health and wellbeing. It placed five key outcomes at the heart of everything we support and invest in—physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, individual development, social and community development and economic development. It identified tackling inactivity and getting people from underrepresented groups more engaged as key priorities. It was a bold new strategy for an active nation and marked the biggest shift in Government policy on sport for more than a decade.

Participation and physical activity

In the third full year of the strategy we have continued to deliver significant achievements. We have seen good progress against the 2020 physical activity targets set by Sport England and will continue to build on our understanding of active lives adult survey data to define robust successor targets for 2025.

A key focus has been developing our understanding of children’s engagement with, and attitude towards, physical activity. The December 2018 publication of the first year’s results of Sport England’s new active lives children survey was a significant milestone in terms of our understanding of how children engage with and think about sport and physical activity. The data on children’s inactivity levels was a wake-up call both for Government and the sector, and has prompted a substantial new focus across Government on improving sport and physical activity for young people. This will be manifested through the cross-government school sport and physical activity action plan which will be published in spring 2019.

Culture and integrity of sport

We have also continued to focus on the culture and integrity of sport. What matters is not just what we do to win medals and enjoy sporting success, but how we go about it. We have continued to work with UK Anti-Doping (UKAD) to implement the findings of the tailored review of UKAD and will be launching a consultation on revising the UK’s national anti-doping policy. We have launched a mental health and elite sport action plan, and UK Sport has reported on the first set of findings from its culture health check, which monitors how athletes and staff in the elite sport system feel they are treated.

Ensuring people feel safe when participating in sport is a significant part of improving and strengthening the culture and integrity in sport. Over the course of the year we have worked across Government and with the sports sector to look at existing processes and strengthen them where possible, integrating sport into the Department for Education’s working together and keeping children safe in education guidance. The governance of sport remains a critical issue and Sport England and UK Sport continue to embed the code for sports governance and work with the sector to improve on issues such as diversity in leadership.

International sport and Global Britain

We have continued our work to ensure that the UK remains one of the big hitters in elite and international sport. UK Sport launched its consultation on its future funding strategy beyond the Tokyo 2020 Olympics and Paralympics, the results of which will be available in February 2019. UK Sport also successfully launched its aspiration fund which will provide invaluable financial support to those sports that do not have immediate medal potential, but which we want to support to improve and develop. We have also revised the gold medal potential, but which we want to support to those sports that do not have immediate medal potential, but which we want to support to improve and develop.

We have also revised the gold medal potential, but which we want to support to those sports that do not have immediate medal potential, but which we want to support to improve and develop. We have also revised the gold medal potential, but which we want to support to improve and develop.

Looking to the future

Looking to the future, cross-government working will be a key priority. Sport and physical activity has an immense role to play in a range of important agendas across Government, be that supporting the NHS to become more prevention focused, joint working with the Department for Education to make sure that a robust sport and physical activity offer to children is available both in and out of school, supporting and informing investment in transport infrastructure so that we are encouraging more people to walk and get on their bikes, or investing in sport and physical activity interventions to help reduce social isolation and strengthen community cohesion.
Supporting underrepresented groups including women and girls, people from BAME backgrounds, disabled people and people from lower socioeconomic groups to get active will continue to be a central focus. These are the groups in society who will benefit the most from getting more active and we remain committed to focusing on these groups as a priority. Equality in sport also applies to what we are able to watch. We can look forward to a number of sporting events on free-to-air TV this year, including the women’s netball world championships and the women’s football world championships. We want sports and broadcasters to continue to work together to ensure sports can continue to grow their appeal and find new audiences.

Preserving and strengthening the integrity of sport will continue to be at the forefront of our work. People having faith in the sports they know and love and athletes having the belief that they are competing on a level playing field are vital pillars of Sporting Future. To this end our focus on ensuring we have robust anti-doping and governance regimes will continue.

One of my highest priorities going forward will be for Government and the whole sport and physical activity sector to work together to ensure that we create the conditions for everyone to get involved and to enjoy the transformative power of both physical activity and witnessing live sport. It is vital that we direct our efforts not only at providing people with sufficient opportunities to get, and stay, active, but that the atmosphere and environment in which that activity takes place—be it grassroots or at the elite level—is safe, supportive and free of discrimination. In recent times, we have seen some worrying instances of discriminatory behaviour across the sporting landscape, notably in football, and I will be bringing together the footballing authorities and other organisations with an interest, to agree what action must be taken to stamp out all forms of discrimination at sports events. I am clear that we must not, and will not, tolerate any form of discrimination in sport and sport administrators, clubs and fans must continue to embrace diversity and tackle racism whenever they encounter it.

As we leave the European Union, we will also continue to work closely with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and the Department for International Trade, to maximise the great contribution sport can make to our international profile and our vision for Global Britain. Our hosting of the cricket World cup, with an expected international profile and our vision for Global Britain.

There is much more to do to ensure that the UK becomes, and reaps the benefits of, a truly active nation. As we leave the European Union, we will also continue to work closely with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and the Department for International Trade, to maximise the great contribution sport can make to our international profile and our vision for Global Britain. Our hosting of the cricket World cup, with an expected international profile and our vision for Global Britain.

The lead issue on the agriculture-focused agenda was the common agricultural policy (CAP) reform post-2020, divided into two table rounds. The first round focused on strategic plans and horizontal regulations, detailing the changes to streamline the new delivery model, as well as the agricultural reserve. Member states broadly supported the call for the pillar two budget to be maintained, including a proposal which will allow a 35% deviation from annual milestones, among other things.

In the second debate, the Commission’s proposal to lift the ban on vitis labrusca and six forbidden grape varieties was debated. The majority of wine producing member states rejected the proposal on quality and reputational grounds. Commissioner Hogan then gave a presentation on green architecture which focused on member states’ objectives to achieve high-level climate ambitions.

Commissioner Hogan also introduced the non-legislative debate on supporting the growth of plant protein in the EU, setting out a wide range of proposed measures from the Commission’s plan. A declaration, calling for measures to be brought together in an EU-wide action plan was supported by a number of member states.

A number of other items were discussed under “any other business”:

Commissioner Andriukaitis provided an update from the ministerial conference on African swine fever (ASF) held in December 2018.

Slovakia presented their request for an update on the dual quality food issue.

Denmark informed Council about their new international centre for antimicrobial resistance solutions (ICARS). The UK expressed its support, highlighting the new five-year national AMR action plan and the chief medical officer’s recent visit to Copenhagen.

[HCWS1308]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Automatic Immigration Bail Referral Pilot

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): On 24 July 2018, the Home Secretary laid before Parliament the second independent review by Stephen Shaw CBE, into immigration detention. In responding to that review, the Home Secretary committed to going further and faster with the reforms to immigration detention in four priority areas: encouraging and supporting voluntary returns; improving the support available to vulnerable detainees; increasing transparency around immigration detention; and a new drive on dignity in detention.
As a part of this commitment, the Home Secretary, in agreement with the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, announced plans to pilot an additional automatic bail referral to the First-tier Tribunal of the Immigration and Asylum Chamber at the two-month point, halving the time in detention before a first bail referral.

I am pleased to announce that this pilot will commence on 10 February. It will run for six months and will be evaluated fully.

This is an important additional safeguard for those who are detained, giving them certainty that their detention is subject to further independent judicial oversight. It builds on the current automatic bail referral regime at the four-month point which was introduced last year. I have written to the Chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee and the Joint Committee on Human Rights with more detail on the pilot and I will place copies of those letters in the Libraries of both Houses.

Together with the Ministry of Justice, we will consider the key outcomes of the pilot, as part of our continued efforts to ensure we have a detention system that is fair to those who may be detained, upholds our immigration policies and acts as a deterrent to those who might seek to frustrate immigration control.

[HCWS1309]

TRANSPORT

Smart Ticketing on the Rail Network

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): In November 2017 in our strategic vision for rail, the Department for Transport set out ambitious plans for the roll out of smart ticketing across the network, with the aim of making it more convenient for passengers to buy and receive their train tickets. Over a year later, we have made real progress. Every franchise offers smart cards and/or barcodes and smart tickets are available across almost all of the network.

We now want to go further. Our ambition is to ensure that across regional and urban commuter areas smart ticketing can deliver the kind of pay-as-you-go (PAYG) structure that is used in London, to make journeys easier and smoother for passengers.

In the north of England, the Government have allocated £150 million to the multi-modal PAYG programme already being progressed by Transport for the North and, in London, Oyster ticketing already offers seamless PAYG travel. However, there is demand for PAYG to be deployed more widely, so today we begin consulting on the feasibility of delivering PAYG to an expanded area across the south-east of England. This is just a first step, and we will continue to work with other areas to assess opportunities to roll out PAYG.

The consultation offers the travelling public, business, local authorities and others the opportunity to have their say on how the system could operate and where it could extend to. We are aware that there are views on the appropriate ticketing systems and the way the fares structure could be organised to complement pay as you go travel; these issues are also being considered in the consultation.

[HCWS1307]
sample tyres are all from a single manufacturer and have been assembled so that accurate comparisons can be made. This analysis will be used to address the question of how ageing affects tyres' integrity. I understand that it will be the first of its kind to be published using this methodology.

The Government are committed to evidence-based policy making, in order to ensure the safety of all road users. Stakeholders and the public expect the Government to act on complete and appropriate evidence, and decisions would otherwise risk legal challenge by affected parties. As I informed the House on November 23, we expect the outcome of this research to be reported in the spring. It will be used alongside existing evidence to inform Government policy.
Written Statements
Friday 8 February 2019

TREASURY

Aggregates Levy Review

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): Longstanding litigation on the aggregates levy has now been concluded, with the litigation against the Government and the European Commission being withdrawn. The Government remain committed to devolving the aggregates levy to the Scottish Parliament following the conclusion of this litigation and are working with the Scottish Government to work out the next steps.

The aggregates levy has been largely unchanged since its introduction in 2002. The Government will now conduct a comprehensive review of the levy over the next year, working closely with the Scottish Government, and consulting the Welsh Government and Northern Ireland Executive throughout. The review will be comprehensive, looking at the latest evidence about the objectives of the levy, its effectiveness in meeting those objectives, and the design of the levy, including the impact of devolution.

The terms of reference for the review will be published in spring 2019 and a working group will be established to inform it. The review will aim to conclude by the end of 2019.

[HCWS1315]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein: EEA-EFTA Citizens’ Rights

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): The UK has concluded discussions with Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein (the EEA-EFTA states), on an EEA-EFTA citizens’ rights agreement that would protect the rights of UK nationals already living in the EEA-EFTA states and EEA-EFTA nationals already living in the UK in the event of a no-deal scenario.

Delivering the deal negotiated with the EU remains the Government’s top priority. This has not changed. However, the Government must ensure the UK is prepared for every eventuality. It is the responsible thing to do.

The EEA-EFTA citizens’ rights agreement would ensure that citizens would be able to continue living broadly as they do today, regardless of the outcome of negotiations with the EU. The arrangements in the agreement closely mirror the arrangements for citizens in the EEA-EFTA separation agreement, published on 20 December 2018. Citizens falling within scope would have broadly the same entitlement to work, study and access public services and benefits as now. The EEA-EFTA separation agreement relies on some of the provisions of the withdrawal agreement which would not apply in a no-deal scenario. In such a scenario, therefore, we would instead bring this no-deal citizens’ rights agreement into force.

Together, these agreements will protect around 17,000 UK nationals living in these countries and approximately 15,000 nationals from these countries in the UK in any scenario.

I am depositing a copy of the agreement and an explainer in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1312]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Review of Drugs: Appointment

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): In October, I announced that there would be a major independent review of drug misuse. This will look at a wide range of issues, including the system of support and enforcement around drug misuse, in order to inform our thinking about what more can be done to tackle drug harms. The review will make sure that we know as much as possible about who drug users are, what they are taking and how often, so that law enforcement agencies can target and prevent the drug-related causes of violent crime effectively. The review will also look at the health and social harms associated with drug use, identifying evidence-based approaches to preventing and reducing drug use, as well as where there are any gaps in the evidence about what works.

I am pleased to announce today that I have appointed Professor Dame Carol Black to lead the review. Dame Carol has a wealth of experience and I am confident that she will bring independence, integrity and a strong focus on analysis and evidence to the review.

The review will be held in two parts, with part one focusing on:
- the demographics of drug use. This will look at demand, including who uses which types of drugs, together with patterns of, and motivations for, use; and
- the drugs market. This will look at supply into and within the UK and how criminals meet the demand of users.

The scope of the second part will be determined once the first part has reported.

The review will focus only on England for those matters which are devolved and the UK for those matters which are reserved.

[HCWS1314]

Immigration

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): The Government launched a public consultation on 19 July 2018 seeking views on proposals for a Windrush compensation scheme. I am today updating the House on the progress of the Government’s response to that consultation. Righting the wrongs experienced by the Windrush generation remains one of my top priorities.

The consultation period was originally intended to last 12 weeks. I made a written statement on 11 October extending the consultation period, on the advice of Martin Forde QC, the independent adviser I appointed to oversee the development of the scheme. I agreed to this extension in order to give all those who would like to respond, the opportunity to do so.

Over 1,000 leaflets advertising the consultation were delivered via volunteers and community groups, and over 2,500 paper copies of the consultation document were distributed. The document was published on gov.uk,
and information about the consultation was disseminated via email and social media. Assistance in completing responses was available through a freephone helpline and email address.

During the consultation period twelve focus groups were also held, involving over 300 participants. These took place in Croydon, Birmingham, Cardiff, Newport, Walsall, Woolwich, Leicester, Brixton, Wolverhampton, Reading, Coventry and Telford.

Since the consultation closed on 16 November, we have given very careful consideration to the 1,435 responses that were received from people and organisations, as well as the feedback from the focus groups. These views have been considered in addition to the 650 responses to the call for evidence which preceded the consultation. I also have met with Martin Forde QC to discuss his views on the design of the scheme.

I intend to publish the formal Government response to the consultation shortly, which will set out the detailed design of the scheme. I will also publish more detailed rules and guidance about the scheme, and information about how eligible claimants can apply. The compensation scheme will then be opened for claims as soon as possible.

I would like to thank all those who responded to the consultation and who took part in the wider engagement throughout this period. The views and experiences that have been shared have proved invaluable in shaping the Government’s policy, ensuring it addresses the matters raised by those affected.

[HCWS1313]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Rough Sleeping

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): On 31 January, figures for the 2018 rough sleeping count were published and showed a welcome 2% reduction in the number of rough sleepers. While this decrease is encouraging, I know we must maintain our focus on making sure nobody has to spend even a single night sleeping on the streets. This Government are determined to get to the root of the problem, unique to every local authority, and tackle the complex range of reasons why people sleep rough, helping to prevent it from happening in the first place.

Early Adopters of the Rapid Rehousing Pathway

In December, we announced the locations of our first 11 Somewhere Safe to Stay hubs, one of four elements that make up the rapid rehousing pathway as announced in the rough sleeping strategy in August.

Today, I am pleased to announce the allocation of funding to a further 42 areas across the country for the three remaining elements of the rapid rehousing pathway—navigators, supported lettings and local lettings agencies.

Navigators are specialists assigned to rough sleepers, acting as a single point of contact to support people into settled accommodation, helping them access appropriate local services and sustain a safe life away from the streets;

Local lettings agencies work to source, identify, or provide homes and advice for rough sleepers or those at risk, supporting them into affordable, settled accommodation;

Supported lettings support individuals with a history of rough sleeping to help them to sustain their tenancies.

This funding will enable more than 80 navigators to work with up to 1,600 people sleeping rough, provide up to £2.8 million for supported lettings across 17 areas and up to a further £1.25 million for local letting agencies across nine areas. We estimate supported lettings to support around 600 rough sleepers, with local lettings agencies expected to make around 1,200 properties available.

Local areas will be able to connect people with the right support and sustainable housing to move them swiftly away from the street and facilitate their journey to recovery, bringing us a step closer to ending rough sleeping for good.

The full list of the 42 areas can be found at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/rapid-rehousing-pathway-additional-42-early-adopters

[HCWS1316]
Written Statements

Monday 11 February 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Competitiveness Pre-Council Statement

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary for State for the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Lord Henley) has made the following statement:

The Internal Market and Industry Day of the Competitiveness Council will take place on 18 February 2019 where the right hon. Lord Henley, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, will represent the UK, and the Research and Space Day on 19 February 2019 where Chris Skidmore MP, Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, will represent the UK.

Day one—internal market and industry

The internal market and industry day will consider a number of non-legislative items including, a competitiveness check-up focusing on the impact of EU value chain integration on competitiveness. Ministers will be asked to exchange views on the impact of artificial intelligence on EU industry and to adopt conclusions on the EU's co-ordinated plan on artificial intelligence.

They will take part in a policy debate on ‘Clean Planet for all’, the EU's strategic long-term vision for a climate-neutral economy. The non-legislative part of the agenda will finish with a European semester policy debate on how to deliver key reforms to make the European economy more competitive and resilient in the face of global uncertainty.

Under any other business, there will be updates on the following current legislative proposals: the company law package including a directive on digital tools and processes and a directive on the cross-border conversions, mergers and divisions; the regulation on enforcement of union harmonisation legislation on products; and the regulation on promoting fairness and transparency for business users of online intermediation services.

Day two—research and space

The research and space day will begin with a session on the Horizon Europe package during which the Council will review the progress report and exchange views on the specific programme implementing Horizon Europe—framework programme for research and innovation for 2021-2027.

Under any other business, the presidency will provide information on the state of play of the Horizon Europe package, covering the framework programme and its rules for participation and dissemination. The presidency will then conclude the Council by providing information on the ITER and Euratom programmes.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill: EVEL

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): I am today placing in the Library of the House the Department’s analysis on the application of Standing Order 83L in respect of the Government amendments tabled for Commons Report stage for the Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill.

[HCWS1317]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Integrated Communities

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Britain is a great place to live and is made stronger by its diversity. However, the benefits and opportunities of our society are not felt equally by everyone. No community should feel excluded, and everyone should understand and embrace the benefits and opportunities of living in modern Britain.
In March 2018, the Government launched a consultation on the Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper to obtain the views of the public and organisations on its ambitious goal to build integrated communities where people—whatever their background—can live, work, learn and socialise together based on shared rights, responsibilities and opportunities. The consultation ran for 12 weeks in total and closed on 5 June 2018.

I am today publishing the Government’s response to this consultation. The consultation process considered the Government’s proposed actions as laid out in the Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper and presented a number of questions about the Government’s strategy for consultation. There were over 3,400 responses to the consultation, reflecting the high level of interest in building integrated communities. A breakdown of the responses to each of these questions can be found in the Government’s response.

The Government have taken the views expressed in the consultation into account when developing our next steps. These are set out in the integrated communities action plan I am also publishing today. This outlines more than 70 actions across Government to help create strong and integrated communities. This action plan will build the capacity of our leaders, strengthen our communities, boost English language proficiency, and give people the infrastructure they need to thrive. The views of communities will continue to be an important factor when implementing these actions.

The action plan sets out a framework of national priority actions to promote integration and adopts a localised approach. As the Secretary of State for Communities, one of my priorities is to help build thriving, liveable and resilient places where people get along—from our high streets to our community spaces.

I am placing a copy of both documents in the Library of the House.

[HCWS1321]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Private Pensions Update

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): I am pleased to announce today, two important steps to ensure millions of people have greater security in retirement.

A stronger pensions regulator

Today, the Government have published their response to the consultation “Protecting Defined Benefit Pension Schemes—A Stronger Pensions Regulator”. This outlined their approach, as set out in the 2018 White Paper, to strengthen, clarify and streamline the defined benefit pension system.

The Government will introduce two new criminal offences to prevent and penalise mismanagement of pension schemes.

The first will target individuals who wilfully or recklessly mishandle pension schemes, endangering workers’ pensions, by such things as chronic mismanagement of a business; or allowing huge unsustainable deficits to build up; or taking huge investment risks; or a combination thereof. We will introduce a new custodial sentence of up to seven years’ imprisonment or an unlimited fine for this offence. This brings the punishment in line with similar offences in financial services.

The second, which will attract an unlimited fine, will target individuals who fail to comply with a contribution notice, which is issued by the Pensions Regulator requiring a specified amount of money to be paid into the pension scheme by that individual. We will also introduce a new civil penalty of up to £1 million for this offence.

We have also provided an update on measures to strengthen the Regulator’s information-gathering powers, such as enhancing their interview and inspection powers previously announced in the White Paper.

The changes will build on the robust system that is already in place to protect defined benefit pension schemes, further protecting individuals’ pensions and ensure greater clarity for employers.

The Government’s full response to the consultation is available here:

Ten million workers automatically enrolled into pensions

Today we announce the milestone of 10 million workers having been automatically enrolled into a workplace pension.

Automatic enrolment is transforming the savings culture of this country by normalising workplace pension saving. It is enabling millions of workers to look forward to a more secure future and a better retirement.

Between 2012 and 2017, the proportion of eligible employees saving in a workplace pension rose from 55% to 84%. The private sector has seen the largest increases over this period, with participation rates almost equalising among eligible men and women in 2017. The increase has also been particularly marked among younger workers and those with low earnings. Among eligible employees aged 22 to 29 years, participation increased from 35% to 79% and 76% of people earning £10,000 to £20,000 thousand are now saving, a rise of 42 percentage points since 2012.

Employers’ support is key to the success of automatic enrolment. In the last two years, thousands of small and micro employers have enrolled eligible workers into a pension for the first time. Automatic enrolment is now business as usual.

In addition, we brought in the first of the planned increases in minimum contribution rates, in April 2018, raising the overall minimum contribution level to 5%. From April 2019, the second planned increase, to a minimum 8%, will enable many workers to save even more.

The Government are committed to building on the 10 million milestone to support more workers, no matter what job, to save for a better retirement.

[HCWS1319]
**Written Statements**

*Tuesday 12 February 2019*

**TREASURY**

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):
A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Brussels on 12 February 2019. The UK will be represented by Mark Bowman (Director General, International Finance, HM Treasury). The Council will discuss the following:

*Early morning session*

The Eurogroup President will brief the Council on the outcomes of the 11 February meeting of the Eurogroup, and the European Commission will provide an update on the current economic situation in the EU.

*European system of financial supervision review*

The Council will be invited to adopt Council conclusions on the review of the European system of financial supervision.

*Current financial services legislative proposals*

The Romanian presidency will provide an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

*Decision making in EU taxation policy*

The Council will hold an exchange of views on the European Commission’s proposal to move to qualified majority voting (QMV) in EU taxation policy.

*Fiscal sustainability report*

The Council will be invited to approve a Council recommendation to discharge to the European Commission in respect of the 2017 EU budget.

*EU budget guidelines*

The Council will be invited to adopt Council conclusions on the EU budget guidelines for 2020.

*AOB—carbon pricing and aviation tax*

The Dutch Finance Minister will present a paper to the Council on carbon pricing and aviation tax.

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**HOME DEPARTMENT**

**National DNA Database Strategy Board Annual Report**

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): My noble Friend the Minister of State, Home Office (Baroness Williams of Trafford) has today made the following written ministerial statement:

... (statement content)

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**TRANSPORT**

**East Midlands Rail Franchise**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): I wish to inform the House that the Secretary of State for Transport, has reached agreement with Stagecoach Group to continue to operate train...
services on the east midlands rail franchise. This direct award means that passengers from London St Pancras International to Northamptonshire, the east midlands, Lincolnshire, Staffordshire and South Yorkshire will continue to be served by East Midlands Trains until 18 August 2019. If required there is an option to extend this agreement by up to a further six rail periods.

East Midlands Trains has achieved good performance and passenger satisfaction levels during the time they have been operating the franchise and the new agreement will allow for a smooth transition into the next competitively-tendered franchise. In the forthcoming months I expect East Midlands Trains to deliver the following improvements as part of the new agreement:

- investment of £150,000 on accessibility improvements at stations;
- a simplified application process for Delay Repay.

As a minimum East Midlands Trains will also be expected to continue to deliver the following:

- good performance levels and passenger satisfaction;
- a mobile app which provides real time information on the operation of passenger services and enables customers to book and pay for travel;
- a 4G wi-fi service and provide at least 15 minutes of free access per passenger journey on standard class.

This direct award will ensure a smooth transition from the current operator to the next franchise which is expected to deliver significant passenger benefits including more services and seats across the franchise, in addition to better facilities and further improved accessibility at stations.

[Taxi and Private Hire Vehicle Licensing]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am today announcing to the House the launching of a consultation on statutory guidance to be issued to taxi and private hire vehicle (PHV) licensing authorities and that the Government have issued their response to the report of the task and finish group on taxi and private hire vehicle licensing.

The draft statutory guidance proposes a range of robust measures to protect taxi and PHV passengers, particularly those most vulnerable. Government and licensing authorities must work together to ensure that, above all else, the taxi and PHV services the public use are safe. The consultation on this guidance will run until 22 April 2019.

The taxi and PHV trade has experienced significant and rapid changes in recent years which have brought with them benefits but have exacerbated concerns over the existing structure of the industry and the environment in which it operates. In particular, many of these changes have highlighted inconsistencies in the licensing standards, and in the rigour with which these standards are applied by some licensing authorities.

The recommendations proposed in the draft statutory guidance are a result of extensive consultation, and in particular learning from the best practice of exemplary licensing authorities. Consulting on statutory guidance is an important first step to reforming the way the taxi and PHV sector is regulated.

In addition to the statutory guidance consultation, the Government are today publishing their response to the report of the chair of the task and finish group. The Government have set out their plans to introduce legislation and bring forward the urgent reforms necessary. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Chair, Professor Mohammed Abdel-Haq, for his report, and the members of the group for their dedication in considering the issues facing the trade and their potential remedies.

The Government will, when time allows, bring forward legislation to introduce national minimum standards for taxi and PHV licensing, reinforcing the consistently high standards that the statutory guidance will bring to the sector. To ensure that drivers are under the same level of scrutiny when operating away from their licensing area we will legislate to enable enforcement and compliance checks to be conducted by any licensing officer against any vehicle regardless of where they have been licensed. Where drivers or vehicles fail to meet the national minimum standards, they will be able to take appropriate action to protect the public. Underpinning these measures will be the introduction of a national licensing database to assist the sharing of relevant information between licensing authorities and other bodies necessary to ensure that all those in the trade are “fit and proper” and warrant the trust that is placed in them by the public. This database will build on the work of the Local Government Association and the National Anti-Fraud Network in establishing the national register of revocation and refusals.

Taxis and PHVs provide a vital community service which is used by many people; helping them get to the shops, see their friends, or go to work or school. We will work with the trade, drivers and regulators as well as passenger groups to meet the challenges the sector is expected to face in the future and ensure that change is not at the expense of a safe and well-functioning market. This work is already under way through the future of mobility grand challenge and the Law Commission’s consideration on enabling autonomous vehicles. I would encourage all to engage on these issues and help shape a successful sector that all can be proud of.

Second Additional Provision to the High Speed Rail (West Midlands – Crewe) Bill

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I would like to inform the House about the introduction of a second additional provision to the High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill, which is currently before a Select Committee.

As part of this Government’s industrial strategy we are investing in High Speed 2, a transformational infrastructure project that will improve people’s journeys, create jobs, generate economic growth and help to rebalance our country’s economy. HS2 is more than a railway and the project’s vision is to be a catalyst for economic growth. It has cross-party support and support from councils, local enterprise partnerships, metro Mayors and businesses who can see the transformational potential.

HS2 is making progress and the benefits are already being seen in towns and cities in advance of HS2 services. Around 2,000 businesses have been awarded HS2 contracts and over 7,000 jobs have been supported, a figure that will increase to around 30,000 at peak.
The additional provision proposes a number of changes to the powers in the Bill for the Select Committee’s consideration. These changes have arisen as a result of requests from petitioners, directions from the Select Committee currently considering the Bill, and further design development, principally in relation to utility works. Those directly and specially affected by these changes may petition against them, and once any petitioners have been heard, the Committee will decide whether the amendments to the Bill should be made. The main changes in the additional provision are as follows:

The lowering of the viaduct at Kings Bromley which reduces environmental effects such as visual impact;

- a revised and more simple Handsacre junction layout, where phase one connects to the west coast main line;

- a new traction power connection, requiring over 7 km of high voltage electricity lines, from the HS2 line at Newlands Lane to the east of the route. This change ensures the necessary resilience and redundancy required for traction power on a high-speed railway;

- temporary and permanent power supply routes to the Whitmore and Madeley tunnels, to support the operation of the tunnel boring machines during construction and later, the operation of the tunnels;

- a southward extension of the southern end of the tunnel at Whitmore, to avoid the need for complex surface works where the A53 crosses the route; and

- works at and around Crewe station including the extension of platform 5 to accommodate 400-metre HS2 trains. These changes support the realisation of the Crewe hub vision.

The additional provision also includes works and powers related to utilities following detailed discussion with utility companies. Other changes relate to highway safety and capacity improvements.

All of these changes require additional land to be acquired, and/or works to be carried out. In some cases land now affected is at some distance from the line of route. Full details are shown in the plans and sections deposited alongside the additional provision. Affected landowners will receive notification this week, including information on how to petition against the changes, should they decide to do so.

The following amendments are also included in this additional provision:

- An insertion to allow easements over land to be for the benefit of a third party (i.e. utility companies) rather than for the benefit of the Secretary of State;

- dis-application of some sections of the Building Act 1984 in relation to demolitions which are already otherwise authorised by the Bill; and

- increasing the controls on the nominated undertaker in relation to low-volume lorry movements.

I am also publishing an environmental statement setting out the significant effects and mitigation from the changes in the additional provision, alongside a supplementary environmental statement reporting new environmental information relating to the scheme. In accordance with Standing Orders, there is a public consultation on these documents which will run until 29 March 2019. The documents will be put in the Public Bill Office of the House, and will also be made available in locations open to the public in all local authorities and parishes affected by the changes.

In October 2018, I committed to updating the House regularly on the progress of HS2. I intend to make further statements to this House to update colleagues on HS2’s progress during the course of 2019.

[HCWS1324]
Written Statements

Wednesday 13 February 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Competition and Markets Authority: Contingencies Fund Advance

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has sought a repayable cash advance from the Contingencies Fund of £17,049,000 to ensure the CMA’s relocation to new offices remains on schedule.

The CMA will only receive its voted funding for this project at the supplementary estimate, and consequently may only draw the related cash from the Consolidated Fund after the Supply and Appropriation Act has received Royal Assent in March 2019. This requirement has arisen because the 2018-19 expenditure for the construction works at the CMA’s new offices is predominantly falling in the last quarter of this financial year.

The cash advance will ensure the project stays on track and on budget and ensure that the CMA also meets its operational needs.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £2,793,000 and capital of £14,256,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the CMA. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £17,049,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS1328]

TREASURY

Reinsurance (Acts of Terrorism) Act 1993

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): In a written statement on 22 March 2018 [HCWS579], I informed Parliament that the Government intended to amend the Reinsurance (Acts of Terrorism) Act 1993 to enable the Government’s agreement with Pool Re, the terrorism reinsurer, to be expanded to include business interruption losses that are not contingent on damage to commercial property. This was achieved with Royal Assent of the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act on 12 February 2019. This demonstrates the Government’s commitment to ensuring that businesses can continue to secure insurance against the financial costs of terror attacks, and that Pool Re can maintain its position as an example world-leading partnership between Government and the insurance sector.

[HCWS1329]
Written Statements
Thursday 14 February 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Leaving the EU: Nuclear Energy Policy

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The Government continue to make progress in putting in place all the necessary measures to ensure that the UK can operate as an independent and responsible nuclear state upon the UK’s withdrawal from Euratom and the European Union.

The UK has now concluded all replacement international agreements required to ensure continuity for civil nuclear trade following exit day. These include new nuclear co-operation agreements (NCAs) with Australia, Canada and the US, and voluntary offer agreement and additional protocol safeguards agreements with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). All of these have passed in Parliament on 19 December.

In addition to the new bilateral NCAs described above, the UK has an existing bilateral NCA with Japan which has been in place since 1998. This agreement will remain in force following the UK’s withdrawal from the EU. The UK and Japan are holding formal negotiations to put in place arrangements to reflect the UK’s future safeguards arrangements, with both sides confident that appropriate arrangements will be in place for March 2019 if required.

Significant progress has been made in the setting up of a domestic nuclear safeguards regime. Government’s new domestic safeguards regulations are now on track to commence on exit day, having been debated and passed by both Houses of Parliament as of 22 January 2019.

In addition, the state system of accounting for and control of nuclear material (SSAC) has commenced parallel running alongside Euratom, processing and checking reports received from industry through the safeguards information management and reporting system (SIMRS) IT system and producing the decorations required to enable the UK to meet its international obligations. This will provide the opportunity to identify and make any necessary adjustments before 29 March 2019.

Working closely with industry, Government have been putting in place measures to address the issues that may affect the civil nuclear sector in any exit scenario. This includes laying all the necessary statutory instruments (SIs) required for any exit scenario, to minimise civil nuclear business disruption and ensure health and safety standards remain robust. The SIs will also ensure that no inoperabilities are retained in domestic law following the UK’s departure from the Euratom treaty.

Today I will be depositing a report in the Libraries of both Houses that sets out further details on the overall progress on the Government’s implementation of their Euratom exit strategy, including EU negotiations, domestic operational readiness, legislation and international agreements. The report covers the three-month reporting period from 26 September to 26 December and is the second statutory report under section 3(4) of the Nuclear Safeguards Act 2018. The next report on Euratom exit progress is due to be deposited after the start of May 2019.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council, February 2019

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Lord Callanan, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:

I will attend the General Affairs Council in Brussels on 19 February 2019 to represent the UK. Until we leave the European Union, we remain committed to fulfilling our rights and obligations as a full member.

The provisional agenda includes:
Multianual financial framework 2021-27
Ministers and the Commission will discuss progress on the multiannual financial framework (MFF) negotiations with the presidency.
Preparation of the European Council 21-22 March 2019:
Annotated draft agenda
The Council will discuss the draft agenda for the March European Council. It is expected to include: jobs, growth and competitiveness; climate change; and external relations.
Towards a sustainable Europe 2030
In January 2019 the Commission released a reflection paper as part of its 2019 work programme titled “Towards a sustainable Europe by 2030, on the follow-up to the UN sustainable development goals including on the Paris agreement on climate change”. Ministers will discuss this paper ahead of the Sibiu summit in May, where issues relating to Europe’s future will be discussed.
Values of the Union—Hungary / article 7(1) TEU reasoned proposal
Ministers will discuss the article 7(1) procedure in relation to Hungary.
Rule of law in Poland / article 7(1) TEU reasoned proposal
The Commission will provide Ministers with an update on the rule of law in Poland.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council, February 2019

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs will attend the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on 18 February. It will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini and will take place in Brussels.

Ukraine

Ministers will discuss the EU’s response to the Russian attack on Ukrainian vessels in the Black sea and look ahead to what is likely to be a challenging election year for Ukraine. Ministers will take stock of Ukraine’s reform efforts and consider how the EU can provide socioeconomic support to the sea of Azov region. The UK will welcome the EU’s readiness to provide economic...
and humanitarian support to those regions most affected by the ongoing conflict. It will also reiterate the need for a collective and high-profile response to Russia’s malign influence in Ukraine.

Syria

This discussion will focus on preparations for the upcoming Brussels III conference, “Supporting the future of Syria and the region”, taking place on 13 and 14 March. The conference will aim to improve humanitarian access and the protection of civilians in Syria, as well as mobilise humanitarian assistance, including for refugee-hosting countries.

Horn of Africa

Ministers will discuss the political and security situation in the horn of Africa, including changing regional dynamics following reconciliation between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The UK supports the EU proposal to review future engagement. The Council will also discuss mutual concerns about the Sudanese Government’s use of violent tactics in response to protests, and the need for wider reforms; as well as the political situation in Somalia, where the EU is urging the Somali Government to translate their commitment to progress into tangible results.

Council conclusions

The Council is expected to adopt conclusions on Yemen, EU human rights guidelines on non-discrimination in external action, EU priorities in UN human rights forums in 2019, climate change diplomacy, and in response to the recent European Court of Auditors report on the implementation of the Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRiT).

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Building Safety

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Since the discovery that a glass-reinforced plastic (GRP) composite fire door from Grenfell Tower marketed as meeting a 30-minute standard failed a test after approximately 15 minutes, the Government have led a programme of work to investigate fire door performance across the market in the interest of public safety and reassurance. Today I am updating the House on actions taken.

Following consultation with representatives from the Metropolitan Police, the Government’s chief scientific advisors and the National Fire Chiefs’ Council, the Government’s independent expert panel advised that, while the overall risk to public safety was low, further investigations should be undertaken into other GRP composite fire door manufacturers.

During testing, a sample of GRP composite fire doors from nine manufacturers failed to meet the required fire performance standard. The sample of fire doors failed for a range of reasons including but not restricted to performance at the glazing unit, letter box and the door frame. There was some evidence of over reliance on written assessments being used in lieu of primary tests for significant changes in hardware and ironmongery; and for the reverse side of the door. These findings clearly indicated broader failings within the industry. The Government therefore took further urgent action.

My Department wrote to all building control bodies highlighting the need to check that existing building regulations guidance on new GRP composite fire door installations is followed. The guidance sets out the tests which should be performed—including testing on both sides of the door—to meet building regulation requirements.

My Department also notified Trading Standards of the test results and local Trading Standards are working with the individual companies concerned.

On 28 July I instructed major GRP composite fire door manufacturers to meet urgently to agree actions to tackle the failings which have been identified. As a result, the following actions have been taken:

In August 2018, the three companies providing GRP composite fire door blanks in the UK agreed to stop production and sale of any door blanks with immediate effect. This stopped any new GRP composite fire doors from entering the market.

In August the Association of Composite Door Manufacturers (ACDM) further agreed that all GRP composite fire doors sold from their members would be removed from the market until they could demonstrate meeting the required standard. This stopped any fire doors from ACDM members already in production leaving factories.

In August the ACDM established a collaborative testing programme to facilitate manufacturers bringing quality product meeting the required standard back to market. The ACDM provided assurance that all products brought back to market will have the required furnace test report for both sides of the door before being sold.

The ACDM also agreed that all members of the ACDM will be required to sign up to a third-party accreditation scheme carrying out additional checks on their fire doors to drive up quality across the market.

All GRP composite manufacturers with a failed test are consulting their customers to establish an effective new building safety risk assessment. At least one manufacturer has gone beyond this providing a dedicated telephone helpline for their customers and offering meetings to help customers understand the situation.

The ACDM is working on an industry-led plan for repair and replacement of affected doors. The ACDM is working closely with my Department on its plan to ensure it can be published by industry as soon as possible.

As well as work to encourage industry action, my Department has liaised closely with social housing building owners to ensure that they have been kept up to date with the fire doors investigation. To facilitate this, it has established a mechanism for local authorities and housing associations confidentially to share test results from fire door testing to inform building risk assessments and support our investigation.

Manse Masterdor, the manufacturers of the door from Grenfell Tower, went into administration in November 2014 and is therefore not part of the wider industry action outlined above. My Department has been working closely with local authorities and housing associations with Manse Masterdor GRP composite fire doors in their buildings regarding replacement of these doors.

In parallel, the expert panel has issued guidance for building owners looking to fit or replace fire doors, which can be found on the building safety programme website. The summary results of the GRP composite tests to inform building risk assessment are also now available on the building safety programme website.

I can confirm that the expert panel advice remains unchanged and the risk to public safety remains low as even when not meeting full resistance standards fire
doors will provide some protection from the spread of fire and are part of a layered fire protection systems within buildings.

The National Fire Chiefs Council continue to advise that, in the event of a fire, people should follow existing fire procedures for the building. Residents should also test their smoke alarms regularly to ensure they work and ensure that their flat front door is fitted with a working self-closing device. All doors provide some essential protection in a fire if they are properly closed.

I want to reassure hon. Members that my Department is doing all it can as quickly as possible to properly investigate these issues and to make sure that where needed appropriate action will be taken.

On the advice of the expert panel, investigations are ongoing into the timber fire door industry. Public safety is paramount and I will continue to keep the House updated.

[HCSW1334]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ebola Response

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): Six months on from its formal declaration, the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) remains challenging to contain. I am updating the House on how the UK Government are continuing to support the response in DRC, and preparedness in neighbouring countries.

Since my hon. Friend the Minister for Africa’s statement on 20 November, Official Report, column 737, elections have taken place in the DRC and a new President inaugurated. Disruption over the election period hindered response activities; as a result, there has been an increase in the number of new Ebola cases reported this year.

As of 12 February, there were 823 confirmed and probable cases. Of these, 517 people have died and 280 recovered. The response, ably led by the DRC authorities with international support directed by the World Health Organisation, has continued to expand and adapt. Approximately 7,000 contacts are currently under surveillance. The experimental vaccine, developed with UK aid following the 2014 west Africa outbreak, has been administered to over 78,000 people in DRC, including 21,000 health and frontline workers and 16,000 children.

Let me pay tribute to all the DRC health workers and international experts who are dealing with this outbreak in very challenging circumstances.

Geographical shifts in the outbreak are testing the capacity of the response. As more health zones are affected and cases move further south, there is an increased likelihood of an outbreak in Goma, the provincial capital on the border with Rwanda. Preparedness work has been under way in Goma, including setting up case surveillance, an Ebola treatment centre and a laboratory.

The DRC Government have just released their third strategic response plan, which sets out plans for the next six months. It is quite possible that it will take longer for this outbreak to be fully contained. The UK is supporting the response through both funding and expertise. At the request of the DRC Government I am not announcing specific funding figures, to avoid putting first-line responders at further risk of attack. But let me restate that it is in our national interest to find ways of building resilience to such deadly diseases, preventing their international spread and saving lives. The UK has supported the response since the very start and will continue to do so for as long as it takes to curb the outbreak.

The critical challenge now is to break the chain of transmission in DRC. That means redoubling contact tracing; training and supporting health workers in infection prevention control; continuing the vaccination effort; and working with local communities so they can spot symptoms, report them and seek treatment. WHO is doing a good job in difficult circumstances to lead the international response. It has over 500 people deployed to DRC and is working closely with other parts of the UN system and with international NGOs including MSF, ALIMA and Oxfam to help the people of DRC tackle this deadly disease. Key areas we would like to see strengthened in the international response include leadership, co-ordination and analysis.

This will require sustained support. To date, the UK is one of the largest bilateral donors to the Ebola response in DRC and for regional preparedness efforts in Uganda, Rwanda and South Sudan. Others must now step up and I will be urging our international partners to do so.

In addition to funding, the UK has supported preparations for clinical trials of new therapeutic drugs which have started in Beni. The UK public health rapid support team has played a major part in making this work possible. Technical experts have been deployed to eastern DRC, including two senior epidemiologists, a data scientist and a clinical trials specialist.

UK aid has provided WHO with six armoured vehicles to facilitate response work in such insecure operating environments. We are also backing efforts to understand and address the social and cultural dimensions of the outbreak, which in turn supports key interventions such as ensuring that burials in affected areas are conducted in a safe and dignified way.

There remains a significant risk of transmission to neighbouring countries and measures are be taken to prepare. For example, in Uganda, closest to the current outbreak, the Government have already vaccinated over 3,500 health workers in high priority districts. Community sensitisation is also taking place.

In Rwanda, the UK is backing the Government’s preparedness plans, including the training of health care workers, vaccination planning and the screening of more than 24 million people at Rwanda’s borders.

In South Sudan, UK support has led to the installation of an Ebola screening facility at Juba international airport. So far, over 1 million people at land and air borders have been screened. We are also helping to procure ambulances and sanitation equipment for isolation facilities.

The risk of Ebola to the UK population remains very low. Public Health England continues to monitor the situation daily and review the risk assessment on a two-weekly basis.

The UK is fully committed to containing this outbreak and to our longer-term efforts to combat deadly diseases in sub-Saharan Africa.

[HCWS1331]
**Contingencies Fund Advance**

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The Ministry of Justice requires an advance to discharge its commitments which are set out in its supplementary estimate 2018-19, laid before Parliament on 11 February 2019.

The Ministry of Justice has sought a repayable cash advance from the Contingencies Fund of £840,000,000. Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £840,000,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Ministry of Justice. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £840,000,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

The advance will be repaid upon Royal Assent of the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill.  

[HCWS1336]

**Justice and Home Affairs Post-Council Statement**

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The first meeting of EU Interior and Justice Ministers during the Romanian presidency of the Council of the EU took place on 7 and 8 February 2019 in Bucharest. The Immigration Minister represented the UK on Interior day. I represented the UK on Justice day.

Interior day focused on counter-terrorism, policing co-operation, the Schengen area, and migration and asylum.

Interior day began with a discussion on the European Parliament’s report on the EU’s approach to counter-terrorism. The Immigration Minister welcomed the European Parliament’s report in general, and emphasised areas—such as counter-radicalisation, tackling terrorist content online, addressing issues relating to returning foreign terrorist fighters, and aviation security—where the UK considers that continued European co-operation is vital in the fight against terrorism. The Immigration Minister also welcomed the committee’s call for close co-operation with the UK after Brexit. A number of member states agreed, urging immediate Commission and member state action to prepare contingency plans in case of no deal, including a mechanism of continued information exchange. Some member states also noted that member states retained competence for national security, and noted concern about expanding the competence of the European Public Prosecutor’s Office (EPPO) at this time.

The policing discussion focused on mechanisms to share experience and expertise on gathering and analysing digital data. The Immigration Minister intervened to support proposals to explore developing means of identifying and sharing best practice on the recovery and analysis of digital information, during the course of the prevention and investigation of criminal activity. Most member states also supported this work, and were keen for Europol to have a central role.

Over lunch and in the afternoon session, Ministers discussed the functioning of the Schengen border free zone, in the context of some member states retaining internal borders, and wider migration and asylum issues. As the UK does not participate in the border free zone, the Immigration Minister did not intervene on the Schengen border discussion. There was discussion about the necessity of Schengen internal border controls. Ministers also discussed but did not agree on the possibility of a temporary redistribution mechanism pending reform of the Dublin asylum system.

Justice day began with a discussion on the future of civil judicial co-operation in the EU. The debate marked the twentieth anniversary of the Amsterdam treaty and of the adoption of the Tampere programme. Ministers reaffirmed the need to focus on the proper implementation of existing legislation before considering new measures. I emphasised the importance of a future relationship with the EU in this area.

There then followed a lunchtime discussion on gathering electronic evidence in criminal matters. Ministers discussed the mandates for negotiations to establish an agreement on access to electronic evidence (e-evidence) with the US, and with contracting parties to the Budapest convention. I updated Ministers on progress towards an UK-US agreement under the US CLOUD Act.

Justice day ended with a discussion on the future of judicial co-operation in criminal matters in the EU. Ministers again emphasised the importance of proper implementation of legislation, and ensuring the current acquis works effectively.  

[HCWS1337]

**PRIME MINISTER**

**Intelligence Oversight**

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): On 22 November 2018, the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament published two reports: its 2017-18 annual report; and its report into the terror attacks in 2017, titled “The 2017 Attacks: What needs to change?” Our thoughts remain with the victims and all those affected by the 2017 attacks in Westminster, Manchester, London Bridge, Finsbury Park and Parsons Green.

Today, the Government are publishing their response to each of these reports. I am separately providing to the ISC a closed response to the redacted recommendations in the 2017 attacks report. I remain grateful to the Intelligence and Security Committee for its continued independent oversight and scrutiny.

Copies of the Government responses have been laid before both Houses.  

[HCWS1335]
The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The Government have decided to opt in to the European Commission’s proposals for Council decisions authorising the acceptance by certain member states of the accession of named countries to the 1980 Hague Convention on the civil aspects of international child abduction, in the interests of the EU. The acceptances are as follows:

- Austria, Cyprus, Croatia, Luxembourg, Portugal, Romania and the United Kingdom to accept Dominican Republic;
- Austria, Luxembourg and Romania to accept Belarus and Uzbekistan;
- Austria to accept Ecuador and Ukraine;
- Austria and Romania to accept Honduras.

The UK has already accepted Belarus, Uzbekistan, Ecuador, Ukraine and Honduras and therefore these Council decisions do not instruct the UK to take any action.

All EU member states are party to the 1980 Hague Convention, the primary civil law international instrument which provides a mechanism to seek the prompt return of wrongfully removed or retained children to their country of habitual residence.

When a country wishes to accede to the convention, it is necessary for an existing contracting state to accept that country’s accession before the convention can apply between them. It is the European Commission’s view that there is exclusive competence on the EU for all matters relating to the 1980 convention and that therefore member states must be authorised by the EU to accept accessions by third countries and must do so collectively through Council decisions.

Although not anticipated in the proposals, the Government believe that the UK opt in under the protocol to title V of the treaty on the functioning of the European Union applies and it has therefore asserted its right to choose whether to opt in and have decided that it is in the UK’s best interests to do so.

The Government believe that the wider significance of these proposals for external competence mean that it is in the UK’s interests to participate fully in these negotiations, including having the ability to vote. These proposals must be agreed by unanimity within the EU Council.

The House will be aware that community rehabilitation companies were set up just over four and a half years ago (with contracts awarded in December 2014). They were a new idea and part of probation reforms which extended supervision on licence each year to an additional 40,000 offenders released from prison sentences of less than 12 months. These companies do not deal with high-risk offenders—who are managed by the National Probation Service—but with low and medium risk offenders. They have been set up in a range of ways. There are 21 companies, the majority of which are private sector owned with a range of voluntary sector third party suppliers. Their particular purpose is to work with low and medium risk offenders, supervise them, develop plans for them, and provide them with rehabilitative services, in order to reduce the reoffending rate.

On Thursday 14 February 2019, Working Links (Employment) Limited, and its three CRCs: Working Links, Bristol, Gloucestershire, Somerset and Wiltshire CRC, and Dorset, Devon and Cornwall CRC, went into administration. The Ministry of Justice has been in discussions with Working Links and has taken immediate action to ensure that probation services are fully protected in these areas. Our central priority is of course to protect the public, ensuring that we have the right supervision of offenders in place, and that probation staff are supported in their important work. We have undertaken significant work to determine the most sustainable option for future management of probation services in Wales and the south-west and have transferred staff and services to Kent, Surrey and Sussex CRC, which is owned by Seetec. This change has been made via a variation to Kent, Surrey and Sussex CRC’s existing contract. Seetec has a good track record in Kent, Surrey and Sussex and we are satisfied that they are well-placed and well-equipped to take over these services and run them effectively. Plans have been implemented to ensure that probation staff and other key probation stakeholders are well-informed with regards to the transition.

We are also working towards more bespoke arrangements for the services in Wales, specifically that offender management services in Wales be transferred to Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service before the end of the current contractual period, to better dovetail with the future design for probation delivery in Wales. Our intentions are to transfer these services by the end of 2019, rather than the previously planned date of 2020, and we are currently working at pace with Seetec to accelerate this process.

We also recognise the impact of Working Links’ administration upon its other public sector contracts in the UK, and have been engaging with the Department for Work and Pensions and the Scottish Government. DWP will be working with Working Links and the administrators to identify all participants of its programmes who are potentially affected to ensure appropriate advice and support is provided.

The Government continue to work to improve the effectiveness of the wider probation system. We have already taken action to stabilise and improve probation delivery. Last year, we announced we intended to end CRC contracts early and held a consultation on proposals to improve future probation services. We also agreed contractual changes with current CRCs to improve performance in key areas. We want to create a
better system in future which will prevent these kinds of things happening again. We intend to better integrate public, private and third sector providers, putting in place a more stable and resilient probation system, which works effectively to protect the public and tackle reoffending. We will announce detailed plans later this year.

We know probation is vital to ensuring justice is done and the cycle of reoffending is broken. We will work closely with Kent, Surrey and Sussex CRC and Seetec in the next weeks and months to ensure the continuation, stability and improvement of services. [HCWS1338]
Written Statements

Tuesday 19 February 2019

TREASURY

ECOFIN

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):
A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) was held in Brussels on 12 February 2019. The UK was represented by Mark Bowman (Director General, International Finance, HM Treasury). The Council discussed the following:

Early morning session

The Eurogroup President briefed the Council on the outcomes of the 11 February meeting of the Eurogroup, and the European Commission provided an update on the current economic situation in the EU.

European Central Bank—executive board member

The Council endorsed the appointment of Philip Lane as a new member of the European Central Bank executive board.

European system of financial supervision review

The Council agreed a general approach on the review of the European system of financial supervision.

Current financial services legislative proposals

The Romanian presidency provided an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

Decision making in EU taxation policy

The Council held an exchange of views on the European Commission’s proposal to move to qualified majority voting (QMV) in EU taxation policy.

Fiscal sustainability report

The Council adopted Council conclusions on the 2018 fiscal sustainability report.

Discharge of the EU budget

The Council approved a Council recommendation to the European Parliament to discharge the Commission of the implementation of the 2017 EU budget.

EU budget guidelines


AOB—carbon pricing and aviation tax

Following a presentation by the Netherlands, the Council held an exchange of views on carbon pricing and aviation tax.

DEFENCE

Chemical Weapons Convention: Annual Statement of UK Protective Programme 2017

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster):
My right hon. Friend the Minister in the House of Lords (the right hon. the Earl Howe PC) has made the following written ministerial statement.

The UK’s chemical protection programme is designed to protect against the use of chemical weapons. Such a programme is permitted by the chemical weapons convention, with which the United Kingdom is fully compliant. Under the terms of the convention, we are required to provide information annually to the organisation for the prohibition of chemical weapons. In accordance with the Government’s commitment to openness, I am placing in the Library of the House a copy of the summary that has been provided to the organisation outlining the UK’s chemical protection programme in 2017.

[HCWS1340]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

National Planning Policy Framework

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): The national planning policy framework is fundamental to delivering the homes and other development that we need, achieving high-quality places and protecting our environment.

Last year we published a revised framework, which implemented a range of reforms to help make planning more predictable and transparent, drive up quality and support delivery.

A consultation on further updates to the framework and associated planning guidance ran from 26 October to 7 December 2018, and the Government are grateful to everyone who responded. Having considered those responses, we are making very minor changes to the text of the framework, which are reflected in an updated version being published today. A copy of the revised framework is available on the Department’s web site, alongside our response to the consultation.

[HCWS1341]
Written Statements

Wednesday 20 February 2019

CABINET OFFICE

Government Outsourcing

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): Following Carillion’s liquidation in January 2018, the Government response ensured continuity of key public services. However, there has been increased scrutiny on the benefits and risks associated with the use of the private sector to deliver public services. In the light of this, we have been reviewing our outsourcing processes and considering lessons learned.

The review concluded that outsourcing, done well, can deliver significant benefits. It delivers economies of scale that mean services can be provided more efficiently, at lower cost and at better value for the taxpayer. Open and fair competition within free markets encourages creativity and innovation, meaning fresh perspectives and new solutions can be applied to existing policy challenges.

However, it also highlighted that we need to take steps to improve public service outcomes from outsourcing, increase our resilience to supplier failure and rebuild public trust in outsourcing. Today, I am pleased to announce that we have published new guidance for officials that will help Government to work smarter with industry, set up contracts for success and build a more diverse supplier base. These are:

Outsourcing playbook and associated guidance—This will allow Departments to make good outsourcing decisions, achieve value for money when outsourcing, and is aimed at everyone involved in the outsourcing of a public service.

Supplier code of conduct—We have reviewed and updated the supplier code of conduct to ensure that it not only set out the behaviours taxpayers expect of central Government’s suppliers but includes what suppliers should expect of Government.

Guidance on corporate financial distress which suggests practical steps to take where contract managers have concerns over a supplier’s financial health.

The principles of the outsourcing playbook will apply to all Government outsourcing with a particular focus on complex first generation projects and subsequent generations where the service is being delivered in a different or novel way. The 11 key policies published today in the playbook will ensure that the Government get more projects right from the start. It will promote a diverse and healthy marketplace—and we will have “living wills” in the unlikely event of things going wrong.

In order to ensure that we take into account the wider social benefits to be derived from Government contracts, we are extending the requirements of the social value Act in central Government so that all major procurements will explicitly evaluate social value, where appropriate, rather than just consider it.

The Public Accounts Committee recommended that we review our approach to managing current strategic supplier risk. The revised approach will see the introduction of a new memorandum of understanding between the Cabinet Office and strategic suppliers that reflects a more mature relationship with industry, and provides greater flexibility in how Government manages situations.

In order to build the capability within Departments to outsource effectively and manage outsourced contracts, we are undertaking a programme to accredit and train 30,000 contract managers across the civil service by the end of 2021.

Taken together, the measures in this reform package is key to delivering value for money for taxpayers when services are outsourced, strengthening our resilience to supplier failure and rebuilding public trust in outsourcing.

A copy of the outsourcing playbook, financial distress guidance and supplier code of conduct have been placed in the libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1345]

TREASURY

Public Service Pension Indexation and Revaluation

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): Legislation governing public service pensions requires them to be increased annually by the same percentage as additional pensions (state earnings related pension and state second pension). Public service pensions will therefore be increased from 8 April 2019 by 2.4%, in line with the annual increase in the consumer prices index up to September 2018, except for those public service pensions which have been in payment for less than a year, which will receive a pro rata increase.

Separately, in the new career average public service pension schemes, pensions in accrual are revalued annually in relation to either prices or earnings depending on the terms specified in their scheme regulations. The Public Service Pensions Act 2013 requires HMT to specify a measure of prices and of earnings to be used for revaluation by these schemes.

The prices measure is the consumer prices index up to September 2018. Public service schemes which rely on a measure of prices, therefore, will use the figure of 2.4% for the prices element of revaluation.

The earnings measure is the whole economy average weekly earnings (non-seasonally adjusted and including bonuses and arrears) up to September 2018. Public service schemes which rely on a measure of earnings, therefore, will use the figure of 2.8% for the earnings element of revaluation.

Revaluation is one part of the amount of pension that members earn in a year and needs to be considered in conjunction with the amount of in-year accrual. Typically, schemes with lower revaluation will have faster accrual and therefore members will earn more pension per year. The following list shows how the main public service schemes will be affected by revaluation:
The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): Today I am announcing new stop and search powers for police to tackle acid attacks and the misuse of drones.

These new powers are being announced in response to the recent public consultation on extending stop and search to address the criminal misuse of unmanned aircraft (drones), laser pointers and corrosive substances.

Stop and search is an important tool for the police to prevent, detect and investigate offences, including some of the most violent and devastating, thereby helping the police to protect and safeguard the public. The use of stop and search, when proportionate, lawful, and intelligence-led, is an integral part of the policing response in tackling serious violence, and in preventing and deterring people from carrying weapons. However, it is also important that when stop and search is used it is done effectively, professionally, and, as far as possible, with community consent.

The Offensive Weapons Bill, which is currently before Parliament, will introduce the offence of possession of a corrosive substance in a public place and provisions to extend stop and search powers to cover this offence. The use of corrosive substances as a weapon can cause significant harm and injury to individuals, families and communities and we are determined to take strong action in order to prevent these horrendous attacks.

Following the incident at Gatwick airport, the Government have been working closely with the police to examine whether they have the necessary powers to respond should the misuse of a drone cause widespread disruption to the operation of an aerodrome. The police have been clear that in certain circumstances, a power to stop and search a person in relation to offences concerning flying a drone within the restriction zone of a licensed aerodrome would enhance their ability to respond should a similar situation arise in the future. We consider such a power to be proportionate and beneficial in enabling the police to tackle incidents causing widespread disruption to the operation of aerodromes and the Government will continue to work with the police to define the detailed scope of this power.

In addition, the Government are working closely with the police to examine whether they have the appropriate powers to respond effectively to other offences, including around prisons, that might be committed using a drone. If this work reveals further meaningful operational gaps, the Government will take further legislative action.

The Government will also keep under review the adequacy of the existing powers to tackle offences related to the misuse of laser pointers.

I am grateful to the 223 individuals and organisations that responded to the consultation, including members of the public, the police service and other interested parties.

I am placing a copy of the Government response to the consultation in the Libraries of both Houses and on gov.uk.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): On 28 January, I announced £56.5 million of new funding to help councils prepare for Brexit as set out in a written ministerial statement on local government Brexit funding, Official Report, column 31WS. Part of that funding was £1.5 million in 2018-19 to local authorities facing immediate impacts from local ports.

I am today able to announce an increase of this funding from £1.5 million to £3.14 million. Its distribution to local authorities is set out in Table 1 below. This additional funding will support those authorities to plan and better mitigate against potential disruptions once we have exited the EU.

The funding will be divided between 19 district and unitary councils. These allocations are based on recent analysis and engagement and reflect a range of issues including the amount of EU goods managed and the wider, strategic importance of these ports.

As part of the 28 January announcement, I retained £10 million for allocation during 2019-20 to respond to specific local costs that may only become evident in the months after we exit the EU. I will look carefully at any pressures that should be funded, including any emerging pressures relating to port functions or wider impacts on port areas.

Table 1: Allocation of funding to authorities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Port Authority</th>
<th>Allocation (£)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Port of Dover</td>
<td>136,362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Folkestone and Hythe</td>
<td>136,362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dover</td>
<td>136,362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Folkestone and Hythe</td>
<td>136,362</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eurotunnel</td>
<td>136,362</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dover</td>
<td>136,362</td>
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<tr>
<td>Folkestone and Hythe</td>
<td>136,362</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ramsgate</td>
<td>136,362</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thanet</td>
<td>136,362</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gooie</td>
<td>136,362</td>
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<tr>
<td>East Riding of Yorkshire</td>
<td>136,362</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hull</td>
<td>136,362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hull City</td>
<td>136,362</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Grimsby 6. North East
C. Ro (DBP, DiDS and General
9. Southampton
8. Portsmouth 7. Portsmouth City 136,362
12. Ebbsfleet 10. Gravesend
Container
10. Southampton
14. Manchester
12. Gatwick
11. Harwich
10. Suffolk Coastal 19. Felixstowe
20. Felixstowe
Total funding of £3,136,326.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Port</th>
<th>Authority</th>
<th>Allocation (£)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grimsby</td>
<td>North East Lincolnshire</td>
<td>136,362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immingham (DBP, DiDS and General)</td>
<td>North East Lincolnshire</td>
<td>136,362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portsmouth</td>
<td>Portsmouth City</td>
<td>136,362</td>
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<tr>
<td>Southampton</td>
<td>Southampton City</td>
<td>136,362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southampton Container</td>
<td>Southampton City</td>
<td>136,362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashford</td>
<td>Ashford</td>
<td>136,362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ebbsfleet</td>
<td>Gravesend</td>
<td>136,362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Pancras</td>
<td>Camden</td>
<td>136,362</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manchester</td>
<td>Manchester</td>
<td>136,362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Midlands</td>
<td>North West Leicestershire</td>
<td>136,362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stansted Airport</td>
<td>Littleford</td>
<td>136,362</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heathrow Airport</td>
<td>Hillingdon</td>
<td>136,362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gatwick Airport</td>
<td>Crawley</td>
<td>136,362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harwich</td>
<td>Tendring</td>
<td>136,362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felixstowe</td>
<td>Suffolk Coastal</td>
<td>136,362</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): My noble Friend, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Baroness Sugg) has made the following written statement.

Today I am setting out the Government’s recent action on drones, including legislative amendments to the Air Navigation Order 2016 that will be laid before Parliament today.

Last year, the Government legislated to make flying drones above 400 feet or within 1 km of an airport boundary illegal. This 1 km restriction measure was a first step in protecting our airports and aircraft while the Department gathered further evidence and engaged with stakeholders through our recent consultation.

The highly irresponsible and dangerous disruption caused by drones to flights at Gatwick and Heathrow airports recently highlighted the risks. While the use of drones at Gatwick and Heathrow was already illegal, it is extremely important that regulation provides protection which reduces, as much as possible, the airspace where drones and manned aircraft can come into close proximity with each other. Therefore, the Government have decided to extend the restriction zone around airports, as announced to Parliament in January.

The amendment laid today will put into law the extension of the restriction zone around protected aerodromes where drones cannot be flown without permission. The new restriction zone will include an airport’s aerodrome traffic zone (ATZ) as well as 5 km by 1 km extensions from the end of runways to protect take-off and landing paths. All drones will be restricted from flying within this zone unless appropriate permission is granted.

The extended restriction zone will come into force on 13 March this year.

In addition to legislation, it is crucial that the public are aware of the rules on the use of drones, so today we are expanding our national campaign, in partnership with the Civil Aviation Authority, to boost public awareness.

The Department for Transport has today written to airports and local authorities asking them to publicise the new rules and to help to educate passengers and the public about responsible drone use. To help with this, the Department is providing a digital tool kit to explain the rules simply and clearly and to promote the Civil Aviation Authority’s drone safe campaign and drone code guidance. This includes maps detailing the new restriction zones at each individual airport.

The Government are preparing a new drones Bill, which will give police powers to clamp down on those misusing drones and other small unmanned aircraft, including a power to access electronic data stored on drones with a warrant. In addition, the Home Office is also today announcing new stop and search powers for drones around aerodromes, which will also be included in the Bill.

These enforcement powers will complement legislation introduced last year which will require the mandatory registration of operators and the online competency testing of remote pilots for drones over 250 grams. These requirements will become a legal obligation in November this year and work with the new police powers to increase accountability and clamp down on irresponsible and dangerous behaviour.

The Home Office is further reviewing the UK’s response to the malicious use of drones, and will consider how best to protect the full range of the UK’s critical national infrastructure, as well as testing and evaluating technology to counter drones.

The Government will continue to work closely with industry and other partners on regulation, anticipating future innovations wherever possible in order to keep our airports secure and our airspace safe.

These actions will help to combat the misuse of drones, so that small unmanned aircraft can be used safely and securely, and continue to support the development and growth of this rapidly expanding new industry.

[HCWS1344]
Written Statements

Thursday 21 February 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Energy Capacity Market

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): As set out to the House in the statement of 6 December 2018, the European Commission was expecting to make its initial decision regarding the UK capacity market in early 2019. The Commission has today confirmed that it is moving on to the next phase of its investigation into the capacity market. This is an important first step as we work to reinstate state aid approval for the capacity market as soon as possible.

In its announcement the Commission confirms that the General Court of the European Union did not rule that the GB capacity market was incompatible with state aid rules. The Commission has also made clear that the Court ruled on procedural grounds. This was on the basis that the Commission should have opened an in-depth investigation on certain elements of the scheme related to participation by demand side response operators.

In accordance with the Court’s judgment, the Commission has therefore launched a further investigation focusing on particular elements of the capacity market. We understand that this investigation will cover past and future capacity payments, including deferred payments in respect of the standstill period. Since 2014 the Commission has approved state aid for six capacity markets similar to the GB scheme. We will continue to work closely with the Commission as its investigation progresses and will ensure that market participants are regularly updated.

Separately, the Commission has recently chosen to appeal the General Court’s judgment that it did not follow the proper process to conclude in 2014 that the capacity market was compatible with EU state aid rules. I can confirm today that the UK Government will be supporting this appeal. The appeal does not affect the Commission’s separate process for considering state aid approval for the current capacity market scheme.

[HCWS1351]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS Prescription Charges

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): My right hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Baroness Blackwood) has made the following written statement:

Regulations will shortly be laid before Parliament to increase certain national health service charges in England from 1 April 2019.

In the 2015 spending review, the Government committed to support the five year forward view with £10 billion investment in real terms by 2020-21 to fund frontline NHS services. Alongside this, the Government expect the NHS to deliver £22 billion of efficiency savings to secure the best value from NHS resources and primary care must play its part.

This year therefore, we have increased the prescription charge by 20 pence from £8.80 to £9 for each medicine or appliance dispensed. To ensure that those with the greatest need, and who are not already exempt from the charge, are protected, we have frozen the cost of the prescription pre-payment certificates (PPC) for another year. The 3 month PPC remains at £29.10 and the cost of the annual PPC will stay at £104. Taken together, this means prescription charge income is expected to rise broadly in line with inflation. Charges for wigs and fabric supports will also be increased in line with inflation. Details of the revised charges for 2019-20 can be found in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prescription Charges</th>
<th>Charge from 1 April 2019 (£)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single Charge</td>
<td>£9.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 month PPC (no change)</td>
<td>£29.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 month PPC (no change)</td>
<td>£104.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wigs and Fabric Supports</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surgical Brassiere</td>
<td>£29.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdominal or spinal support</td>
<td>£44.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stock modacrylic wig</td>
<td>£72.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial human hair wig</td>
<td>£192.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full bespoke human hair wig</td>
<td>£282.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[HCWS1350]

Personal Budgets: Consultation Response

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): Today I am publishing the joint response from the Government and NHS England to a recent consultation exploring extending legal rights to personal health budgets and integrated personal budgets. The response is available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/personal-health-budgets-and-integrated-personal-budgets-extending-legal-rights and a copy has also been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

Across the health and social care system, there is an ever growing shift towards personalising care, including an increasing amount of people choosing to take on a budget. It is clear that people value being involved in the planning of their care, being able to make choices and personalise their support in a way that best meets their bespoke needs. The evidence is clear; through personalised care, people are more satisfied, have better outcomes, and are able to explore more innovative approaches that better meet their individual needs.

The Government are therefore committed to increasing the extent to which people can exercise greater choice and control over their care. Personal health budgets, and all other features of a personalised care approach as set out within the “Comprehensive model of Personalised Care”, including shared decision making and personalised care and support planning, are the key mechanisms for delivering this change.

Given this commitment, we consulted on potentially extending the legal rights to personal health budgets and integrated personal budgets, to the following five groups:

- People with ongoing social care needs, who also make regular and ongoing use of relevant NHS services.
- People eligible for section 117 aftercare services and people of all ages with ongoing mental health needs who make regular and ongoing use of community based NHS mental health services.
People leaving the armed forces, who are eligible for ongoing NHS services.
People with a learning disability, autism or both, who are eligible for ongoing NHS care.
People who access wheelchair services whose posture and mobility needs impact their wider health and social care needs.

The outcome of the consultation was hugely positive, with 87% of respondents, on average, agreeing with each proposal made. At the same time, respondents outlined their positivity for personalised care more broadly, citing the positive impacts personalised care can bring to people’s lives.

We are committed to delivering an ambitious package of personalised care that will enable up to 5 million people to benefit in the next decade. As part of this ambition, we now intend to take forward work to extend the legal rights to people eligible for section 117 aftercare services, and people who access wheelchair services whose posture and mobility needs impact their wider health and social care needs. We will also continue to further explore both the other groups we consulted on, and additional groups who we believe could also benefit from having a right to have a personal health budget.

We want personalised care to become business as usual; and the ambitious package set out in this response, the “NHS Long Term Plan”, and universal personalised care will enable us to do this.

[HCWS1349]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

No Deal: Trade Continuity

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The Government are today publishing revised guidance to UK and international businesses that use preferential trade terms under existing agreements between the EU and third countries to advise them about a scenario in which the UK leaves the EU without a withdrawal agreement. While a number of our continuity agreements are likely to be concluded by exit day, it is the duty of the Government to produce a highly cautious list of those that both may and will not be in place in order that businesses and individuals ensure that they are prepared for every eventuality.

A list of these agreements and related advice is available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/existing-trade-agreements-if-the-uk-leaves-the-eu-without-a-deal.

If the UK leaves with a deal, under the withdrawal agreement the EU has agreed that it will notify treaty partners that the UK is to be treated as a member state for the purposes of its international agreements during the implementation period (IP), up until December 2020. This approach provides continuity and gives businesses and international partners the certainty and confidence they want and need.

Delivering a negotiated withdrawal agreement with the EU remains the Government’s top priority. Nevertheless, we continue to prepare for all eventualities, including no deal. Therefore, in recent months, the Government have refocused discussions with third countries to transition trade agreements to come into effect for day one after our EU exit, should the UK leave the EU without a withdrawal agreement. From the outset, we have been open and transparent with the EU about this programme of work.

Scope of the trade continuity programme

The Government are seeking continuity for existing EU trade agreements in which the UK participates as a member of the EU. These agreements constitute around 11% of our trade. These agreements also cover a wide variety of relationships, including:

- free trade agreements (FTAs);
- economic partnership agreements (EPAs) with developing nations;
- association agreements, which cover broader economic and political co-operation;
- mutual recognition agreements (MRAs) and;
- trade agreements with countries that are closely aligned with the EU.

Businesses in the UK and partner countries are eligible for a range of preferential market access opportunities under the terms of these agreements. These can include, but are not limited to:

- preferential duties for goods, including reductions in import tariff rates and quotas for reduced or nil rates of payable duties;
- quotas for the import of goods with more relaxed rules of origin requirements;
- enhanced market access for service providers;
- protection from discrimination in public procurement opportunities across a range of sectors;
- allowing parties to mutually recognise conformity assessment procedures;
- the ability to complete mandatory inspections and tests on products close to the place of production; and
- common standards on intellectual property.

The Government have been in extensive and constructive discussions with partner countries to transition these agreements to maintain their benefits and deliver as much continuity and stability as possible in our trade with these partners for businesses, consumers and investors as we leave the EU.

Progress update

To date, the Government have signed trade agreements with Switzerland, Chile, the Faroe Islands, members of the eastern and southern Africa (ESA) economic partnership agreement, Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

The Government are also close to formal agreement on text with Fiji and Papua New Guinea (Pacific) and arrangements are being made for their signature. It is likely these agreements will be transitioned in time for day one of exit.

We have also signed mutual recognition agreements that allow continuity of trade with Australia and New Zealand, and the United States. Total UK-US trade in sectors covered by the US MRA agreement is worth up to £12.8 billion, based on recent average trade flows. These important agreements boost trade as UK exporters can ensure goods are compliant with trading partners’ technical regulations before they depart the UK, saving businesses time, money and resources.

Discussions with other partners continue with the aim of replicating the effects of existing EU agreements as far as possible. We are continuing to engage with those other partner countries to conclude agreements in
time for exit day. Particularly intensive discussions are, for instance, happening now with partners such as SACU+M, EEA, Canada and South Korea. Other discussions are ongoing.

Where agreements have been signed and there are significant changes to trade-related provisions of trade agreements, including to ensure operability in a UK context, they will be set out in reports to Parliament. As is already the case with the Chile, ESA and the Faroe Islands agreements, the reports will sit alongside the treaty text and explanatory memorandum, when these are laid in Parliament as part of the treaty ratification process, as set out in the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010. These and other relevant documents will be also placed on gov.uk when signed. Implementing legislation, including on the preferential tariffs and related rules of origin in these agreements will also be laid before Parliament. Details of these agreements will be available on gov.uk.

If the full parliamentary scrutiny processes to ratify some UK-third country agreements have not concluded by the end of March, we are considering whether there are other means through which we can bring their provisions into effect to provide the same certainty and continuity to business and stakeholders from day one.

One such option is provisional application, where the UK and the third country agree to apply a treaty, in full or in part, “provisionally” for a period of time before the full domestic scrutiny processes have completed and the treaty enters into force. Where possible, this would bridge a potential gap in coverage of preferential trade terms. The UK has used provisional application on a number of occasions in its independent treaty relations. The use of provisional application is also common practice for the EU’s international agreements.

If the UK leaves the EU without a deal, some agreements will not be concluded in time and therefore will not be in place for exit day. There are a range of reasons for this. Those agreements that will not be in place for exit day are Andorra, Japan, Turkey, and San Marino.

Certain countries raise specific issues in the context of transitioning trade agreements. For example, Turkey is in a unique position, being in a partial customs union with the EU. This is not, therefore, a pre-existing free trade agreement relationship that can be technically transitioned to the UK. For this reason, should the UK leave the EU without a withdrawal agreement it will not be possible to transition these arrangements on day one of exit. However, Turkey is an important partner for the UK, and we want to strengthen our trading partnership with the EU after our EU exit on the same terms as at present. We will shortly be laying the necessary secondary legislation in Parliament.

This means that some countries will continue to be eligible for preferential tariff treatment under the UK’s newly established independent trade preferences scheme even if the relevant EU-partner country trade agreement has not yet been transitioned into a UK-partner country agreement.

Details of non-EU countries with whom we currently have place arrangements for preferential trade, including both free trade agreements and unilateral preferences can be found at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-trade-tariff-preferential-trade-arrangements-for-countries-outside-the-eu/uk-trade-tariff-preferential-trade-arrangements-for-countries-outside-the-eu.

1 This 11% figure excludes Turkey (plus San Marino and Andorra) which is part of a customs union with the EU, and excludes Japan, as the economic partnership agreement only came into force on 1 February 2019 and therefore business have only very recently been trading under this agreement.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment and Support Allowance

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): This written statement is a fifth update to the House on progress in reviewing and, where necessary, correcting past employment and support allowance (ESA) underpayments and paying arrears following conversion from previous incapacity benefits.

Since my last update to the House in October 2018 we have made significant progress. Due to the complex nature of these cases they take considerably longer than the average ESA case to complete. To ensure we make rapid and accurate progress we have therefore increased the number of staff working on putting these cases right from around 400 to approximately 1,200. This additional resource has led to a substantial increase in the number of cases that we have reviewed, corrected and paid arrears where due.

This 11% figure excludes Turkey (plus San Marino and Andorra) which is part of a customs union with the EU, and excludes Japan, as the economic partnership agreement only came into force on 1 February 2019 and therefore business have only very recently been trading under this agreement.

[HCWS1352]
We have made good progress and by 11 February had:

- started 310,000 claimants on the reassessment journey;
- paid arrears of over £328 million to 58,000 people; and,
- completed action on 207,000 cases1.

Based on the progress made since October we believe we are on track to complete work on the majority of the original 320,000 cases by April 2019 (phase 1). Unfortunately, some cases where the claimant sadly died prior to the exercise starting, are taking a significant period of time to resolve due to difficulties in identifying the next of kin or executors. There are around 20,000 deceased cases included in phase 1 that require review. While we continue to progress this work, we expect that the Department will need until the end of 2019 to complete these cases.

Following our announcement in July 2018 that we will review and pay cases back to the date they were converted from incapacity benefits to ESA, we are reviewing a further 250,000 cases (phase 2), as set out in October. Activity in respect of this group is due to start shortly, and we aim to complete phase 2 by the end of this year.

The cases included in this exercise were largely converted between 2011 and 2014. Revised operational guidance was put in place in October 2014 after individual cases that had been incorrectly converted came to light. As part of our commitment to correct all cases affected by this error, we decided to undertake additional testing of cases converted in 2015. This testing has shown that the error rate did not improve as quickly as expected and we therefore believe that it is prudent to review around a further 30,000 cases, that were converted from 2015 onwards. This reflects our commitment to ensure all those who may have been affected are identified and paid the arrears they are due.

The Department is publishing an updated ad hoc statistical publication today setting out further detail on the progress it has made in processing cases, including an updated estimate on forecast expenditure and the numbers affected. This will be published on gov.uk.

These updated forecasts will feed into the spring statement 2019. The Department now estimates that around 600,000 cases require review and that by the end of the exercise around 210,000 arrears payments will have been made. The increase, compared to our previous estimate of 180,000, is based on assumptions made using evidence we have gathered from the checking exercise to date. The data shows an increase in the proportion of cases in error among some groups of claimants. In addition, based on sample testing we have also included an assumption of the proportion of errors likely to be identified in the further 30,000 cases that have been added to the exercise.

An updated frequently asked question guide will also be deposited in the Library of the House for further information.

1 Some of these cases which were originally completed prior to our announcement in July 2018 that we will review and pay cases back to the date they were converted from incapacity benefits to ESA, will require further action.

[HCWS1348]
Petitions

Wednesday 6 February 2019

PRESENTED PETITIONS

Petitions presented to the House but not read on the Floor

The future of maintained nursery schools

The Petition of the parents, carers and staff of Grasmere Nursery School in Luton; received 5 February 2019.

Declares that we are concerned about the future of maintained nursery schools in England after March 2020 as no guarantee has been given by the Government that adequate funding will continue when supplementary funding ends.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to urge the Government to take action to ensure nursery schools are financially sustainable for the future.

And the petitioners remain, etc—[Presented by Kelvin Hopkins.]

Petitions in the same terms were presented by:

The hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Charles Walker):
The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Greenfield maintained nursery school in Waltham Cross.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Arlesdene Nursery School maintained nursery school and Pre-school in Hertfordshire

The hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr Jonathan Djanogly):
The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Greenfield maintained nursery school in Cambridge.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Arlesdene Nursery School maintained nursery school and Pre-school in Hertfordshire

The hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell):
The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Rowland Hill Nursery, maintained nursery school in Haringey London.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Woodlands Park, maintained nursery school in Haringey.

The petition of The parents, carers, staff, governors and other local community contacts of Kintore Way maintained nursery school in Southwark.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Pembury House, maintained nursery school in Haringey.

The petition of The parents, carers, staff and governors of Ribblesdale Nursery School, maintained nursery school in Clitheroe, Lancashire.

The Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury, the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer):
The Petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Moss hall maintained nursery school in Barnet.

The hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins):
The Petition of the parents, carers and staff of Gill Blowers Nursery School in Luton.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and of Chapel Street, Gill Blowers, Grasmere, Hart Hill, Pastures Way and Rothesay maintained nursery schools in Luton.

The hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Charles Walker):
The petition of The parents, carers, staff and governors of Rye Park, maintained nursery school in Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire.

The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Hillfields maintained nursery school in Coventry.

OBSERVATIONS

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Sale of Jackson Lane Car Park

The Humble Petition of residents of Wellingborough, Northamptonshire and the surrounding area, Sheweth,

That the Petitioners believe that the proposed sale of the Jackson Car Park, should be refused on the grounds of the loss of public parking in the area which will have an enormous effect on local businesses, doctors surgery, the chemists, the Salvation Army, the Afro Caribbean Association, the Daylight Centre, the Society of Friends, the Job Centre and the United Reformed Church.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Borough Council in Wellingborough to take in account the concerns of the petitioners and refuse to grant the sale of the Jackson Lane Car Park to a private developer.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.—[Presented by Mr Peter Bone, Official Report, 12 September 2018; Vol. 646, c. 829.]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak):

Parking is the responsibility of local authorities and it is for them to determine what is appropriate in their own area. Central Government have no remit to intervene in local authorities’ day to day affairs.
However, under the Community Right to Bid legislation community groups have listed car parks as assets of community value. The scheme allows communities and parish councils to nominate buildings or land for listing by the local authority as Assets of Community Value. Any asset can be listed if its principal use furthers, or has recently furthered, their community’s social well-being or social interests which include cultural, sporting or recreational interests, and is likely to do so in the future.

I should point out that the listing of Assets of Community Value is a matter for the local authority and as such the Department does not comment on individual cases.

If successful, listed and made available for sale, community interest groups then have six weeks (the interim moratorium period) to lodge a non-binding expression of interest. This triggers a moratorium of a further four and half months (six months in total—the full moratorium period) to delay the sale of the asset. This affords community interest groups sufficient time to prepare and raise money to bid for it.

What the scheme does not do is compel the owner to sell to a community group, or set the price at which the owner must sell. The scheme seeks to balance the rights of private property owners with the interests of the community where the local authority agrees that the asset in question is an Asset of Community Value.
Petition

Thursday 7 February 2019

OBSERVATIONS

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Ryarsh Quarry Kent

The petition of Residents of Tonbridge and Malling,

Declares that land in Ryarsh, west of Roughetts Road is an unsuitable location for a quarry and Kent County Council should not allocate site M8 for sand extraction in their Minerals and Waste Local Plan.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Kent County Council to reconsider the allocation of a site for quarrying in Ryarsh, West Malling.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Tom Tugendhat, Official Report, 21 November 2018; Vol. 649, c. 976.]

Observations from The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse):

While I am unable to comment on emerging minerals plans and the merits or otherwise of specific sites proposed for inclusion in those plans, I can set out the Government’s policy on allocating sites for minerals development.

The national planning policy framework states that it is essential that there is a sufficient supply of minerals to provide the infrastructure, buildings, energy and goods that the country needs. Since minerals are a finite natural resource, and can only be worked where they are found, best use needs to be made of them to secure their long-term conservation.

Mineral planning authorities should plan for the steady and adequate supply of minerals by designating specific sites, preferred areas or areas of search. Sites may be designated where viable resources are known to exist, landowners are supportive of minerals development and the proposal is likely to be acceptable in planning terms. Designating specific sites in minerals plans provides the necessary certainty on when and where development may take place.
Petition

Tuesday 12 February 2019

PRESENTED PETITIONS
Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

The future of maintained nursery schools

The petition of parents, carers, staff and governors of Newtown Nursery maintained nursery school in Colne,

Declares that we are concerned about the future of maintained nursery schools in England after March 2020 as no guarantee has been given by government that adequate funding will continue when supplementary funding ends.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take action to ensure maintained nursery schools are financially sustainable for the future.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Lucy Powell.]

[P002424]

The petition of parents, carers, staff and governors of Horsham Nursery School maintained nursery school in Horsham,

Declares that we are concerned about the future of maintained nursery schools in England after March 2020 as no guarantee has been given by government that adequate funding will continue when supplementary funding ends.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take action to ensure maintained nursery schools are financially sustainable for the future.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Lucy Powell.]

[P002425]
Petitions
Wednesday 13 February 2019

OBSERVATIONS

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Bredbury Parkway Industrial Estate Extension

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that proposals to extend the Bredbury Parkway Industrial Estate deep into the Tame Valley would involve large-scale developments on the Green Belt land, which is a valuable barrier to urban sprawl and is hugely valued by local people, particularly in the areas of Bredbury, Woodley, Denton and Tameside; further declares that this development would destroy the openness of this section of the Tame Valley and damage the visual amenity from the Haughton Dale and Hulme's Wood Local Nature Reserves; further declare concerns over HGV traffic in the area and the impact that the proposals would have on an already congested Stockport Road and Ashton Road, and the associated effects on the environment.

The petitioners oppose plans to extend the Bredbury Parkway Industrial Estate. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council, Tameside Council and the Department for Communities and Local Government no to support the extension of the Bredbury Parkway Industrial Estate; and to further urge that the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework (GMSF) must follow principles of a “Brownfield First” strategy, so that previously developed land, including derelict or unused sites, must be fully considered before Green Belt is released for development.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mr William Wragg, Official Report, 23 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 248.]

Kings Langley Green Belt

The petition of residents of Kings Langley,

Declares strong opposition to plans under consideration in Dacorum Borough Councils Local Plan 2017 that would mean the loss of valuable farmland and the demise of Wayside Dairy Farm and other local green areas.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to protect the Green Belt in and around the village of Kings Langley.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Sir Mike Penning, Official Report, 24 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 400.]
Observations from the Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse):

The Government are clear that councils and their communities are best placed to take decisions on planning issues affecting their local area, within the context of national planning policy and our ambition to build 300,000 homes a year. Up-to-date plans reduce speculative development, provide certainty and are a mechanism for holding authorities to account on managing local housing need. It gives local areas the flexibility to use land they already have to build the homes, facilities and infrastructure that they need.

Environmental protection is at the heart of the revised National Planning Policy Framework (published July 2018), setting clear expectations for future developments, including assessing the impacts of new development on the road network. The revised Framework sets out that most new building is inappropriate in the Green Belt and should be refused planning permission except in very special circumstances. Only in exceptional circumstances can a strategic policy-making authority establish the need to alter a Green Belt boundary, using the plan process of consultation and examination. The revised Framework has strengthened this policy by setting out that authorities should show fully evidenced justification for a Green Belt boundary change. Including through setting out they have examined all other reasonable options for meeting their identified development needs by making more effective use of suitable brownfield and under-utilised land; optimising density of new development where appropriate; and discussing with neighbouring authorities whether they could take some of the necessary development.

The Secretary of State for Housing Communities and Local Government has a quasi-judicial role in the planning system, and so the Government cannot comment on the detail of specific plans or planning applications for reasons of propriety.

It is understood that Dacorum Borough Council are undertaking a partial review of their core strategy to produce a new local plan. As part of this process the council held a public consultation on an issues and options document, followed by a series of public exhibitions. It is also understood that the council proposes to undertake a pre-submission draft consultation during summer 2019.

When ready, the council will submit the plan for examination by an independent inspector. Before the examination anyone with an interest in the plan will have an opportunity to make representations and may request to appear before the examination.
Petition

Monday 18 February 2019

PRESENTED PETITION
Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

The future of maintained nursery schools
The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Tenterfield maintained nursery school in Welwyn.

Declares that we are concerned about the future of maintained nursery schools in England after March 2020 as no guarantee has been given by Government that adequate funding will continue when supplementary funding ends.

The petitions therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Government to take action to ensure maintained nursery schools are financially sustainable for the future.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Grant Shapps.]
Petition

Thursday 21 February 2019

OBSERVATIONS

HOME DEPARTMENT

Funding of the Avon and Somerset police force

The petition of constituents of Bristol East constituency,
Declares that Avon and Somerset Police have already
had to make £65 million of cuts since 2010, with the
loss of nearly 700 front line police officers; and further
that The Police and Crime Commissioner and Chief
Constable have now warned in their report “The Tipping
Point” that the force cannot sustain any further cuts- as
proposed by the Government—without extremely serious
consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of
Commons urges the Government to give Avon and
Somerset Police the resources they need to police our
streets, prevent crime and protect the public.

And the petitioners remain etc. — [Presented by Kerry
McCarthy, Official Report, 5 December 2018; Vol. 650,
c. 1026. ]

[P002302]

Observations from the Minister for Policing and the
Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd):

The report mentioned in this petition (“The Tipping
Point: The case for a safe, sustainable and fair funding
settlement for Avon and Somerset Constabulary”) was
published in September 2017. In 2017 I engaged with
every police force in England and Wales to understand
the demands they face. In response the Government
enabled Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) to
protect their funding in 2018-19 real terms including
council tax precept. For Avon and Somerset, this meant
an increase in funding of £8 million.

Next year, the Government are going further. We are
enabling an increase in total police funding of up to
£970 million compared to 2018-19, including precept,
pensions funding and national investment. For 2019-20
the Avon and Somerset PCC will receive £302.9 million,
an increase of £21.2 million on 2018-19 following the
PCCs decision to use their precept flexibility.

Decisions about the number of police officers in
Avon and Somerset and how they are deployed are
matters for the Chief Constable and democratically
accountable PCC. They are responsible for ensuring the
needs of the local community are met. I am pleased,
therefore, to note that the PCC has set out her intention
to use the improved financial settlement for 2019-20 to
recruit an additional 100 police officers.
Ministerial Corrections

Tuesday 5 February 2019

TREASURY

Draft Market Abuse (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018 and Draft Credit Rating Agencies (Amendment, Etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019

The following is an extract from the debate on the draft Market Abuse (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018 and draft Credit Rating Agencies (Amendment, Etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019.

John Glen: The SI also retains exemptions in MAR—and amends the scope of the exemptions to UK-only—that relate to certain trading activities that cannot be enforced against the regulation.


Letter of correction from the Economic Secretary to the Treasury:

An error has been identified in my contribution to the debate on the draft Market Abuse (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018 and draft Credit Rating Agencies (Amendment, Etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019.

The correct statement should have been:

John Glen: The SI also retains exemptions in MAR for financial instruments on UK and EU markets. These relate to certain trading activities that cannot be enforced against the regulation.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Disability Support

The following is an extract from a debate on Disability Support on 19 December 2018.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): Looking at all four measures of low-income poverty—before and after housing costs, and on a relative and on an absolute basis—poverty for people in families with a disabled person has improved since 2010 on three of the four measures, and there was no change in the fourth. I am not complacent. One person living in poverty in this country is one person too many, which is why we are determined to do everything we can to put more money in people’s pockets.


Letter of correction from Sarah Newton:

An error has been identified in my response to the debate.

The correct wording should have been:

Sarah Newton: Looking at all four measures of low-income poverty—before and after housing costs, and on a relative and on an absolute basis—poverty for people in families with a disabled person has improved since 2010 on three of the four measures, and there was an increase in the fourth. I am not complacent. One person living in poverty in this country is one person too many, which is why we are determined to do everything we can to put more money in people’s pockets.
Ministerial Correction

Thursday 7 February 2019

WORK AND PENSIONS

State Pension Age: Women

The following is an extract from an Adjournment debate on Thursday 31 January 2019.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): I want to address briefly the point about the national insurance fund that the hon. Lady raised. It is simply not true that the national insurance fund is used purely to reduce national debt. It is financed on a pay-as-you-earn basis with receipts collected in one year used to pay for certain benefit payments, including the state pension paid out in the same year.


Letter of correction from Guy Opperman:

An error has been identified in my response to the debate.

The correct response should have been:

Guy Opperman: I want to address briefly the point about the national insurance fund that the hon. Lady raised. It is simply not true that the national insurance fund is used purely to reduce national debt. It is financed on a pay-as-you-go basis with receipts collected in one year used to pay for certain benefit payments, including the state pension paid out in the same year.
Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 12 February 2019

EDUCATION

Post-16 Education: Funding

The following is an extract from questions to the Secretary of State for Education on 4 February 2019.

Anne Milton: The Raise the Rate and Love Our Colleges campaigns have been very successful and, to a large extent, led to the number of hon. Members who attended that debate to raise the issue. I will continue to raise this with the Treasury. It has to be said—I have to continue to point this out to hon. Members—that there is over £2 billion available in apprenticeship funding from 2020. It is there now. Currently, colleges are not doing that much of that apprenticeship training. I look forward to seeing them getting more involved in those opportunities.


Letter of correction from the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills:

Errors have been identified in my response.
The correction information should have been:

Anne Milton: The Raise the Rate and Love Our Colleges campaigns have been very successful and, to a large extent, led to the number of hon. Members who attended that debate to raise the issue. I will continue to raise this with the Treasury. It has to be said—I have to continue to point this out to hon. Members—that there is over £2.5 billion available in apprenticeship funding from 2019-2020. It is there now. Currently, colleges are not doing that much of that apprenticeship training. I look forward to seeing them getting more involved in those opportunities.
Ministerial Corrections

Wednesday 13 February 2019

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill [Lords]

The following are extracts from the Report stage of the Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill [Lords] on 12 February 2019.

Caroline Dinenage: This particular area of law has always been open to legal challenge. We decided to include a definition because so many stakeholders, as well as the Law Commission and Members of the other place, thought it essential.


Caroline Dinenage: For example, in the new system a family member or a loved one can be an appropriate person.


Caroline Dinenage: The wishes and feelings of the vulnerable person are at the centre of the Bill, and the wishes and feelings of their family will definitely be taken into consideration if their family is the approved person. We must always leave a little space in case the person does not want their approved person to be a family member for whatever reason.


Letter of correction from The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage):

Errors have been identified in the response I gave on Amendment 1 to clause 6.

The correct wording should have been:

Caroline Dinenage: This particular area of law has always been open to legal challenge. We decided to include a definition because so many stakeholders, as well as the Joint Committee on Human Rights and Members of the other place, thought it essential”.

Caroline Dinenage: For example, in the new system a family member or a loved one can be an appropriate person.

Caroline Dinenage: The wishes and feelings of the vulnerable person are at the centre of the Bill, and the wishes and feelings of their family will definitely be taken into consideration if their family is the approved person. We must always leave a little space in case the person does not want their appropriate person to be a family member for whatever reason.
Ministerial Corrections

Thursday 14 February 2019

WORK AND PENSIONS

In-work Poverty

The following is an extract from questions to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on 11 February 2019.

Justin Tomlinson: This Government are not only delivering record employment in all regions of the UK—it is accepted that work is the best route out of poverty—but targeting support at the most vulnerable in society, with increases in the national living wage, which will see the fastest pay rise in the last 20 years, changes to the income tax threshold and a doubling of free childcare.


Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson):
An error has been identified in my response.
The correct response should have been:

Justin Tomlinson: This Government have not only delivered record employment in all regions of the UK since 2010—it is accepted that work is the best route out of poverty—but are targeting support at the most vulnerable in society, with increases in the national living wage, which will see the fastest pay rise in the last 20 years, changes to the income tax threshold and a doubling of free childcare.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

Apprenticeships and Work: Fair Access

The following is an extract from questions to the Minister for Women and Equalities on 7 February 2019.

Anne Milton: I have spoken about the targeted support available, and whenever I meet apprentices I ask them about their wages and how they travel to work. We are very aware of some of the problems faced by those young people, and as I have said, the railcard for 16 and 17-year-olds is available, and colleges have discretionary bursaries to support them.


Letter of correction from the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills:
An error has been identified in my response.
The correct response should have been:

Anne Milton: I have spoken about the targeted support available, and whenever I meet apprentices I ask them about their wages and how they travel to work. We are very aware of some of the problems faced by those young people, and as I have said, the railcard for 16 and 17-year-olds will be available in September, and colleges have discretionary bursaries to support them.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Counter-Daesh Update

The following are extracts from responses to questions during a statement on Counter-Daesh Update on 11 February 2019.

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend of course speaks with great wisdom on this because he was responsible for a lot of the training of overseas armies that makes precisely that strategy possible. We have now trained 70,000 Iraqi forces as a result of the programme that I think he may even have set up when he was Secretary of State for Defence.


Mr Hunt: In this country, we can be proud of the fact that we have put £2.7 billion into that process, which has had a huge humanitarian impact.


Mr Hunt: First, in terms of the courage of people who have been fighting in Syria, there is one group that we have not mentioned so far, and that is the White
Helmets, who did an extraordinary job in Syria—not so much in the particular conflict against Daesh, but we can be proud that this country has resettled 29 families of White Helmets and was instrumental in getting about 400 White Helmets out of Syria towards the end of last year.


Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs:

An error has identified in the response I gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon).

The correct wording should have been:

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend of course speaks with great wisdom on this because he was responsible for a lot of the training of overseas armies that makes precisely that strategy possible. We have now trained nearly 90,000 Iraqi forces as a result of the programme that I think he may even have set up when he was Secretary of State for Defence.

An error has identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes).

The correct wording should have been:

Mr Hunt: In this country, we can be proud of the fact that we have put £352.5 million into humanitarian and stabilisation support for Iraq, which has had a huge humanitarian impact.

An error has identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt).

The correct wording should have been:

Mr Hunt: First, in terms of the courage of people who have been working in Syria, there is one group that we have not mentioned so far, and that is the White Helmets, who are doing an extraordinary job in Syria—not so much in the particular conflict against Daesh, but we can be proud that this country has resettled 29 families of White Helmets and was instrumental in getting about 400 White Helmets out of Syria towards the end of last year.
Ministerial Corrections

Tuesday 19 February 2019

EDUCATION
Education Funding: Cheshire

The following is an extract from a debate in Westminster Hall on Education Funding: Cheshire on Wednesday 13 February 2019.

Nick Gibb: The sparsity factor in the formula allocates additional funding of £25 million specifically to schools that are both small and remote. This year, seven schools in my right hon. Friend’s constituency attracted a combined total of £133,000 in sparsity funding.

Letter of correction from the Minister for School Standards.

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Ms McVey).

The correct response should have been:

Nick Gibb: The sparsity factor in the formula allocates additional funding of £25 million specifically to schools that are both small and remote. This year, seven schools in my right hon. Friend’s local authority attracted a combined total of £133,000 in sparsity funding.

TRANSPORT

Draft Drivers’ Hours and Tachographs (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019

The following is an extract from the debate on the draft Drivers’ Hours and Tachographs (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 on 5 February 2019.

Jesse Norman: Certain functions will also be transferred to the Secretary of State, such as the Commission’s power to specify the technical requirements of the tachograph, which will become a domestic regulation-making power using the affirmative procedure.

[Official Report, Tenth Delegated Legislation Committee, 5 February 2019, c. 4.]
Letter of correction from the Minister of State, Department for Transport, the hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman).

An error has been identified in my contribution to the debate.

The correct statement should have been:

Jesse Norman: Certain functions will also be transferred to the Secretary of State, such as the Commission’s power to specify the technical requirements of the tachograph, which will become a domestic regulation-making power using the negative procedure under this affirmative procedure SI.